

Toward a Better World: LBJ, Niebuhr, and American Human Rights, 1964-1966

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In the fall of 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson had his first opportunity to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Among those he chose to recognize was the scholar, activist, and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Although the gruff and profane Johnson would appear to have little in common with the cerebral pastor turned theologian, the President employed the teachings of Niebuhr to formulate and articulate his attempts to remake both the nation—War on Poverty and Civil Rights legislation—and the world—making human rights the cornerstone of American foreign policy. Niebuhr’s Christian realism influenced policy makers and presidents for nearly thirty years, but it found its most forceful practitioner in Johnson, who praised Niebuhr for invoking the “ancient insights of Christianity to illuminate the experience and fortify the will of the modern age.”¹

By clasp[ing] to the pragmatic Christian realism articulated by Niebuhr, Johnson set out to establish social justice for America and then the world. The President’s consistent call for the reformation of society helped refocus liberal America’s mindset toward the beginning of a credible human rights policy, both at home and abroad. President Johnson had politically come of age as Niebuhr’s influence was

¹“Remarks at the Presentation of the 1964 Presidential Medal of Freedom Awards,” September 14, 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson* [hereinafter cited as *PPLBJ*] (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), 2:1065.

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at its zenith. Due to this, Johnson understood that for society to obtain justice for all—whether poor, uneducated, or black—the government would need to use gentle coercion. This happened as Johnson pushed his Great Society agenda through Congress in 1964 and 1965, finally allowing America to take a credible seat in the international human rights discussion.

After President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the newly sworn in president, Lyndon Johnson, appeared to many as merely a political opportunist capitalizing on the initiatives of John F. Kennedy. Johnson's concern for justice and equality, however, had emerged much earlier. His father's populism and the influence of the newly articulated Christian pragmatism had indelibly shaped Johnson's worldview. None of this lessened Johnson's political acumen—the famed "Johnson treatment" was still in use as he presided over the Oval Office—but it had been influenced by Christian realism.

Niebuhr's attempt to redefine justice and democracy took place among the politicians and intelligentsia of Cold War America. The United States was working to provide an alternative to the Kremlin, and Niebuhr helped lend an intellectual and spiritual credibility to the anti-communist rhetoric codified in Washington's containment policies. Containment, developed in the late 1940s as a response to Soviet aggression, was the brainchild of three men in particular—Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs William Clayton, and the head of the State Department's policy planning staff George F. Kennan. These three men, heavy hitters in America's halls of power, helped to establish a form of Christian realism that provided a philosophical foundation for Washington's policies.

Acheson, heavily influenced by Niebuhr, firmly believed that it was his moral and civic duty to stop Communism on every front. Clayton, a successful businessman before being called into politics, sought to unify the world through economic activity, especially trade and monetary reform. Kennan, often called the "father" of containment, was an expert in Russian history and a former diplomat to Russia, giving him a great deal of credibility during the initial stages of American Cold War planning. He earnestly believed that communism was fundamentally evil and that the Russian brand was out to destroy the Western world. Kennan's famous article, "The Sources of Soviet

Conduct,” became Washington’s official policy as it argued the Soviet threat would push America into the forefront of a battle for the moral and political leadership of the developing world.²

With the return of liberalism in John F. Kennedy’s election in 1960, the Democratic party began trying to resurrect Roosevelt’s New Deal, addressing poverty, civil rights, and fear itself through the rousing speeches of the young president. Throughout the 1950s, the Republican party had made significant gains among voters in part by using the ravings of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the cries of the Asia First establishment, throwing the Democratic party into a scramble to protect their right flank from the Republican attack. During Harry Truman’s presidency, the Chinese Nationalist party under Jiang Jieshi had lost to Mao Tse-tung’s Communist forces, prompting Senators Robert Taft and McCarthy to join Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, to accuse Truman and the Democrats of failing to protect China from Kremlin-led Communism. Truman, reeling from this critique, placed troops on the ground in Korea by the end of 1950 in an effort to prevent the fall of South Korea. These events combined with the Second Red Scare led in part by Joseph McCarthy’s commission and the perjury conviction of Alger Hiss in 1950 to create a climate that allowed the Republicans to attack Democratic policy as soft on communism abroad and as introducing socialism at home.

