

## When in Doubt

*Thanks to Bush, doubt is back in American politics. But which form of doubt is right for progressives—and good for America?*

**G**eorge W. Bush's stubborn certitudes—about Iraq, about executive power, about the readiness of peoples everywhere to embrace democracy—have created a bull market for doubt, not least among conservatives. While there is still no shortage of assured conviction in American politics, it has become intellectually fashionable to place doubt at the heart of one's political principles. *Atlantic* senior editor Andrew Sullivan has filled his blog—and his most recent book—with a call for a renewed place for doubt in conservative politics, drawing on everyone from Socrates to the twentieth-century British philosopher Michael Oakeshott. Likewise, many liberals, and in particular those hawks left soul-searching by their erstwhile support for the Iraq war, have turned to ancestral liberal doubters, most notably the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, for intellectual succor.

This quest for alternatives to dogmatism has led in three directions. The first

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is toward *common sense doubt*—a renewed focus on the incompleteness and indeterminacy of data, and also on the vagaries of human judgment. The second is toward *skeptical doubt*—a comprehensive stance questioning the availability of any final and definitive truth. The third path leads to *moral doubt*—the suspicion, grounded in psychology or religion, that the actual motives of individuals and nations are never pure and that the announced motives are always in some measure self-serving. All three have their intellectual adherents; but it is moral doubt that is most needed to re-establish balance within our government and American authority and respect throughout the world.

### Three Types of Doubt

We need not tarry long on the first kind of doubt. In the wake of gross errors of fact (weapons of mass destruction in Iraq) and judgment (Iraq's readiness for a democratic transition), the case for ensuring that all perspectives are given a fair opportunity to be heard in policy deliberations is compelling, indeed crashingly obvious. Every generation, it seems, must re-learn the dangers of "groupthink": the temptation to fit facts to pre-established judgments and to marginalize unwelcome dissent. Common sense doubt is neither liberal nor conservative; it is an antidote to ideologically driven policymaking of every stripe.

#### SKEPTICAL DOUBT

More noteworthy is the conservative reconsideration of skeptical doubt. In his recent book *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get It Back*, Sullivan deploys a philosophical tradition extending from Socrates through Montaigne to Oakeshott against the "politics of certitude," which he describes as the infusion of the "fundamentalist mindset" into the contemporary Republican Party and the presidency of George W. Bush. Socrates questioned everything, demonstrating, in Sullivan's words, "the fundamental incompatibility of certainty with humanity; of philosophy with politics; of ideas with practice." Montaigne, likewise, observed the myriad ways in which arrogance and presumption warp human judgment and lead us to make claims about heaven and earth that we cannot justify. And Oakeshott was a critic of "rationalism" in human life; in both morals and politics, he taught, the heart of the matter is sound practice, not true doctrine, and sound practice is the sort of thing one learns not by reading, but by doing. The best political alternative to bad theory is not better theory, but rather no theory.

This is all very British—not surprising, given that Sullivan was born and raised in England. The question is whether it can work in America, or anywhere else, for that matter. Sullivan declares, sensibly enough, that the "need to conserve"

is the “essence of any conservatism.” But he fails to draw the obvious inference, that conservatism will therefore be a local matter. And this is an important transnational point—because Great Britain and the United States have different national traditions, the substance of what British and American conservatives seek to conserve will differ accordingly. Because the idea of “inalienable rights,” which Sullivan spurns as pertaining to liberalism rather than conservatism, is woven into American tradition but not the British, it would be surprising if American conservatives did not rise to its defense, as many do.

This failure to understand the way creed and tradition interpenetrate American politics generates all manner of difficulties. For one, it leads Sullivan to mischaracterize Abraham Lincoln as pursuing, Oakeshott-like, the “intimations” of the Civil War as he acted to free the slaves, overlooking what Lincoln himself had said on the eve of that conflict: “All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract idea, applicable to all men and all times.” For another, it leads Sullivan to mischaracterize the U.S. Constitution as being about only means and procedures, overlooking the Preamble, which declares in no uncertain terms what the Constitution’s purposes are and what they are not (the blessings of liberty but not the promotion of virtue; the common defense and general welfare but not the inculcation of the One True Faith, and so forth).

