

The Irony of American History Revisited

In 1952, during my senior year at Bosse High School in Evansville, I was talked into applying to Harvard College by a recent graduate of Bosse who was in his junior year at Harvard. Quite frankly, Harvard was the farthest thing from my mind at the beginning of my senior year. I knew little or nothing about Harvard except that it was a very good school and they played Yale in football every year. Besides, I was going to be a Phi Gam at I.U. along with some of my high school friends. At that time, Harvard had a reputation of catering to eastern prep schools. It wanted to rid itself of that reputation and had a scholarship program targeting mid-western and western students. I was the beneficiary of that program. The tuition at that time—1952—was \$450 a year. It is now, as many of you know, in the vicinity of \$45,000 a year.

The President of Harvard was James Bryant Conant. A participant in the Manhattan Project during the war, he left Harvard in my sophomore year to become the U.S. High Commissioner to Germany. He was replaced by Nathan Pusey. The Dean of the Faculty was 30-year-old McGeorge Bundy. A legend at Groton, he was considered to be one of the brightest people to ever graduate from Yale.

The distinguished faculty, for the purpose of this paper, included the social scientist David Riesman, the author of The Lonely Crowd, and the well-known historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. The managing editor of the *Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper, was David Halberstam, the author of the critical book about our involvement in the Vietnam war, The Best and the Brightest. As a part of his job, he interviewed President Pusey and McGeorge Bundy every week regarding what was going on at Harvard.

In my last semester at Harvard, I took Arthur Schlesinger's History 169 course. Our principal assignment, and the major factor in determining our grade, was to write a paper comparing the philosophy of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr as set forth in his book The Irony of American History with that of the social scientist David Riesman in The Lonely Crowd.

My focus here is on Niebuhr and his philosophy. So I am not going to spend much time on Riesman and his views on the "social character between men of different regions, eras, and groups." The Lonely Crowd is an attempt on the part of Professor Riesman to analyze American society in terms of the type of individual who has dominated it in its various periods of growth. His primary goal is to determine the link between the individual and society and, more particularly, to discover "the way in which society ensures some degree of conformity from the individuals who make it up."

Riesman identifies three different forms of conformity during three different periods of population growth in the history of the U.S. For these three forms of individual conformity, he coins the terms "tradition-directed," "inner-directed," and "other directed." As our population grew, the "tradition-directed" individual gave way to the "inner-directed" individual and is no longer present in our society. It is Riesman's belief that, in the period beginning after World War II, the mode of individual conformity began shifting from "inner-directed" to "other-directed." The conformity of the "other-directed" individual "is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others."¹ He is motivated not by his own individualized gyroscope, but by the expectations of those with whom he associates—by his peer group. He is an individual who does not think for himself or according to an acquired set of internalized goals, but who receives his signals from those with whom he associates.

It is this tendency toward self-induced conformity on the part of the individual that constitutes the real danger to individuality in American society in the opinion of Riesman. As he puts it, "The idea that men are created free and equal is both true and misleading; men are created different; they lose their social freedom and their individual autonomy in seeking to become like each other."²

Riesman is at his best when empirically analyzing and describing the various phases of the population growth and the social character that they breed. To a Midwesterner who, during his four years at Harvard, changed his thinking habits as well as his clothing habits, his observations his home more often than not. But when he looks at the future, his empiricism becomes, if not a contradiction in terms, somewhat utopian and idealistic. He postulates that man must not only realize his other-directedness and reconcile himself to it, but man must transcend his tendency toward other-directedness and become autonomous. The autonomous, according to Riesman's definition, "are those who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society but are free to choose whether to conform or not."³ Such a concept of an individual, one capable of conforming or not conforming, is definitely a utopian view. It stresses the possibilities at the expense of ignoring the limitations of human nature. Perhaps this optimistic view of the future of the individual in society is due to his faith as a social scientist in the ability of man to utilize his reason and apply it to the improvement of his environment. Whatever his motive or the rationale therefore, in the light of his excellent insights into the nature of the changing character of individualism in America, his comments on autonomy are superficial and only serve to detract from the completeness of the whole.

I now turn to Reinhold Niebuhr and his insights as to the dangers confronting America as set forth in his book The Irony of American History. Keep in mind the observations in his book

were based on two series of lectures—the first in 1949 and the second in 1951, the height of the Cold War.