Out of this broiling political cauldron came a new group that took root in America’s liberal political circles. They worked to show Democrats were able to have both a strong stance against communism abroad and for social reform at home. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., named the group of intellectuals and politicians working to join hard-line anti-communist action with social reforms the “vital center” in 1949. He, and Cold War liberals like Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Reuther, formed the Americans for Democratic Action in the late 1940s, helping to present a liberal face to America—one that tried gave an intel-

²Some have argued that the realist stance Kennan adopted placed him at odds with those concerned with morality; Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). But an understanding of Niebuhr in conjunction with Kennan’s theory leads to the conclusion that moral and political concerns were tied to one another in many areas of American foreign policy. Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Walter Hixson, *George Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

lectual credibility to their agenda. The new organization, observed Schlesinger, “mark[ed] perhaps as much as anything the watershed at which American liberalism began to base itself once again on a solid conception of man and history.”³

Reinhold Niebuhr’s approach to the Cold War differed from those on the far left. He attacked the left and its leader Henry Wallace for calling for a conciliatory relationship with the Soviet Union. Niebuhr’s view of the world, seen especially in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, had been formed prior to the birth of the Cold War. Disagreeing with Hans Morgenthau, he argued that the American nation was not what needed to be saved, but rather civilization itself. By the late 1940s, Niebuhr was a loud, fervent voice in the liberal debate over the Cold War, frequently arguing that the United States was responsible to act against the Kremlin in order to protect democratic civilization.⁴

Christian realism was new twist in American Protestant theology. With it, Reinhold Niebuhr departed from the perfectionist religious philosophy prominent in American society during the postwar years and called western Christianity to take responsibility for the problems of the nuclear world. Niebuhr, the pastor turned professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, voiced the new doctrine in his writings from 1930 to 1959. He sought to link Christian theology to politics, helping usher in the rise of a new orthodoxy with a dual emphasis—the inherent evil of man and the duty of the Christian to work towards the achievement of social justice. His writing presented scathing attacks on Communism, and he firmly believed that the American form of democracy was, while not perfect, the best way for the world to achieve a semblance of social justice. From Harry Truman to Lyndon Johnson, Niebuhr’s writings would help convince American politicians and intelligentsia that racism, totalitarianism, and imperialism were threats to America’s strategic, spiritual, and moral well being at home and abroad.⁵

³Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: Our Purposes and Perils on the Tightrope of American Liberalism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 166.

⁴Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 76-78.

⁵Randall Bennett Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 501.

Niebuhr's writings rejected the adherence of social liberals to the social gospel—the doctrine that humans are good rather than evil and that given the right circumstances they will always better themselves. The social gospel had blossomed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and was given voice by theologian Walter Rauschenbusch's writings.⁶ Niebuhr instead argued that the person, and not nature, was evil.⁷ Niebuhr's writings "assaulted the illusions of utopianism in the name of Christian realism and political pragmatism." He argued that working for social justice fitted with belief in God, and showed that a person could be a "political progressive without shallowness, an anti-Communist moralist without fanaticism, a religious believer without delusion."⁸ As historian Robin Lovin argues, Niebuhr's realism did jibe with portions of the traditional liberal ideals, namely that the "norms of justice extend across the boundaries of nations and interest groups."⁹ With this, Niebuhr gave an intellectually anti-communist voice to policy debates in America during the Cold War and recreated the American liberal dialogue, influencing a generation of Cold Warriors.

Niebuhr acknowledged that all of man's efforts would be imperfect but refused to "relieve humanity of the obligation to improve the world where it could."¹⁰ Niebuhr argued that improving the environment and education alone could not solve society's problems, for "modern developments have proved that there is a more intimate relation between . . . man's reason and self-love."¹¹ Because of his rejection of the social gospel and insistence on man's inherent evil, Niebuhr called his new philosophy "Christian realism" in opposition to the optimistic nature of Rauschenbusch's social gospel.

Justice, a key element in Christian realism, was threatened by man's self-love, which according to Niebuhr was the "source of all

⁶Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917; rept., New York: Abingdon Press, 1960).

⁷Reinhold Niebuhr; edited by Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960), 71.

⁸Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 99-100.

⁹Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 231.

¹⁰Ronald Brownstein, "Pragmatic Path to an Ideal World," *Financial Times*, Sunday March 27, 2005.

¹¹Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 71.

evil." Self-love translated into egocentricity—the trend of man to think of himself as his own end or to make himself “the false center” of any group.¹² By subverting the individual to the community, a democratic government could coerce the population into achieving justice. “Governments must coerce,” wrote Niebuhr, even if that coercion came close to tyranny. Despite this danger, Niebuhr felt that the inherent self-corrective powers of a democracy made for the best method of “accommodating and balancing the interests of competing groups.”¹³

Democracy, Niebuhr wrote, should be “rooted in the principle of universal suffrage,” which would give society the ability to self-correct any abuses.¹⁴ Niebuhr believed this allowed a confidence in “man’s natural justice” and gave people and government the ability to set its institutions as barriers against injustice. Niebuhr argued that humanity has the “residual capacity for justice” and that the institutions humanity created were able to change as society changed. They were able to adjust because good and evil were not permanently defined by a fixed structure—the only consistent evil for Niebuhr was man’s self-love—and democracy was therefore able to shift as needed.¹⁵