In a similar vein, Sullivan insists that “all conservatism begins with loss”; the hope (often against hope) of resisting loss by slowing if not stopping change is what motivates the desire to conserve. Again, a plausible if not original proposition. But Sullivan does not take the next, and necessary, step: He does not ask whether the skepticism he embraces and the freedom he endorses are consistent with the impulse to conserve, rather than undermining it. Socrates was hardly a force for conservatism. Whether or not the Athenians should have executed him, they were not wrong to see him as a corrosive political force. The conservative, says Sullivan, sees his grasp on truth as “always provisional” because the human mind is inherently fallible and limited, capable of deluding itself and seeing what it wants to see. I cannot imagine a better description of the scientific mindset, but I would not describe modern science as a conservative force. And one does not need to be a deep reader of Edmund Burke to understand that Joseph Schumpeter’s characterization of the effects of a market economy—namely, “creative destruction”—applies more broadly to the workings of a free society. Freedom is a very high-order human good, but its thrust is not conservative—at least not in the sense of conserving what already is against the force of future possibilities.

So while it is easy to sympathize with Sullivan's discomfort in the face of fundamentalism, domestic and foreign, it is unwise to generalize this sentiment into full-blown skeptical doubt. Sullivan has not taken seriously enough the multiple tensions between the comprehensively skeptical stance he advocates and the kinds of politics he cherishes. In the end, every political community must affirm something without reservation—which is why they will all, and always, have tense relations with truly skeptical thinkers.

### MORAL DOUBT

Of the three types of doubt in currency, it is moral doubt that seems most pointedly pertinent. While skeptical doubt questions our claim to knowledge, moral doubt questions our motivations and pretensions to special virtue. It is for this reason, above all, that after a period of neglect, Reinhold Niebuhr is the man of the hour. Liberals, such as historian Kevin Mattson, write articles with titles like "Why We Should Be Reading Reinhold Niebuhr Now More than Ever." Peter Beinart, of the *New Republic*, began writing his book *The Good Fight* intending to deploy Niebuhr to rebuild the vital center—a muscular liberalism capable of prevailing in Iraq and winning the war on terrorism; along the way he changed his mind about Iraq and ended by citing Niebuhr's cautionary notes as much as his call to arms.

But it is the (ex?)-conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks who has most consistently appealed to Niebuhr. Writing in September 2002, Brooks professed amazement that Niebuhr hadn't made a comeback after September 11. On the one hand, Niebuhr had helped rally liberals against communism; on the other, he argued against illusions of American innocence and virtue. What better way, Brooks wrote, to recreate a "hawkish left . . . suspicious of power but willing to use it to defend freedom"?

This is not to say that the 2002-model Brooks was ready to endorse Niebuhr's overall argument. On the contrary, he disagreed with "two-thirds" of what Niebuhr wrote. The crux of the matter, Brooks said, is that Niebuhrian "realism" is unrealistic. Politics is about passionate commitment, not cool reflection; "idealism in defense of democracy is no vice." Our problem today, Brooks continued, is not excessive zealotry but the opposite: most people's disengagement from "great public matters." So Niebuhr was wrong to try to disabuse Americans of a sense of democratic mission, "the essence of the American character." Despite our "periodic fits of arrogance," Brooks concluded, the world is a better place because the United States has pursued and continues to pursue its global democratic project.

That was then. By March 2007, Brooks had warmed to Niebuhr's cool virtues. Our next leader, he wrote, will have to "build a coalition of autocrats

against the extremists, not grow apoplectically rigid in the face of their barbarism [and]...manipulate the self-interest of other countries and factions, not bully them with ultimatums.” After observing that this leader would have to temper American idealism with “world-weary qualities,” Brooks approvingly quoted Niebuhr’s famous statement that the preservation of democratic civilization requires the “wisdom of the serpent” as well as the “harmlessness of the dove.”

