Congress tip the balance on war-related issues in the president's favor; however, as numerous scholars have written, such asymmetries are common features of relations between presidents and Congress. If we believe these conclusions, should we also believe that presidents are more dictatorial than even Hallett allows? Finally, if Congress *had* fulfilled its constitutional obligations as articulated by the author, would we have observed differences in war-related outcomes? Would a more empowered Congress put the brakes on an inherently hawkish president, or would we find that Congress houses the true warmongers? Hallett does not say, though it provides an interesting historical counterfactual.

The Irony of Barack Obama: Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr and the Problem of Christian Statecraft. By R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012. 222p. $94.95.
doi:10.1017/S1537592714001935

— Bryan McGraw, *Wheaton College*

When in the midst of the 2008 presidential campaign Barack Obama told the writer David Brooks that his favorite theologian was the mid-twentieth-century ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, the most common reaction was likely: "Who?" For inasmuch as the Lutheran thinker had a significant public presence in the postwar years, the decline of the mainline Protestant establishment and sometime secularization of public discourse had rendered him relatively obscure. Scholars, especially those working in theological ethics, knew him well, but as far as the general public was concerned, he was pretty much an unknown.

Well, no more. Obama's remark set off a scramble among journalists and public intellectuals to say something about what Niebuhr thought and how it might matter for an Obama presidency. It turned out, though, that doing either proved fairly tricky. Pinning down what exactly Niebuhr thought—theologically, morally, and politically—ran quickly into the fact that he was himself something of a moving target over the nearly four decades during which he wrote on matters great and small. A one-time Marxist who eventually became celebrated by anticommunist conservatives, Niebuhr had political views that changed over time, and his underlying moral-theological claims are sometimes difficult to grasp directly. More difficult still, though, is getting a handle on just how Niebuhr's ideas have helped shape the president and his policy choices. It is never easy to assess how ideas matter to political outcomes, and it is even more difficult when the object of your inquiry—in this case, President Obama—has an interest in offering a certain public image of himself.

It is to R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson's credit that they recognize these difficulties as they try to discern whether and how Obama is indeed a "Niebuhrian," if we can use that phrase. But they are just as interested, it seems to me, in using that more pedestrian discussion to illuminate a broader set of questions about the possibilities and limits of religiously motivated political engagement within pluralist democracies. It is this latter set of claims, I think, that turn out to be much more interesting and persuasive than the former, for while the evidence that Obama is a Niebuhrian in practice seems to me rather scant, the difficulties inherent in putting Niebuhr's ideas to work politically are robust and fascinating.

Niebuhr rose to public acclaim on the back of the withering critiques he delivered of the relentlessly and hopelessly naive strands of the Christian Social Gospel movement that underwrote in part the progressive politics of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. A man of the Left himself, Niebuhr nonetheless clearly articulated the ways in which the Social Gospelers ignored how humans' sinfulness and finitude necessarily undermined their hope in an inevitable march of progress. Amid the wreckage of the Great Depression and the gathering political storm clouds in Europe, Niebuhr's chastened realism served as a somewhat bitter, but proper, tonic. It is no surprise, then, that Obama's invocation of him resonated in a political climate where the failures (real and perceived) of George W. Bush's neo-Wilsonian foreign policy loomed very large indeed.

It is in regard to Obama's foreign policy choices that Holder and Josephson most persuasively make their case that the president really is something of a Niebuhrian. Sensitive to the limits on American power, Obama has tread carefully (his critics would suggest indolence) in reacting to the conflict in Libya, the Arab Spring, and the civil war in Syria. He has deliberately eschewed the rather dramatic "Freedom Agenda" of the post-9/11 Bush administration, looking instead, it seems, to preserve stability first. With regard to domestic issues, though, the evidence for Obama's Niebuhrianism is scant, perhaps entirely nonexistent. Holder and Josephson acknowledge that Obama's technocratic idealism runs afoul of Niebuhr's critique of social science perfectionism (pp. 156–58), and their discussion of Obama's signature policy achievements are offered with little connection to Niebuhr's views. But they do not then take the next obvious step and say what they should say: that Obama does not seem to rely on Niebuhr when it comes to domestic politics.

This lacuna leads into a more interesting set of arguments, where the authors suggest that inasmuch as Obama has attempted to model his presidency after Niebuhr's "pragmatic prophecy," he does so with "a self-contradictory set of foundations" (p. 164). Put simply, Obama wants to be a prophet who calls out the injustices of the American order, a statesman who sees politics at the center of the moral life, and an evangelist who moves the people to transform their country. But these roles do not fit together. They depend on fundamentally different claims about the nature of politics and the American order, and Obama's attempt to tie them

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001935 Published online by Cambridge University Press

together in himself was always inevitably fraught with difficulty (at the least). Niebuhr's genius was to see how these three themes wove their way through American political history, and Obama's audacity was always to suppose that he could, by dint of intelligence and rhetorical flourish, overcome their paradoxical interrelation to achieve his policy aims.