Man’s constant movement to establish social groups meant problems, however. The larger community was held together by emotion or force instead of the mind or education.¹⁶ This created a lack of justice and a need for political order. “To establish justice in a sinful world,” wrote Niebuhr “is the whole sad duty of the political order.” Even though humanity did not possess the “conscious will” to set up a form of governance, Niebuhr argued that men still had responsibility to establish justice through cooperation. He saw the establishment of justice as the best that can be achieved given man’s evil nature. Because of man’s inherent evil nature, justice could be achieved by a degree of coercion on one hand and a resistance to coercion on the other.¹⁷ For Niebuhr, coercion by government, even a democratic

¹²Niebuhr, *Political Problems*, 122-123.

¹³Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 182-183.

¹⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 96.

¹⁵Niebuhr, *Political Problems*, 99, 130, 195.

¹⁶Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 84, 87.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 180-182.

government, was inevitable. Though some evil crept in because of the coercion, it allowed humanity the chance to achieve justice.

As a valid form of social and political organization, democracy lent itself to seeking order “within the conditions of freedom; and maintain[ed] freedom within the framework of order.” In doing so, democracy became the best method to organize government and society by giving a system of arbitration and accommodation for social conflict alongside an apparatus that checked the government and provided a way for controlling the government. The modern form of democracy, argued Niebuhr, tended “toward a more equal justice” by endowing all men a measure of political power and the ability to review their leaders’ policies, placing a check upon an excessive use of government coercion. Democracy provided the means of passive self-correction and allowed minorities to organize in order to change its policies and structure.¹⁸

As a theologian, Niebuhr argued that a major contribution Christianity must make to achieving political justice was to set all “propositions of justice under the law of love . . . creating the freedom and maneuverability necessary to achieve a tolerable accord between man and nations.”¹⁹ Niebuhr argued that Christianity gave men freedom, even the freedom to sin. This freedom correlated with the ability of a democracy to allow for change as men worked in social groups that were the “approximation of [a] loving community under the conditions of sin.”²⁰

By using this democratic freedom, President Lyndon Johnson would engage society and work to renew America. He saw that government, in the absence of love, must create equality for all men. He argued in 1965 that the people of America have a “covenant of justice, liberty, and union,” and that as a result, Americans were inherently “believers in justice and liberty.”²¹ This belief, rooted in the Constitution, helped convince Johnson that once the American people began moving to grant equal rights to their country men they would respond to the call to provide the same throughout the world.

¹⁸Ibid, 183-185.

¹⁹Niebuhr, *Political Problems*, 110.

²⁰Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 72, 181.

²¹“The President’s Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:71-74.

Johnson was a believer in the use of government to help bring justice to society—so much so that H. W. Brands said, “Brother Lyndon was born again in the gospel of government activism, and he devoted his career to spreading the good news.”²² The unlikely social activist from the Texas hill country would lobby for a better life for the American people throughout his presidency, but he was especially active during his early years in office. These efforts formed Johnson’s Great Society—his attempt to build a better America through Civil Rights reform and the War on Poverty and a better world through a foreign policy rooted in a concern for human rights.

Johnson’s efforts were rooted in utilizing what he saw in Americans—an idea that justice was for all and by all. He wrote that people “expect justice for themselves and they are willing to grant it to others.”²³ His idea of justice came from America’s democratic nature. He agreed with Niebuhr’s insistence that democracy “does indeed require some confidence in man’s natural capacity for justice.”²⁴ Johnson, echoing Niebuhr’s philosophy, felt justice was best achieved within a democracy, as it provided the ability for society to adapt to new concerns, thereby ensuring “a greater degree of justice than any other political form” could provide.²⁵ While democracy allowed for this movement toward greater social justice, democracy for Niebuhr was the treatment for an illness. Man had enough capacity for justice to allow democracy to exist, but man’s basic evil nature made democracy necessary. This type of society, Niebuhr argued, had “at hand the means of peaceful self-correction,” which allowed men to work towards greater social justice.²⁶

Johnson felt that the forces of the democracy should be used to help eliminate the last barriers to equality and justice in mankind. He aimed to put the full capacity of America behind his efforts: “We have the capacity to abolish hunger. We have the capacity to end poverty and to eliminate most diseases.” When the helpless cry out, Johnson argued, “the hearing must hear, the seeing must see, and the

²²H. W. Brands, *The Strange Death of American Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 91.

²³Lyndon Baines Johnson, *My Hope for America* (New York: Random House, 1964), 17.