Niebuhr makes the case that the irony of American history since the beginning of the Republic until World War II was that we became a great nation not because of our faithful allegiance to the ideals and dogma set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but despite those ideals and dogma. I am suggesting that the irony of American history since World War II in the conduct of our foreign affairs, especially in our failed experience in Vietnam, was precisely because of our ideals and our attempt to impose those ideals on other cultures.

Niebuhr rejects the superficiality and the utopianism of the social scientist. In the first place, he rejects the theory that, by empirically analyzing the relationship between society and the individual, one can discover the essence of individuality. In one passage particularly applicable to The Lonely Crowd, he says "The realm of freedom which allows the individual to make his decision within, above and beyond the pressure of causal sequences is beyond the realm of scientific analysis."⁴ Secondly, Dr. Niebuhr would reject Riesman's utopian vision of the historical possibility of an autonomous man. He states:

"It is frequently assumed that human nature can be manipulated by methods analogous to those used in physical nature. Furthermore, it is generally taken for granted that the highest ends of life can be fulfilled in man's historic existence. This confidence makes for utopian visions of historical possibilities on the one hand and for rather materialistic conception of human ends on the other."⁵

We thus see that Niebuhr has little use for the social scientist's view and understanding of human nature and the historic role of the individual in society. He has even less use for their view of the possibilities of the role of the individual in the future—i.e., the autonomous individual or one who is subject to manipulation. He stresses that man is both the creature and

the creator of history. What he does on the one hand is determined to a large extent by what he has previously done. he points out that modern social scientists "all forget that, though man has a limited freedom over the historical process, he remains immersed in it. None of them deal profoundly with the complex 'self' . . . This self has a reason; but its reason is more intimately related to the anxieties and fears, the hopes and ambitions of the self as spirit and to the immediate necessities of the self as natural organism than the 'pure' reason of the natural scientist."⁶ It is safe to say that Niebuhr was no fan of the modern social scientist.

For Niebuhr, the danger to individualism as well, in the larger sense, to the "political tradition of the West" arises from the Missranic illusions of the American nation; from the failure of the American people, both individually and collectively, to realize their limitations as creatures of the historical process. The danger is increased by the irony of American history. In the preface to his book, Niebuhr defines irony as follows:

Irony consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous. . . . If virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits—in all such cases the situation is ironic.⁷

When the Republic was first formed, there was a Messianic aura about it. Our forefathers, whether New England Calvinists or Virginia Jeffersonians, believed that we had been called out by God to create a new humanity, to make a new beginning for mankind. Free from the vice and corruption of the European nations, we were an innocent people in an innocent world. As such, we were a virtuous people guided by the ideals and dogma contained in the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Not only did we believe these traits to define us, but friend and foe alike also believed this to be the case. As stated earlier, for Niebuhr, the

irony of American history is that we became a great nation not because of our faithful allegiance to these virtuous ideals and dogma, but despite these ideals.

In the first place, we were not always as innocent as we claimed. Witness our aggressive expansion over a continent which claimed Oregon, California, Florida and Texas against any foe which may have stood in our way. Such expansion was not the act of an innocent nation.

Secondly, our history, contrary to what many are inclined to think, has not been a record of fulfilled ideals. Witness our treatment of Native Americans, of African-Americans, and even of women. Rather, our history has been a record of the triumph of experience over dogma. Within our dogma we have reconciled the seemingly conflicting concepts of virtue and prosperity. This has resulted in a more pragmatic and materialistic society. It is this "preoccupation with the material circumstances of life" that constitutes, in Niebuhr's opinion, the threat to America. The irony is that our strength as expressed in our "innocent" and vain beliefs has now become our chief weakness and it is this fact which causes "He that sitteth in the heavens to laugh."⁸

After World War II, Niebuhr's concern was that our pretensions of virtue, wisdom and power would cause problems for America in the future unless our leaders recognized the limitations of man in the historical process and unless they understood that man and nations were creatures of the historical process as well as creators of history. The irony of American history from the beginning of the Republic up until World War II was that we became a strong nation despite our failure to realize our limitations. As we have seen, such failure was tempered by the fact we were not as innocent as we claimed, and we were not as virtuous as we thought we were. More importantly, we were not considered to be a powerful nation in the international world either politically or militarily. With our ever expanding frontier, our abundant natural resources

and our prosperity, we were content as a nation with our lot. We held no territorial ambitions outside of our borders. Even after World War I, we retreated back into our shell and disavowed the responsibilities that go along with being a powerful nation.

