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Niebuhr Lives In Oslo

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NCR Today

President Obama's speech this morning in Oslo was truly remarkable. A monsignor called shortly after the President finished his remarks and said it was the best speech from a politician he had ever heard. I suspect the monsignor's judgment was biased because the speech was, above all else, theological. And the theology was all Reinhold Niebuhr.

In fact, you could say that the key difference between George W. Bush and Barack Obama is that Bush's worldview lacked any intellectual underpinnings, it was all gut, while Obama has grounded his worldview in the thought of one of the most penetrating minds of the last century. Niebuhr, more than any other theologian, provided the intellectual justification for the policy of containment that characterized American foreign policy for forty years, achieving its twin goals of avoiding World War III while containing the Soviet Union's expansionist policies so that the internal rot of that hideous regime would not have a longer shelf life through the conquest of new imperial lands. Containment was the most successful foreign policy in the annals of our national history.

Containment was also a foreign policy that was embraced by Democrats and Republicans alike. During the 1952 campaign, there was idle talk of "rolling back communism" but it came to naught. The fact was that the policy fit the moral requirement of the twin menace we faced in the post-World War II era: It recognized the evil of our geo-political opponent and the evil of any kind of force that might "defeat" that regime. It saw military force as an instrument of politics, not the other way round. (Only Dick Cheney still seems to see military force as an end in itself.) And, most importantly, containment rested on the belief that over time, communism would collapse because of its own internal flaws, that our system of free government and free enterprise was morally superior to theirs.

Obama has wedded himself to these kinds of calculations about the necessity and the limits of military

might. He understands that peace is more than the absence of war. He understands, too, that there are worse things than war and cited the intervention in the Balkans as an example of how it can become immoral not to use military force. The President's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan, as well as all his future decisions about foreign policy, can now be seen publicly through the prism he obviously employed in reaching his decision. It is a fine prism and it should lead to fine decisions. Let's hope that the Republicans will recall with pride the history of one of their own, Sen. Arthur Vandenburg, who embraced containment despite the fact that its suggestion first came from a Democratic administration.

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