²⁴Niebuhr, *Political Problems*, 99.

²⁵Ronald F. Howell, “Political Philosophy on a Theological Foundation” *Ethics* 63 (January 1953): 94.

²⁶Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 185.

able must act.”²⁷ He believed that while the majority of Americans were educated, strong, and fed, they must help those who could not help themselves. In order to do so, the government would help by providing policies—Civil Rights and the War on Poverty—that would allow the helpless to get on their feet and move closer to equality and justice.

The President’s belief in equality took political form through his demands that the quality of American life must rise. For Johnson, the test of America’s test civilization, would lie in the “quality of our peoples’ lives and in the character of the men and women our society produces.”²⁸ In his 1965 State of the Union Address, Johnson stated his wish “to establish a harmony between man and society which will allow each of us to enlarge the meaning of his life and all of us to elevate the quality of our civilization.”²⁹ The harmony Johnson sought would be built on equal rights for all Americans, and then throughout the world as he worked to further the Great Society’s cause during the Cold War.

As Johnson began moving the nation towards this goal he would echo John F. Kennedy’s battle cry, “The Great Society asks not how much, but how good; not only how to create wealth but how to use it; not only how fast we are going, but where we are going.”³⁰ Johnson intended to meet the challenges that would rise on a point-by-point basis, agreeing with Niebuhr’s philosophy of how justice would be achieved.³¹ Believing that there was no single cure for the problems of society, Johnson would use the War on Poverty and Civil Rights to attack fear, poverty, and hatred—the issues that held Americans back.³²

While Johnson’s social reforms are often called a fulfillment of John Kennedy’s program, the Texan’s agenda reflected an ideological conviction lacking in his predecessor. As President, Johnson would work to finish what Franklin Roosevelt had left uncompleted. Even

²⁷ Johnson, *My Hope for America*, 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹ “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 4, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1: 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 202.

³² “Remarks to the 10th National Legislative Conference, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO,” May 3, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1: 477; Johnson, *My Hope for America*, 17, 23.

before the election, his rhetoric showed the influence of Niebuhr's Christian realism as Johnson called for social justice in his Great Society programs. His efforts showed how his life had shaped his belief that government could be a force for change in America, and he would use the coercion that Niebuhr described to enact as much change toward the fullest achievement of justice America had ever seen.

Johnson's social awareness had been built while still in Texas—his father had been enamored with William Jennings Bryan and populism— and Johnson himself had been a teacher for the down-and-out in Cotulla. When Franklin Roosevelt appeared with the New Deal, Johnson supported the new president's efforts. By the 1960s, Johnson had blended his love of American politics with a messianic mentality to try and set America on the right track.³³ This spirit was tempered by the grim reality of passing reform bills while trying to wage a limited war in Vietnam. Despite the imperfections noted by historians of the Great Society, Johnson was still compelled to push through what was one of America's greatest reform programs.

In order to understand the movement of the Great Society's rhetoric from domestic front to international relations, a brief look into the rhetoric of two key aspects in Johnson's vision is needed. The War on Poverty and Civil Rights initiatives provide framework that Johnson tried to use to give America a credible voice in the international human rights dialogue. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were some Lyndon Johnson's most famous successes. Critics often cry that the road to true equality was not followed and that Johnson failed, but his efforts stood apart from past forays into the wilderness of American Civil Rights.³⁴ Above all, Johnson was a believer in justice and liberty, and argued that every man must be free. His efforts to achieve these things formed the backbone of his Great Society—and gave America a credible voice for human rights.

Johnson, while agreeing with Niebuhr's realism, also had hope for America. The Great Society was not simply an attempt at fixing the

³³Randall Bennett Woods, "The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 31 (January 2007): 1-3.

³⁴Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

nation—it was “the excitement of becoming—always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again—but always trying and always going.” He believed that if the Great Society succeeded, “it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but rather because of what we believe.”³⁵ At the University of Michigan in 1964, Johnson declared war on social injustice of every kind. The Great Society would demand an end to racial injustice and poverty, and would be a place “where the city of man serves . . . the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.” Johnson knew that the Great Society would be a “challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.”³⁶ The Great Society was a clarion call for hope in a world dominated by a Cold War and fears of nuclear annihilation.

Johnson argued Americans “have the capacity to abolish hunger. We have the capacity to end poverty and to eliminate most diseases.”³⁷ In doing these things a “second America” would be built, a “great society of our vision,” a vision that saw the achievement of racial, economic, and educational equality at home—and ultimately abroad.³⁸ “Ahead now is a summit where freedom from the wants of the body can help fulfill the needs of the spirit” Johnson said in 1965. The road would be long, but the Great Society would test its results in the quality of its citizens.³⁹

Johnson’s rhetoric echoed that of Niebuhr, who insisted “democracy is rooted in the principle of universal suffrage.”⁴⁰ Precisely because of Johnson’s belief that government must at times coerce the population into doing what was needed, as Niebuhr argued, as president he worked to push through legislation to make the playing field as equal as he could.⁴¹ His commitment was moral and political. As

³⁵ “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:73-74.

