

Niebuhr's *Irony of American History*, Chapter 4
Wesley Advocates 6 November 2016

The Master of Destiny

To whom or to what does this chapter title refer?

According to RN, what does its “vanguard” do to bring communism above the “trade-union psychology”? Who is that vanguard typically? Would any nation have been able to sustain communism without the “grant strategy of a secularized providence”? How might we characterize the various forms of that secularized providence? Does it function solely in communist countries, or do we see it at work elsewhere?

Describe how you perceive man’s ambiguous position as both creature and creator of the historical process.

What can we say in response to—agreement or disagreement even—with Condorcet’s contention that the future of humankind rests on “the destruction of inequality between nations, the progress of equality among the common people, and the growth of man toward perfection”?

In what ways does the abolition of monarchy contribute to the three elements listed just above?

See page 69, last paragraph: How can we appropriately wield power toward establishing and maintaining the universal values we hold in trust for mankind? What exactly are those values? Are they stated in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution?

And how far can we agree with the Congressman who argued thus: “If ours is to be the home of the oppressed, we must extend our territory in latitude and longitude to the demand of the millions which are to follow us; as well for our own posterity as for those who are invited to our peaceful shores to partake in our republican institutions”? Is this argument essentially Machiavellian?

Do we continue to serve, as Andrew Johnson asserted, as the “tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection”? Evidence?

Does our nation enjoy divine favor? Evidence? If so, does that favor imply a commitment to lead the world in mankind’s regeneration? As we consider those places in the world suffering upheaval, bombing, explosions, poverty, famine, unremediated disease, would those peoples regard us, at least partly, as leaders in regenerating humankind? Why? Why not?

Why must the proletariat seize and hold all power in order to survive?

Do we now need philosopher-kings? Why or why not?

Why does RN regard it as an irony that the U. S. has garnered greater power than any other nation in history without particularly seeking it? Do we agree with this premise at all, in any of its parts? Does the power we have rest solely on our military prowess? What other elements contribute to or detract from world power?

Do we agree, too, with RN's finding irony in America, now strong, seems less a master of its destiny than it was when weak, rocking in the cradle of innocence? Why? Why not?

How is the U. S. thwarted by friends, allies? What exactly is thwarted?

Writing in 1952, RN comments, "We have had so little experience in managing or participating in the conscious and quasi-conscious power struggles of life and in fathoming the endlessly complex compounds of ethnic loyalties, historic traditions, military strength, and ideological hopes which constitute historic forms of power, that we would fain move with one direct leap from the use of economic to the use of military power" (p. 76). Is that still true for the U. S. in 2016? Evidence?

Note RN's comment on p. 77 about the lack of wisdom in supposed bearers of the Messianic vision within the democratic world. What might we add to this observation 65 years after RN's writing?

What does RN see as positive about the survival of some monarchies? About the parliamentary system? Do we agree with his conclusions? Examples?

How close are we to understanding and controlling human group behavior? Is that desirable? How far have we come, since the Founding Fathers, in controlling human thoughts with any precision? Is that desirable?

Can a human being or a group of human beings ever act in a purely disinterested way? Evidence?

See p. 83, middle: "For the individual is also involved in a perpetual internal dialogue about the legitimacy of his hopes and purposes, and the virtue or vice of his previous acts. In this dialogue, contrition and complacency, pride of accomplishment and a sense of inadequacy, alternate in ways not too different from the alternation of moods in a

community.” How do these alternations contribute to the irony of our situation as individuals, as Americans, as Christians in our world today?

See p. 83, bottom: What does RN mean when he says that the self comprises the “rational, emotional, and volitional elements which make its actions and attitudes historically more relative than is realized in any moment of thought and action. The inevitability of this confusion between the relative and the universal is exactly what is meant by original sin.” Do we understand this point and its ramifications? And is this a clear, cogent definition of original sin?

Do we regard natural human urges as bad (p. 86)? Why or why not? Are these urges the result of original sin? Of what?

What mysteries remain to us? Do they require faith? Are we free? Are we still principally both creators and creatures? How do these roles become manifest in our relations to a divine being and providence?