World War II changed all of that. We emerged from the war as the most powerful nation in the world and in possession of the most powerful weapon mankind had ever seen. We no longer could ignore the responsibilities of our power. And this is what concerned Niebuhr about America's future. As he put it in reference to the hazards of our position in the world:

Our moral perils are not those of conscious malice or the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently. The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving; the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configuration of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue.⁹

Unless we understand this and it governs the way we conduct ourselves, he goes on:

We could bring calamity upon ourselves and the world by forgetting that even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process. Man cannot rise to a simple triumph over historical fate.¹⁰

I would suggest to you that Niebuhr's worst fears were realized in our Vietnam experience.

After his election, President-elect John F. Kennedy set about assembling his cabinet. It included, among others:

McGeorge Bundy – National Security Advisor

Theodore Sorensen – Special Counsel to President Kennedy

Walt Rostow – Deputy National Security Advisor

Dean Rusk – Secretary of State

George Ball – Undersecretary of State

Averell Harriman – Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs

Robert McNamara – Secretary of Defense

William Bundy – Assistant Secretary of Defense

David Halberstam, in his book The Best and the Brightest, describes the men in JFK's cabinet as follows:

So they carried with them an exciting sense of American Elitism, a sense that the best men had been summoned forth from the country to harness this dream to new American nationalism, bringing a new, strong dynamic spirit to our historic role in world affairs, not necessarily to bring the American dream to reality here at home, but to bring it to reality elsewhere in the world.¹¹

So almost 200 years after the beginning of the Republic, the Messianic role of America was still a motivating factor in its policies. Only this time, it was directed outside of its borders and backed by the strongest military power the world had ever known.

The principal architects of America's Vietnam policy during the pivotal period 1961-1965 were Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. Dean Rusk's role as Secretary of State—a position which ordinarily would have been heavily involved in America's foreign policy decisions—was by default usurped by McNamara and to a lesser extent by Bundy.

McNamara was a captain in the air force during World War II. He was part of a team that coordinated the production of B-29s and all of the logistics involved in such production and with the training of the crews for the B-29s, insuring that both were ready at roughly the same time. Halberstam described his role as "the intelligence bank of the project," holding the operation together and keeping it on schedule. After the war, the team marketed itself to Ford

Motor Company and helped Ford become profitable once again. The team was known as the Whiz Kids. One week after being named as the President of Ford Motor Company, McNamara accepted JFK's offer to become Secretary of Defense in his administration.

McGeorge Bundy was rejected by his draft board during the war due to deficient eyesight. He circumvented his rejection for poor eyesight by memorizing the eye chart and, through his family connections, secured an appointment as an aide to Rear Admiral Alan Kuk. He participated in the planning for D-Day and observed the invasion from the bridge of the USS Augusta off the coast of Normandy. After the war, Bundy returned to Harvard where, in 1953, he was selected by Nathan Pusey, the University's newly appointed president, to be Dean of the Faculty. It was as Dean of the Faculty that he crossed paths with David Halberstam. As the managing editor of the Crimson, Halberstam interviewed Pusey and Bundy every week with regard to the affairs of the university. Halberstam described Bundy as a "magnificent dean" who "took the complex Harvard faculty—diverse, egomaniacal—and played with it, in the words of a critic, like a cat with mice." David Riesman called Bundy's management of the faculty as a form of "aristocratic meritocracy." As we shall see, Halberstam became Bundy's and McNamara's severest critic in their conduct of the Vietnam war.

During his tenure as Dean of the Faculty, Bundy established a relationship with JFK—who was a member of the Harvard Board of Overseers. After being elected President, JFK tapped Bundy to serve as his National Security Adviser.

Neither McNamara nor Bundy had the background or experience that prepared them for their role in government as Secretary of Defense and National Security Advisor. Neither knew anything about Asia, about poverty, about people and, in particular, about the culture, customs and politics of the Vietnamese people. Halberstam said of McNamara: "This man whose only

real experience had been dealing with the second largest automotive empire in the world . . . was the last man to understand and measure the problems of people looking for their political freedom. He was intelligent, forceful, courageous, decent, everything, in fact, but wise."¹² With respect to Bundy, he said: "The idea and the meaning of failure to him . . . was almost an alien thing. He was so confident in himself, in his tradition and what he represented, that he had no concept about what failure might really mean."¹³ With respect to the North Vietnamese, McNamara and Bundy did not take into account that, not only were they creating history, but they were creatures of history—a history quite different than our history, but with the same passionate thirst for freedom; freedom from the colonial rule of the French and of the Americans whom they viewed as taking the place of the French. As Niebuhr so aptly described the mindset underlying our failure to recognize and understand the underlying motive of others: "We are mystified by the endless complexities of human motives and the varied compounds of ethnic loyalties, cultural traditions, social hopes, envies and fears which enter into the policies of nations, and which lie at the foundation of their political cohesion."¹⁴