³⁶ “Remarks at the University of Michigan,” May 22, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:704.

³⁷ “Remarks to the Delegates to the Conference on International Rural Development,” July 28, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 2:902.

³⁸ “Telephone Remarks Opening the ‘Parade of Progress’ in Cleveland,” August 28, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 2:1019.

³⁹ “State of the Union,” January 20, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:4.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Political Problems and Christian Realism*, 96.

⁴¹ Ronald Stone “The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the Late Twentieth Century” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (Pilgrim Press: New York, 1984), 60.

he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he declared that the past could not continue, that the Constitution forbade it, the “principles of our freedom forbid it,” and the moral high ground claimed by America forbade it.⁴² Johnson argued that the Constitution was the “ultimate expression of the Judeo-Christian ethic.” The purpose of this act was to end division and promote commitment to freedom, a constant pursuit of justice, and a deep respect for humanity.⁴³ It would allow all those who were “equal before God” to be equal in every area of American society Johnson argued after signing the bill in 1964.⁴⁴

Johnson felt that he would not have “done justice” to his office “until every section of this country is linked, in single purpose and joined devotion, to bring an end to injustice.”⁴⁵ His efforts would focus on equality and rights for African Americans, and Johnson believed that the Civil Rights Act was a “reaffirmation of the native decency” of American society.⁴⁶ He believed that “America stood for progress in human rights,” and that by standing for “full and equal rights for all of its people,” America would truly become an international leader.⁴⁷

In 1964, the President told the Argentine Senate the goal of the United States was to “develop a society in which men will be treated with equality.”⁴⁸ Americans were not truly equal “until all of us in America are fully free” and the rights of all Americans were secure.⁴⁹ To do so would be the “vindication of our democracy,” Johnson said, “In extending equal opportunity to Americans for whom democracy has been an illusion and not a reality.”⁵⁰ This vindication would be a

⁴²“Radio and Television Remarks upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill,” July 2, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 2:842-843.

⁴³Woods, *LBJ*, 476.

⁴⁴“Radio and Television Remarks upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill,” 843.

⁴⁵“Remarks at the Air Force Base in Goldsboro, N.C., upon Departing for Atlanta,” May 7, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:648.

⁴⁶“Remarks at a Reception for Members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors,” April 17, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:481; “Remarks to New Participants in ‘Plans for Progress’ Equal Opportunity Agreements,” April 9, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:447.

⁴⁷“Remarks to New Participants in ‘Plans for Progress’ Equal Opportunity Agreements.”

⁴⁸“Remarks at a Reception for Members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors,” 481.

⁴⁹“Remarks in New York City before the 50th Anniversary Convention of Amalgamated Clothing Workers,” May 9, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:656.

⁵⁰“Remarks upon Signing the Pesticide Control Bill,” May 12, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:683.

battle “to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires.”⁵¹ As Niebuhr argued, “Good and evil are not determined by some fixed structure of human existence.”⁵² Good and evil could be redefined, and Johnson did so with his Civil Rights bill.

The War on Poverty took flight as the President’s Civil Rights initiative succeeded in 1964. He regularly called for Americans to work together, crying that the “challenge is not to turn back or to look aside—but to go ahead to the work that will make this a better and finer land for all of us.”⁵³ As Randall Woods has argued, Johnson was “imbued with real concern for the poor and deprived, and he accepted the populist prescription of positive governmental action as a means of restoring opportunity.”⁵⁴ America would have to see that the cause of the individual was the cause of the nation but also that the nation was not an impersonal government monolith.

The program was “primarily concerned with people, in that the programs it authorizes are educational and rehabilitative in nature” argued J. William Fulbright.⁵⁵ People were the point—the quality of people’s lives at home, and eventually abroad, were the way America must judge itself. Johnson even argued that the people were in charge, that the entire program was structured “from the bottom up.”⁵⁶ In the same spirit of Niebuhr’s democracy, the people were to assume responsibility for “the achievement of justice.”⁵⁷ “We seek to establish a harmony between man and society,” proclaimed Johnson, “which will allow us to enlarge the meaning of his life and all of us to elevate the quality of our civilization.”⁵⁸ This harmony and quality of life were to be the hallmarks of the Great Society.