This is, to be sure, the beginning of wisdom. But Niebuhr’s critique cuts far deeper, and we would do well to listen attentively. Ultimately, Brooks still wants to deploy Niebuhr in support of some version of the National Greatness Conservatives’ intellectual project—namely, the organization of the American public behind a great international adventure. Niebuhr would have resisted this temptation, on moral and religious

grounds. Every nation, he argued, has its own form of spiritual pride. Ours is to pretend that our power is exercised by a “peculiarly virtuous nation.” As George W. Bush artlessly put it, “I’m amazed that there’s such misunderstanding of what our country is about

that people would hate us... Like most Americans, I just can’t believe it. Because I know how good we are.” Niebuhr, in contrast, reminds us that “no virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint,” a fact that shapes the world’s reaction to our words and deeds. In a sentence penned more than half a century ago but that might serve as the current administration’s epitaph, Niebuhr noted that “nations, as individuals, who are completely innocent in their own esteem, are insufferable in their human contacts.”

Illusions of innocence are more than off-putting; they are dangerous. As Niebuhr put it, “Some of the greatest perils to democracy arise from the fanaticism of moral idealists who are not conscious of the corruption of self-interest.” A too-confident sense of justice “always leads to injustice.” The only antidote to complacency is the awareness of unjustified self-preference and the quest for power as permanent temptations. This is especially necessary for the strong, Niebuhr warns: “A nation with an inordinate degree of political power is doubly tempted to exceed the bounds of historical possibilities, if it is informed by an idealism which does not understand the limits of man’s wisdom and volition.” If Bush had understood this, he might not have taken us into Iraq; he certainly would have delivered a very different second inaugural address.

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A keen observer, Niebuhr noted what he termed a “deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America.” Not only do we regard ourselves as a chosen people, a new Israel, and a city on a hill, but also, he said, we consider our government as the “final and universally valid form of political organization.” Most of the time, fortunately, we seek to promote its spread through peaceful processes of imitation and moral attraction: “Only occasionally does an hysterical statesman suggest that we must increase our power and use it in order to gain the ideal ends, of which providence has made us the trustees.”

Instead, Niebuhr wrote, our success in world politics depends upon our ability “to establish community with many nations despite the pride of power on the one hand and the envy of the weak on the other.” We have inherited the resentments produced by centuries of European imperialism and colonialism, which further complicates our diplomacy. As we seek to promote freedom and self-government around the world, Niebuhr contended, we must reckon with the reality that many nations lack the preconditions for a rapid transition to democracy. And we must also reckon with our longstanding incapacity to comprehend the distinctive characteristics of other nations. As Niebuhr observes, Americans “can understand the neat logic of either economic reciprocity or the show of pure power. But 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.”

These cautionary notes were not an invitation to disengagement 50 years ago, nor should they be today. History has given us no such option. Now, as then, we have enemies who cannot be defeated by withdrawing from the world stage. Now, as then, our power brings with it responsibilities to others. The question is not whether to act, but how—to what end, and in what spirit. This entails perennial, unavoidable risks, spiritual as well as material. We may be able to change our circumstances, but we cannot change our nature. In Niebuhr’s words, “We take, and must continue to take, morally hazardous action to preserve our civilization. We must exercise our power. But we ought neither to believe that a nation is capable of perfect disinterestedness in its exercise, nor become complacent of particular degrees of interest and passion which corrupt the justice by which the exercise of power is legitimated.”

## **Irony and Humility**

In the end, there is no substitute for moral doubt, and for the moral honesty and realism to which it leads. While America is an unusually fortunate nation, it is not a distinctively virtuous nation. For its leaders to believe otherwise is to

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delude themselves and pander to the people. Under most circumstances, the best that can be expected is that powerful nations will conduct themselves so as to promote the interests of other nations while serving their own. The great successes of U.S. foreign policy after World War II rested, not on altruism, but on enlightened self-interest. The tragedy of current policy is that too many nations have come to see a contradiction between America's interests and their own.

In *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr quotes an unidentified European statesman as expressing the fear that "American power in the service of American idealism could create a situation in which we would be too impotent to correct you when you are wrong and you would be too idealistic to correct yourself." Half a century later, this same asymmetry of power persists, which renders our imperfections all the more damaging. The absence of moral doubt makes it far too difficult to recognize and rectify our mistakes. The cure, Niebuhr teaches, is the humility that comes from the acceptance of limits to human striving. One can only hope that this long-overdue humility will not be the bitter fruit of national humiliation. ▀