Both McNamara and Bundy believed strongly in the power of rationality. As stated by Halberstam, "If there was anything that bound the men, their followers and their subordinates together, it was the belief that sheer intelligence and rationality could answer and solve anything."¹⁵ They believed in the capacity of rational men to control irrational commitments . . ." Failure was a foreign concept to them. In other words, like the social scientists of Riesman's era, they placed their faith in the possibilities of man and did not take into account the limitation of man in the historical process.

Finally, both McNamara and Bundy believed in the use of force to accomplish our virtuous goals. Again referring to Halberstam in describing McNamara, Bundy and Dean Rusk:

They were men who reflected the post-Munich, post McCarthy pragmatism of the age. One had to stop totalitarianism, and since the only thing that the totalitarians understood was force, one had to be willing to use force.¹⁶

For Bundy, Halberstam said:

Force was justified by what the Communists did; the times justified the kind of acts which decent men did not seek; but which historic responsibilities made necessary.¹⁷

In other words, force was a necessary evil act in order to obtain a higher, more virtuous goal—i.e., stopping the Communists and obtaining a peaceful resolution of the war.

So as Niebuhr feared, by 1965 our pretensions of virtue, wisdom and power had all come together in our response to the Vietnam crisis and set the stage, if you will, for the perfect ironic storm.

Consistent with the belief in the Messianic role of America in its international affairs, the rationale for the involvement of America in Vietnam was to stop the spread of communism. We had been successful in preventing its spread into South Korea. And there was the belief in some quarters, including President Johnson, that if North Vietnam prevailed in its attempt to take over South Vietnam, it would have a domino effect on other Southeast Asian nations. But the underlying motive for North Vietnam was not to spread communism and its dogma *per se*. Rather, it was to free itself from its colonial oppressors and obtain political freedom—a motive very similar to that of the American colonies almost 200 years ago. The irony is that, although our intentions were virtuous, we were engaged in a war that, if successful, would prevent a country from obtaining the same political freedom that our forefathers fought and died for and that resulted in the creation of our American Republic.

Niebuhr anticipated such an ironic circumstance. He said:

If only we could fully understand that the evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our

own, we might be better prepared to save a vast uncommitted world, particularly in Asia, which lies between ourselves and communism, from being engulfed by this noxious creed.¹⁸

He said this in 1952, well before our involvement in Vietnam.

By the same token, because of our belief in the virtues of democracy, we insisted that South Vietnam, in order to get our assistance in their battle with North Vietnam, adopt a democratic form of government. Because this was foreign to their culture and customs, it did not go well. We blamed Diem and his brother for the failure of democratic principles to take hold and supported, and perhaps even initiated, a coup against them which resulted in their deaths. This is a vivid confirmation of Niebuhr's observation of "the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon." Good intentions, evil results.

Both McNamara and Bundy were involved in several major decisions concerning the conduct of the war which had ironic results. Both supported and recommended to President Johnson the escalation of our troop commitment. They reasoned that, if we increased the number of troops on the ground, it would send a signal to North Vietnam that we were serious in our support of South Vietnam. Then, presumably, reason would kick in and, realizing that they were up against the most powerful country in the world, they would fold their tent and go home. At the very least, they would be more amenable to a negotiated settlement. The opposite was true. As we increased our commitment, they more than matched the increase, causing the balance to shift back in their favor. Rationality was not persuasive with the North Vietnamese—it could not overcome their passion for freedom.

By 1965, the de facto U.S. military strategy was a war of attrition. Statistically, something that McNamara relied upon in support of his policy decisions, it appeared to be a winning strategy. At the end of 1965, U.S. military deaths were 1, 594 compared with almost 500,000 deaths suffered by the North Vietnamese. By the end of the war, it is estimated that the

North Vietnamese suffered an additional two to three million losses compared to U.S. losses of 58,191. As summarized by Gordon M. Goldstein in his book about McGeorge Bundy and his role in the Vietnam war entitled Lessons in Disaster":

Through its campaign of attrition, the United States presumed that a crossover point would be reached, when the accumulated pain of war would compel the insurgents to relent. But in practice this coercion strategy created an endurance contest. In that competition it was not the will of the Vietnamese communists that was broken . . . it was the United States that withdrew its forces "home without victory."¹⁹

As Bundy confessed, "We had followed a losing strategy—one that led us not to success but to the acceptance of failure." So once again we have the ironic result that a policy adopted with one goal in mind having precisely the opposite result.