In a letter to the Senate in 1965, Johnson once again spoke of his faith “that poverty can be eliminated from this country” and that the

⁵¹ “Remarks at the University of Michigan,” 706.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*, 99, 130.

⁵³ “Telephone Remarks to the Convention of the Plasterers’ Union,” August 31, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 2:1026.

⁵⁴ Randall Bennett Woods, *Quest For Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 181.

⁵⁵ J. William Fulbright to C. A. Hughes, December 9, 1964, ser. 1, box, 11, folder, 8, J. William Fulbright Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

⁵⁶ “Remarks at the 20th Washington Conference of the Advertising Council,” May 6, 1964, *PPLBJ*, 1:610.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *On Politics*, 181.

⁵⁸ “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 4, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:1.

struggle was “not only for the liberation of those imprisoned in poverty, but for the conscience and the values of a prosperous and free nation.” The promise of a democratic America would be fulfilled, and the idea that “all would have an equal chance to share in the fruits” of America would come into being because of programs like the War on Poverty.⁵⁹ The War on Poverty was meant to “extend opportunity to those now deprived of a full chance” so they might take part in the American life.⁶⁰ Johnson argued that America would build a Great Society where no person would be the victim of fear or poverty, and where everyone had a chance for “fulfillment, for prosperity, and for hope.”⁶¹

Education was also important to Johnson—he had been a teacher in Texas before moving to Washington in 1931. In 1935, he began working for President Roosevelt in the National Youth Association of Texas and helped thousands of Texans move through high school and college. His education bill was tied to the poverty initiative and was, as Senator Fulbright told a constituent, “based on the fact that poverty and ignorance go hand in hand and that education in the final analysis is the only remedy for poverty.”⁶² Johnson defined education as “our primary weapon in the war on poverty and the principal tool for building the Great Society.”⁶³ Education would improve the quality of American life, and Johnson agreed with Thomas Jefferson in arguing, “No nation can be both ignorant and free.” Indeed, argued Johnson, “no nation can be both ignorant and great,” so America would have to commit to giving every child as much education as possible with the help of the government.⁶⁴

The idea that U.S. foreign policy should be concerned with human rights did not originate with Lyndon Johnson, but rather it came

⁵⁹“Letter to the President of the Senate and to the Speaker of the House on Stepping Up the War on Poverty,” February 17, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:199.

⁶⁰“Special Message to Congress on Area and Regional Economic Development,” March 25, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:327.

⁶¹“Remarks to the 10th National Legislative Conference, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO,” May 3, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:477.

⁶²J. William Fulbright to Mrs. Caroline L. Brendel, September 3, 1964, ser. 1, box 11, folder 6, Fulbright Papers.

⁶³“Annual Budget Message to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1966,” January 25, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:94.

⁶⁴“Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 20, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:6-7; Woods, *Quest for Identity*, 198.

from Johnson's political mentor and hero, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill in August 1941 for the Atlantic Conference, and its subsequent charter, according to historian Elizabeth Borgwardt, "marked a bold attempt on the part of Roosevelt and his foreign policy planners to internationalize the New Deal." The Charter called for self-determination, free trade, and "New Deal-style social welfare provisions" for the Allied nations and the world. This moment, argues Elizabeth Borgwardt, was the "defining, inaugural moment for what we now know as the modern doctrine of human rights."⁶⁵ While the term "human rights" had been in use for some time, it was changed during World War II into an ideal of individual human freedom and an alignment with Roosevelt's Four Freedoms.⁶⁶

In the immediate postwar years, President Truman was pleased with Eleanor Roosevelt's success in gaining the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the United Nations General Assembly, and her later role as chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Despite Truman's initial pleasure at these things, as United Nations human rights resolutions came to Washington, the Senate refused to ratify nearly all of them.⁶⁷ This caused the United States to become subject to accusations of "brazen hypocrisy"—especially as the United States was often in the company of countries like South Africa in its refusal to ratify human rights initiatives and offer to civil rights to all of its citizens.⁶⁸ American refusal to ratify human rights conventions made it increasingly hard for Washington to have a constructive role internationally.

Until Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, America offered largely empty rhetoric concerning international human rights. With a large segment of the population unable to vote, unequal educational opportunities, and poverty blighting portions of the country, America was losing substantial credibility when it tried to reprimand coun-

⁶⁵Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-4.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁷Karl E. Meyer, "Enforcing Human Rights," *World Policy Journal* 16 (Fall 1999): 47-48.

