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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Thirty-six years after his death, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr seems more alive than ever. Perhaps not since President Jimmy Carter acknowledged Niebuhr's influence during his 1976 campaign has his name been on the lips of so many politicians and pundits.

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama told *New York Times* columnist David Brooks that Niebuhr is "one of my favorite philosophers."

Reinhold Niebuhr

Brooks himself quotes Niebuhr consistently, describing him as a thinker we could use today "to police our excesses" in foreign policy.

Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne's forthcoming book takes note of the current longing for a new Niebuhr to inspire religious liberals, while GOP hopeful John McCain, in his volume, Hard Call, wonders what the

critic of pacifism during World War II would say today about Iraq.

As political theorist William Galston put it recently: “After a period of neglect, Reinhold Niebuhr is the man of the hour.”

Niebuhr widely is regarded as one of the most significant Christian intellectuals of the 20th century.

Born in 1892 in Missouri to German parents, Niebuhr was ordained in the German Evangelical Church—later part of the United Church of Christ—and taught for more than three decades at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

He was a founder of the liberal anticommunist lobbying group Americans for Democratic Action, and in 1948, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Over the years, Niebuhr won the admiration of political figures on the left and the right, including the late historian and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, who served as Ronald Reagan’s U.N. ambassador.

Niebuhr’s unrelenting gaze inward—at a United States that he refused to herald as the world’s unquestioned savior—runs counter to the renewed sense of American exceptionalism that followed the 9/11 attacks.

Niebuhr’s Christian realism—his recognition of the persistence of sin, self-interest and self-righteousness in social conflicts—highlights the distinction between the acknowledgment of evil’s existence and America’s own involvement in that evil.

“As Niebuhr famously said, we always use evil to prevent greater evil,” said Peter Beinart, who advocated a Niebuhr-inflected American humility in his recent book *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win*

the War on Terror and Make America Great Again.

“The recognition that America is capable of evil has been brought home to a new generation, in things like Abu Ghraib, in the most topical way since Vietnam.”

As the 2008 election heats up, Obama has emerged as perhaps the most visibly Niebuhrian candidate.

At a June forum on faith for Democratic candidates, he spoke of the peril inherent in seeing America’s actions as always virtuous and in drawing battle lines too neatly between good and evil.

In his keynote address to the United Church of Christ that same month, he called the challenges of poverty, racism, war and unemployment “moral problems rooted in societal indifference and individual callousness, in the imperfections of man, the cruelties of man towards man”—in other words, the inescapable fact of sin.

But his UCC speech also captured Niebuhr’s insistence that neither sin’s inevitability, nor the idea that worldly justice can only ever approximate divine justice, should give rise to a “Christian pessimism which becomes an irresponsibility.”

University of Virginia religious studies professor Charles Mathewes suggests Niebuhr “is the best theologian to think about things if you want to think about sin without being cynical.”

Niebuhr’s last teaching assistant, Ronald Stone, now professor emeritus of Christian social ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, sees Hillary Clinton as a Niebuhrian candidate because of her bipartisan pragmatism.

As a teenager in Park Ridge, Ill., she read Niebuhr and other theologians such as Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer with her Methodist youth

minister, Don Jones.

Niebuhr's own grounding of his political beliefs in his Christian faith may serve as another factor in the increased interest in him.

At debates and forums, candidates from both parties have spoken about how faith has informed their public policies and personal lives with a pietistic emphasis some believe would have discomfited Niebuhr.

Stone found Niebuhr to possess a deep personal religiosity, while disdaining discussion of personal beliefs in the public square.

"Far better to have good political ideas and a way to carry them out pragmatically than to win votes through pious protestations," Stone said.

Future global threats, Mathewes said, are going to require collaboration across religions, national boundaries and ideologies, and the U.S. response will need to be "infused with moral urgency, but also moral humility."

The 21st century, he predicts, will be a Niebuhrian century. If the current political moment is any gauge, he just may be right.