The irony of the policy of attrition was dissolved well before the end of the war. McNamara and Bundy recognized that it was not working. But Bundy wanted to stay the course. He thought the credibility of the U.S. was at stake. He did not want the U.S. to be considered a "Paper Tiger." On the return from a trip (his only trip) to Vietnam in February 1965, he wrote a memo to President Johnson in which he said:

We cannot assert that a policy of sustained reprisal will succeed in changing the course of the contest in Vietnam. It may fail, and we cannot estimate the odds of success with accuracy—they may be somewhere between 25% and 75%. What we can say is that even if it fails, the policy will be worth it. At a minimum it will damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own.²⁰

Bundy, in other words, was willing to commit more troops and the attendant increase in casualties, to the war of attrition even though he knew that it was a flawed policy. President Johnson instructed Bundy to recall all copies of the memo and not make reference to it again.

The failure of the policy of attrition led to the adoption of the bombing tactic. Whether to bomb or not had been hotly debated for a number of months. Both McNamara and Bundy finally bought into the case for bombing in early 1965. Surely, they reasoned, the bombing of Hanoi and the carpet bombing of the North Vietnamese forces wherever they were, would put irresistible pressure on the North Vietnamese government to come to the negotiation table, and perhaps even to sue for peace. As we learned after the war, the irony was that it had precisely the opposite effect. Rather than dividing the North Vietnamese people, it unified them in their support for the war effort. A North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official said of the effect of the bombing:

Our only choice was rather to submit or resist. Under these circumstances, every Vietnamese citizen would have felt ashamed if we sat down and talked with you under the pressure of bombing. This is the reason why so long as you continued to bomb the North, there could be no negotiations.²¹

So another fear of Niebuhr was realized—the ironic tendency of power to become vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently.

But in addition to the irony related to individual tactics, there is the overall irony that the Vietnam experience exposed what we, and most of the world, viewed as our greatest strength—our military power backed up by the threat of the use of the atomic bomb—turned out to be our greatest weakness. The threat of the use of the atomic bomb, because of its terrible moral consequences, was never a consideration. And our military power, although overwhelming and capable of inflicting terrible losses on the enemy, was not suited to stopping the guerilla war effort of the North Vietnamese. We were not the Paper Tiger that Bundy feared, but we were not invincible.

In Vietnam, the calamity that Niebuhr forewarned us of in 1952 happened. America's pretensions of virtue, of wisdom and of power combined to produce what Halberstam called "the

worst tragedy since the Civil War." Their idealism and the belief in the rationality of man, led the Best and the Brightest to the use of America's power in pursuit of the virtuous goal of stopping the spread of communism. Oblivious of the ironic perils to which human virtue, wisdom and power are subject, they failed to take into account the limitations of man in the historic process. They also failed to take into account that man is the creature of the historical process as well as the creation of history. Ironically, their good intentions resulted in a disaster. Unlike the irony of American history prior to World War II, the irony of American history after World War II was because of the faith in, and allegiance to, our ideals as set forth in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution.

Niebuhr leaves us with this parting shot:

For if we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a great nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory.²²

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- ¹ David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, p. 23
 - ² Ibid, p. 349
 - ³ Ibid, p. 278
 - ⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, p. 8
 - ⁵ Ibid, p. 6
 - ⁶ Ibid, p. 82
 - ⁷ Ibid, p. XXIV
 - ⁸ Ibid, p. 63
 - ⁹ Ibid, p. 133
 - ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 134
 - ¹¹ David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, p. 41
 - ¹² Ibid, pp. 213-214
 - ¹³ Ibid, pp. 526-527
 - ¹⁴ The Irony of American History, p. 41
 - ¹⁵ The Best and the Brightest, p. 44
 - ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 43
 - ¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 60-61
 - ¹⁸ The Irony of American History, p. 16
 - ¹⁹ Gordon M. Goldstein, Lessons in Disaster, pp. 224-225
 - ²⁰ Ibid, p. 158
 - ²¹ Ibid, p. 181
 - ²² The Irony of American History, p. 174