⁶⁸William Korey, "Human Rights Treaties: Why is the U.S. Stalling?," *Foreign Affairs* 45 (April 1967): 415. See also Natalie Kaufman and David Whiteman's "Opposition to Human Rights Treaties in the United States Senate: The Legacy of the Bricker Amendment," *Human Rights Quarterly* 10 (Autumn 1988): 309-337.

tries or engage in international human rights reform initiatives. This hypocrisy made American leaders reluctant to push forward human rights during the postwar years.⁶⁹ Johnson's success in improving Civil Rights and addressing poverty, however, paved the way for a greater American involvement in the international human rights discussion—for a concern for international human rights is “almost always triggered by domestic impulses within the most powerful nations.”⁷⁰

Despite these gains in the 1960s, American involvement in human rights issues hinged on America's perceived Cold War geopolitical needs—resulting in the selective application of human rights policies by American officials. Because of this, human rights emerged as an issue only during times when American anti-communism moved to the back burner, hindering the United States' leadership on human rights for twenty years.⁷¹ For all these limits, U.S. policy did shift, giving a more prominent role in international human rights—at least until U.S. troops began to arrive in Vietnam in wake of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Johnson believed that democracy was the “most powerful secular idea in the history of man.” It followed that America's cause was “truly the cause of the world.” Johnson sought to connect with the struggle of developing nations worldwide, as he argued that the United States was born of a revolution still shaking the globe. Because of America's unique political experiment and the potential for equality and justice that democracy afforded, America was in a place “to show the way to the liberation of man from every tyranny over his mind, his body, and his spirit.”⁷² In a March 1964 phone conversation, Press Secretary George Reedy affirmed Johnson's belief, saying, “the big objective, I think, is to preserve . . . and to maintain the United States as a real inspiration and a real example” to developing nations.” Later Reedy argued “America ought to realize—that this country represents hopes and dreams that people have had for about

⁶⁹Borgwardt, *New Deal for the World*, 291.

⁷⁰Sellars, *Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, xiii.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, xiii.

⁷²“Remarks at the University of Kentucky,” February 22, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:211.

2,000 years.”⁷³ America therefore cared not just for the people of Appalachia but for the people in “Asia and in Africa and in other spots in the world.”⁷⁴ People in these areas had struggled with hunger, misery, and tyranny; and America, as the symbol of success in this battle, could not “dash the hopes of humanity.” International human rights, as we know it had now become an element in the moral purpose of the United States.⁷⁵

This new commitment to human rights was more than monetary, argued Johnson, for the U.S. kept “a moral commitment.” “So long as men anywhere go hungry, so long as men anywhere live in poverty, so long as their bodies are afflicted with disease and their children are denied the light of education,” stated Johnson in 1965, “this great and restless Nation that we call America will be searching” for ways “to overcome these curses and tribulations of mankind.” The only enemy, Johnson said, was “human privation and prejudice—and we shall not rest until justice prevails throughout the world against these adversaries.”⁷⁶

With this cry, he attempted to move the Great Society into Vietnam. As 1965 got under way, Johnson began to tie the Vietnam effort to his Great Society ideals. He offered to turn the Mekong Delta into a new Tennessee Valley Authority and asked Congress to fund the project if the North Vietnamese surrendered. He hoped the “new” TVA would bring the benefits of electricity to all those in the Mekong region. His speech, often noted for its call to North Vietnam for negotiations, also strove to place America at the forefront the fight to uplift mankind around the world. The people of North Vietnam, like those to the south and elsewhere, wanted nothing more than “food for their hunger; health for their bodies; a chance to learn; progress for their country; and an end to the bondage of material misery.”⁷⁷ As a way to win the war, Johnson called for a greater commitment to social justice by America in Southeast Asia.

⁷³Phone conversation, Lyndon Johnson to George Reedy, March 14, 1964, *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson, Toward the Great Society*, ed. David Shreve and Robert David Johnson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 5:197.

⁷⁴“Remarks at the University of Kentucky,” 211.

⁷⁵Phone conversation, Lyndon Johnson to George Reedy, March 14, 1964, 197.

⁷⁶“Toasts of the President and President Yameogo of Upper Volta,” March 29, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:342.

⁷⁷Address at Johns Hopkins University: ‘Peace Without Conquest,’ April 7, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 1:396.

During Johnson's 1965 speech to the member states of the Alliance for Progress, he reminded the world that those who had been oppressed were demanding "their share of the blessings and the dignity which the modern world can offer to man." Johnson felt American aid was the catalyst for developing countries to establish social and economic justice. The President placed America at the forefront of the fight for justice as he stated "we all know that the road ahead is longer and it is more steep than the way behind . . . there are many more that are still untouched" and "we must all increase the efforts we are making."⁷⁸ Johnson was working to change America into a country that continuously fought for justice in Latin America and the world.