In their final reflections, Holder and Josephson suggest that Obama's relation to Niebuhr is more than one of influence. Rather, he is a kind of incarnation of Niebuhr's ideas about politics. When thinking about why Obama has encountered the difficulties he has, the authors seem to suggest that while the president understands the ironies of politics, the American people may find it "too bitter" for their taste (p. 185). To some degree this is probably true. Obama does not buy the idea that America is some sort of exceptional—and exceptionally good—nation, and this puts him at odds with a wide swath of Americans. And the troubles that Obama has encountered on account of his reading of American history suggest to Holder and Josephson that his Niebuhrian statecraft is foundationally problematic. What makes for an incisive analysis of the political order does not always make for effective political leadership. To put things simply, evangelists are not ironic, and ironists do not make for good evangelists.

But how much does Obama really embody Niebuhr's view of politics? The reason Niebuhr considered the exercise of coercive power to be always and inevitably ironic is that it is always and inevitably tied up with human sinfulness and finitude. Obama does not endorse that basic presumption. He, of course, recognizes the ways in which political plans go awry in any number of ways, but at heart he is more like the Social Gospelers critiqued by Niebuhr than Niebuhr himself. He may not have their eschatological confidence in the sure march of history, but aside from some discrete foreign policy choices—which do not seem to reflect a carefully thought-out or at least clearly elaborated grand strategy—it is a grand confidence about the rightness of his views that marks Obama's rhetoric, not a careful attention to their likely misjudgments. Holder and Josephson have done a credible job in laying out for us the ways in which a Niebuhrian might think about and indeed struggle to effect policy aims in a democracy like ours. I am just not sure that President Obama is as Niebuhrian as they claim.

Open for Business: Conservatives' Opposition to Environmental Regulation. By Judith A. Layzer. Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2012. 496p. $35.00 cloth, $20.00 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592714001947

— Alexander W. Hertel-Fernandez, *Harvard University*

Riding a wave of conservative discontent with government into the White House, Ronald Reagan began his administration with bold designs to reshape the American state. It seemed to be an ideal moment for the conservative movement to retrench public policies that had attracted the ire of both business and antigovernment activists, especially the recently enacted regulations from the "environmental decade" of the 1970s. Yet no outright legislative retrenchment of major environmental laws occurred—nor would it under subsequent Republican administrations. In *Open for Business*, Judith Layzer provides an explanation for the puzzling defeats that conservatives endured in their attempts to repeal the major pillars of environmental protection in the United States.

Drawing from the historical institutionalist literature on gradual institutional change (most prominently James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen's 2009 edited volume *Explaining Institutional Change*), Layzer argues that even as conservatives failed to repeal major environmental statutes, they succeeded in limiting the effectiveness of those policies, ultimately generating retrenchment through low-profile attacks on the environmental state. Invoking the notion of policy drift from the work of Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson on economic policy, Layzer shows that conservatives also succeeded in preventing the enactment of new legislation that would have been necessary to address new environmental risks, most notably those related to global climate change.

Across six chapters that span the presidential administrations of Richard Nixon to Barack Obama, the author shows how conservatives were most successful when they leveraged such tactics as changing the enforcement or implementation of existing policies, starving environmental agencies of adequate funding and staff, and making it more challenging for administrators to pass new and restrictive environmental rules. These strategies worked because they generally did not provoke public protest and backlash from environmentally conscious voters and the media, unlike more high-profile efforts to either repeal existing laws or pass new laws that would dismantle regulations. Layzer's focus on the maneuverings of conservatives and businesses through the arcane corners of the federal bureaucracy and court system fits well with other recent work on business power (most notably Pepper Culpepper's 2010 book *Quiet Politics and Business Power*), which emphasizes the advantages that business can command when it operates outside of the public's range of vision.

Conservatives' greatest triumph since the 1970s, according to Layzer, was the introduction of antiregulatory narratives into the environmental policymaking process. Messages regarding "distrust of the federal bureaucracy, admiration for unfettered private property rights and markets, skepticism about science, and disdain for environmental advocates" (p. 4) have now permeated the language of both political parties. The result was that even President Bill Clinton's otherwise "hard-nosed" environmental protection administrator, Carol Browner, felt the need to take the antiregulatory critiques of her agency seriously and to introduce a number of business-friendly

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