One of the recurring announcements since the election in November is that the government of this country is returning to realism in its foreign policy. That change does not bode well for what one can expect from the U.S. government. Of course, it would be highly desirable for the president and his advisors to get in touch with what is real. But an ideology of realism is not necessarily the same as being in touch with reality.

A first problem is that all words ending in –ism are suspect. Government officials, abetted by universities and “think tanks,” love to deal in –isms. Arguments are simplified by the classifying of positions according to the –ism they belong to. It becomes unnecessary to actually listen to others or develop a persuasive argument. In addition, the high conceptual level of –isms (conservatism vs. liberalism, Marxism vs. capitalism, realism vs. idealism) excludes anyone who is merely encountering things and people and has not been trained to think in abstract concepts.

A second problem follows that has special application to the term realism. It is an especially arrogant claim to name one’s set of ideas “realism.” It implies that anyone who disagrees with this doctrine is in the school of “unrealism” (=stupidity). Realism nearly always begins as a self-identifying claim. Any group can arrogate the title to themselves. Their success is measured by whether they succeed in getting other people to acquiesce in their appropriating realism to describe themselves. Every group jockeying for control has a tendency to take over the good words. Religious groups regularly exemplify the practice. But you can’t get much more arrogant than to call your fallible take on the world “realism.”

Given the present predicament, the announcement that foreign policy is now going to be put in the hands of “realists” is understandably met with a sigh of relief. But before any rejoicing begins, one has to take note of the history and connotations of the term “realism.” The assumed choice during the last three-quarters of a century has been between realism and idealism. For most of that time, the meaning of that contrast has been clear. However, the meanings of the two terms seem to almost reverse in the last five years. The word “realism,” as I have noted, can mean almost any doctrine that a sufficient number of people agree to call realism. And its paired opposite “idealism” is a notoriously ambiguous term. So one has to note what the opposition of the two terms used to mean and what it has recently meant before applauding the re-entrance of realism.

Between World Wars I and II there was intense debate about the legitimacy of war. In the wake of the First World War – surely the stupidest war ever fought up to then – there was a strong move to ban war. In the 1920s the leaders of this movement recognized that there was a need to have sanctions in place for rogue
nations acting unjustly toward another nation. By the 1930s when a pact outlawing war was signed by France and the United States and then by dozens of other countries, the hope seemed to be that diplomacy, exposure, and shame would keep nations from starting wars. These people favored disarmament of nations and reliance on good will. They were called “idealists” by people who disagreed with them.

“Idealism” is a word that can go either way. It can be a compliment to say that someone has ideals or is idealistic. Sometimes one does hear people describe themselves as idealists, meaning someone who is trying to live according to high standards. The term “idealism” is subject to more problems than ideal, idealist, idealistic. It suggests living by ideas that separate oneself from the “real world.” This disparaging meaning is confirmed when the opposite of idealism is assumed to be realism. People who proclaim themselves to be realists pride themselves in dealing with the hard facts of life, the regrettable but necessary job of imposing order on a messy world.

The dividing line in the 1930s was over the need for military might and the inevitability of war. The effect of World War II was to discredit idealism and install people who called themselves realists. The premise of realism was that every nation is bound to try to dominate every other nation. Bullying nations can only be restrained with a bigger stick. There is an oft-quoted passage from Thucydides’ Peloponnesian Wars in which the Athenian delegate says to the Melians who are resisting the war machine of Athens: “As everyone knows, justice belongs only to equals. As for the rest, the strong do what they wish and the weak suffer what they must.”

The premise here is a belief that the world consists of individuals who are naturally selfish. Each of these individuals has a single self-interest: an unquenchable desire for power. To any objection by an individual that he or she does not think that way, the realist readily acknowledges that an individual can - and often should - mask the selfishness. Codes of morality have been established to restrain selfishness. Religions, especially Christianity and Buddhism, preach selflessness. To the limited extent that religions are successful, the world is a kinder place. In contemporary writing, morality is equated with altruism, that is, sacrificing oneself for the other person.