American personnel at the United Nations were excited as they saw the ideas of the Great Society being used in Latin America. They wanted to "use the Great Society approach overseas" in order to establish a theme that would allow America to "get off the defensive" and establish a more positive image of America abroad.⁷⁹ As the United Nations was becoming more involved in human rights issues, Johnson's representative, Arthur Goldberg, urged him to move forward in the international human rights arena as he had on domestic human rights. Goldberg felt that if Johnson were to champion this by pushing the ratification of UN treaties through the Senate it would be of "immense value in helping to set and uphold international standards" and represent a "new, liberal" departure in American foreign relation—especially with the Soviet Union.⁸⁰

Johnson argued that the nation must help developing nations fight Communist aggression through social justice programs and, when needed, armed intervention. What he won, instead of human rights for all, was the rejection of his policies as Congress began cutting his programs and the New Left cried that he was not liberal enough. Surveys taken by Congress and Gallup showed that public felt government help in civil rights and poverty programs should end,

⁷⁸"Remarks at a Ceremony Commemorating the Fourth Anniversary of the Alliance for Progress," August 17, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 2:885-887.

⁷⁹Memorandum from Gordon Chase of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy)," September 13, 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereinafter *FRUS*], 1964-1968, 23:798.

⁸⁰"Letter from the Representative to the United Nations (Goldberg) to President Johnson," May 4, 1966, *FRUS*, 1966-1968, 12:830.

and, according to a Gallup poll in 1966, only 10 percent felt that Johnson was not doing enough to help the helpless.⁸¹ The realism he had clung to would now be used against him. The people, initially riding a pendulum swing toward social justice at home and abroad, in the summer of 1966 rode the pendulum back the other way as the realism Johnson had used for change was now used against him.⁸²

Unfortunately, American involvement in Vietnam had served to offset any gains made by Johnson in human rights. Johnson felt compelled to hold the line in South Vietnam, even if the analogies he used to justify the war were faulty. This created a moral quagmire for his human rights ideals—to foster a limited war in Vietnam, resulting in the deaths of thousands of those he proposed to help began eroding his moral credibility at home.⁸³ Johnson was conflicted about the decisions he made in Vietnam, but despite this he still placed America on a path that simultaneously established and destroyed America's human rights credentials. Intellectuals of all stripes were fleeing the administration's camp, and the iconic realist himself, Reinhold Niebuhr, offered stinging critiques of Johnson's efforts in Vietnam. By attempting to link Vietnam to the moral threat of Nazism in the 1940s, Johnson's realist foundation came under fire as Niebuhr argued the analogy simply could no longer stand.⁸⁴ While Niebuhr had been in favor of early American efforts in Vietnam, he became increasingly disillusioned and felt that the United States was attempting the impossible.⁸⁵

Niebuhr's own views on how America should conduct itself abroad had changed by the time the Vietnam conflict had begun escalating. During the early 1950s, Niebuhr suggested that a total war, involving nuclear weapons, with the Soviet Union would be a just war. By 1957, he had even accepted the idea of conducting "limited

⁸¹ Quoted in Robert Dalleck, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 323.

⁸² Woods, "Politics of Idealism," 12-14.

⁸³ For an excellent critique of Johnson's "limited war," see George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *New Republic*, January 29, 1966, 15-16; Richard Fox *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 284-285. At this time, Niebuhr began moving away from Christian realism into what Campbell Craig calls a "nuclear realism"; "The New Meaning of Modern War in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (October-December 1992): 687-701.

⁸⁵ John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics" in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, 135-136.

wars in terms of our objectives and to win them with the appropriate weapons.”⁸⁶

By the end of President Johnson’s tenure, an increasing sense of disillusionment with liberal ideals was sweeping the groups he had hoped to rally. The Civil Rights movement had begun fracturing as it moved north and west and the Community Action Programs under the War on Poverty were coming under attack by conservatives in Congress and mayors across the country. Students chanting anti-Vietnam slogans joined with Sen. J. William Fulbright in voicing their dissatisfaction with actions in Southeast Asia, and the more radical elements of the New Left argued that Johnson had not gone far enough in his social reforms.

Nevertheless, America’s cause had now become the cause of the world, the cause of “all mankind.” What was on the minds of people in America was on the minds of those around the world, reasoned Johnson. For this America was born—“to honor and to serve certain specific ideals—about the worth and the dignity of individual man, about the rights with which he is endowed by his Creator.”⁸⁷ The idealism and wish for the bettering of mankind could no longer halt at the water’s edge, but for the time being it would be delayed yet a little longer.

⁸⁶Craig, *New Leviathan*, 84.

⁸⁷“Remarks to Members of the American Association of School Administrators,” May 14, 1965, *PPLBJ*, 2:533.