

## Response to Scott R. Erwin

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Scott R. Erwin's review of our book, *The Irony of Barack Obama*, is quite welcome and provides an opportunity to clarify one or two points. It is true, as Erwin observes, that we emphasize the distance between Niebuhr's skepticism about social science and Obama's faith in that science (145–155). But it goes too far to say that we do not find much Niebuhr in Obama's domestic policy. We find quite a lot. The most obvious example of Obama's intention to found his economic policy on a Christian precedent is in the April 2009 speech in which he described his economic policies. The speech is sometimes called "The New Foundation," a slogan Obama apparently hoped would take hold of the public imagination. Obama was as explicit as he could be about what this "new foundation" was: his reference is to the Sermon on the Mount (76).

Seeing the connection of Obama's approach to economic policy with Niebuhr's thought requires getting a clearer picture of Niebuhr's understanding. On the one hand, Niebuhr observed that no society or government is good or wise enough to regulate and direct individual activity very well. Thus the president's reliance on behavioral economics is, from a Niebuhrian perspective, highly suspect. But as we also note, Niebuhr's concern was that private economic power had become irresponsible with regard to public goods. Niebuhr therefore tended to subordinate economic power to political power, private goods to public purposes (133–134).

Obama's agreement with Niebuhr in this regard began with a basic or foundational understanding of the fundamental problem of political economy: private economic interests cannot be counted on to produce public goods naturally or through an easy harmony. Again, Obama has much more sympathy with the solutions of Hamilton, Croly, and Dewey than Niebuhr did (138–139).

Niebuhr himself warned, in *The Children of Light*, that his diagnoses did not lead to easy policy solutions, or even to obvious directions in policy (118). Yet in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr is very clear about the necessity of a government role in the economy. He decries the assumption that "the competition of interests will make for justice without political or moral

regulation” (*Irony of American History*, 33; see also *Nature and Destiny: A Christian Interpretation*, Volume II: 248–250). He locates an American foundation for understanding the role of government in the economy in the thought of James Madison. According to Niebuhr, Madison understood that a statesman must use political power to correct the injustices of other centers of power (*Irony of American History*, 30–33, 97–98; *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, 286; *Children of Light*, 174; *The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects*, 41–43; *Irony of Barack Obama*, 156–157, 166). It is precisely this that is the foundation of Obama’s understanding of political economy. The basic ethical problem of political economy remains: “[P]roperty, as every other form of power, cannot be limited to the defensive purpose. If it grows strong enough it becomes an instrument of aggression and usurpation” (*Children of Light*, 99). Of course, Obama is decidedly more comfortable than Niebuhr with the prospects for regulation. So while Obama’s policies reveal an important disagreement with Niebuhr, and perhaps even a degree of incoherence in Obama’s own understanding of Niebuhr, it would be a mistake to overstate what Erwin identifies as the “significant divergence” of Obama’s domestic policies from Niebuhr’s thought.

It is this understanding of Niebuhr’s insight into political economy, connected with Niebuhr’s realistic approach to foreign policy that denies jingoism, which leads us to the ironic dilemma of the Niebuhrian who is also a partisan politician, which is the basic point of our work. The political leader must bring a sense of realism to his work. The prophet holds the politician to a higher standard. Yet even when the highest idealism brings forth the purest standard, that standard will be a policy which, from the political perspective, remains quite impossible (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 270). That is, any political program will fall short of the Niebuhrian prophetic standard. In great part, that was the irony toward which we pointed: that Obama had adopted a philosophical foundation that was fundamentally at odds with some of the basic givens of American politics.

Finally, our study comes down to a study of the influence of a particular theologian on politics. As such, we identified a crucial problem, the question of the possibility of a Christian statecraft. This is the white whale of American politics: ever sought, but always elusive. We sought to illustrate how Obama has used Niebuhr’s thought to come closer than many, but concluded that this may remain the “impossible possibility” of American statesmanship and political power.