Political realists maintain that although altruism can sometimes work at the level of individuals, it is impossible for nations. To invite a nation to act unselfishly would be suicidal. A nation state that thinks it is acting altruistically has deluded itself and lost sight of national self-interest. A nation can have only one interest, the accumulation of power. Morality is a term that should not intrude upon discussions of international politics.
In the United States of the twentieth-first century, the immediate source of realism is a secularized version of Christianity. What is thought to be realistic is a Christian doctrine of a man the sinner without any doctrine of grace or redemption. It is difficult to imagine a more depressing view of the human situation than belief in original sin but no belief in God. And yet U.S. foreign policy since World War II has been built on that premise.

A key figure was Reinhold Niebuhr who had astounding influence on government thinking during and after World War II. Niebuhr believed in a God of grace and redemption. Unfortunately, he was far more successful in convincing government leaders that this is a world wracked by original sin.

Niebuhr had attained prominence with his 1932 book, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Government leaders loved that title. Morality is necessary and good for a man. Individuals should be generous, compassionate, self-sacrificing. These qualities will create a morally good citizenry, a nation worth defending by government officials who operate in the amoral or immoral world of a society or nation. George Kennan, speaking for political realists, called Reinhold Niebuhr the father of us all.

I think that in the last decade of his life before his death in 1971 Niebuhr had some sense of the monster he had created. He acknowledged that his view of a man was too narrowly Augustinian. He wished he had paid more attention to Jewish and Catholic thought. He wanted to soften his realism or apply it less consistently. But there was no way out from within the categories he still assumed. He was writing in the midst of the Vietnam fiasco which provided powerful evidence that national idealism does not work. For Niebuhr, realism remained the only alternative.

It is sometimes claimed that the United States got into Vietnam by misplaced idealism. It should not be forgotten, however, that the last six years of the war were fought by realists in the White House. Henry Kissinger, a dedicated realist,” tried to extricate the United States on the basis of self-interest and not morality. In The White House Years, Kissinger writes that Cambodia was not a moral issue...what we faced was an essentially tactical choice. Kissinger is right on one point; Cambodia is indeed not the name of a moral issue, but the name of a country whose people were devastated by the needs of Kissinger’s tactical choice.
In matters of foreign policy, Kissinger pretty much mocked all questions of morality. For example, tapes released in 2003 record Kissinger telling Pinochet in Chile: “I read the briefing paper for this meeting and it was nothing but human rights. The State Department is made of people who have a vocation for the ministry. Because there were not enough churches for them, they went into the Department of State.”

Only recently was it revealed that Kissinger has regularly been advising George W. Bush. If someone had written a novel in 1970 about Henry Kissinger having his hand in running a disastrous and immoral war in the twenty-first century, the premise would have been dismissed as preposterous. In the 1970s I trusted that Kissinger was smart enough to know that if he blew up the world he would lose his power. Since the people running things now may not be smart enough to know that, perhaps he has brought some realism to the White House.

It is true that in November 2006 Kissinger declared that the war in Iraq was unwinnable. Like a few others who now find it safe to criticize the war, he can quickly skip over his past support of an escapade that was immoral from the start. Bob Woodward in his recent book cites these words of Kissinger on why the U.S. had to attack Iraq: “Because Afghanistan wasn’t enough. In the conflict with radical Islam, they want to humiliate us. And we need to humiliate them….The Iraq war was essential to send them a larger lesson in order to make a point that we’re not going to live in this world that they want for us.” From the likes of Kissinger the country deserves more than “sorry about that little mistake; trust us, now we know what is realistic.”

This is where realism gets a country when its military budget is more than the next fifteen countries in the world combined and it does 80 percent of the world’s development of weapons. If you begin by assuming that everyone is your potential enemy, then it is not surprising to discover that everyone is a potential enemy. And in order to defend yourself in a world of immoral nations, no amount of military hardware will ever be enough.

The Alternative to Realism and Idealism

Can the United States rethink its outlook on the world? That was unlikely to happen without a drastic change in the world’s situation. The change initiated by the events of September 11 is the kind of thing that has the potential to bring about a fundamental change in thinking. One can hope that the present crisis will lead to a less arrogant, more moral country. But a crisis is just as likely to drive the United States further into paranoia.

A rethinking of the ethical basis of foreign policy would require a fundamental change in language. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1964 that a
friend had said a better name for his book would have been *Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities*. That would have been an improvement. One should indeed be realistic about the struggle between good and evil in the world, as Niebuhr was trying to warn. But the struggle runs through the middle of each person and each community.

The phrase *self-interest* is a near contradiction. *Interest* (interest) is what is between. A person does not have an interest; a person in interacting with other persons discovers a multiplicity of interests within the self. The moral struggle is to discover which interests of the self should be given first place; that will determine what kind of self the person becomes. Undeniably the person needs power to survive and prosper but there are many kinds of power. The power to dominate the last man is one crude form of power. Receiving or giving affection can also be powerful - is in fact close to the root meaning of power as receptiveness.

Morality regulates persons in their dealing with other persons in a variety of communal and corporate structures. If one starts with the language of *individual/society*, then there is a dichotomy whenever morality is discussed. But continuity exists between persons acting in small communities and persons acting as business and political leaders. Both persons and nations always have one or more interests at play in decisions. But the interests of others can and should be integral to the actions.

Christian and Jewish morality does not say love your neighbor instead of yourself. Rather, it says love God and the love that is received makes it possible to love your neighbor as yourself. Contemporary writers who equate morality and altruism seem unaware that morality had been discussed for thousands of years before the invention of the term altruism in the 1850s. Only if one assumes that the human being is *naturally selfish* does altruism become the hopelessly idealistic alternative.

The alternative to selfishness/altruism is mutual pacts in which persons and nations strive to find common interests. The United Nations represents a fragile structure of pacts between nations. It is tempting to be cynical about the United Nations and its inefficiencies. But the United States’s foot-dragging on everything from signing treaties to paying its dues can only worsen the condition of the United Nations.

There are also cooperative international ventures that U.S. citizens and companies engage in. Along that route some basis of mutual respect may be built. Artists, athletes, overseas volunteers and business people often
have a saner view of the world than political realists in the government. The alternative to cooperation between nations through the UN and in other venues is a world in which the United States decides what will be done militarily, diplomatically and economically.

Even if the United States were being run by very wise people, the attitude would be outrageous. The United States is being run by people who are not evil but who rely on their own narrow view of what is the national interest.

I think the tragic misunderstanding of morality by advocates of realism can be seen in George Kennan, one of the great diplomats of the twentieth century. Kennan, ambassador to the Soviet Union when he wrote his "long telegram" was realistic about the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. He clearly distinguished force and war, advocating economic, cultural and diplomatic force. But his position was always strangely contorted by his assumption of what morality means. At the beginning of his essay Morality and Foreign Policy (Foreign Affairs, 1985), Kennan says that he wishes to correct the misconception that he has advocated an amoral or even an immoral foreign policy. He then proceeds to say that morality should be kept out of foreign policy.

If there is another possibility than amoral, immoral and moral, I am at a loss to know what it could be. Despite his insistent protest to the contrary, his views in that essay can be called deeply moral. For example, Kennan writes: At seems to me than our purposes prosper only when something happens in the mind of another person, and perhaps in our own mind as well, which makes it easier for all of us to see each other's problems and prejudices with detachment and to live peaceably side by side. How can that possibly be done except by people who, with their own moral convictions, see other people and other nations as moral agents?

One of the most revealing statements by Kennan comes at the end of the essay where he reflects on morality's relation to religion. He asks whether there is any such thing as morality that does not rest, consciously or otherwise, on some foundation of religious faith, for the renunciation of self-interest, which is what morality implies, can never be realized by purely secular and materialistic considerations. He raises an important question about the ultimate basis of morality. But in asking the question he manifests confusion on two points: 1) the assumption that religion is the renunciation of self-interest 2) the belief that morality implies the renunciation of self-interest.
Kennan is caught where Augustine was when he wrote *The City of God* and pitted the love of God against the love of man. But Augustine came to realize that the earthly city contains relatively just and relatively unjust regimes. The love of human beings, including oneself, is a love of God’s creation. Ironically the United States’s foreign policy is guided by *The City of God*; the irony, of course, is that the United States’s city of God is lacking God. Into that vacuum goes the national interest as defined by realism. And while the United States worries over the niceties of church-state separation, its foreign policy is built upon a badly digested Christianity.