

## **The Mirage of Innocence: The Moral Economy of Modern America**

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Wilfred M. McClay

Pepperdine University and University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

What I want to speak about tonight is the problem of guilt, and the management of guilt, particularly as they affect the conduct of our common and public lives. In the process, I will be making some rather large claims for guilt as a potent force, albeit often a hidden one, in historical change. These are claims that, admittedly, will have to be supported largely by inference, since guilt is not a phenomenon that lends itself to being easily or precisely measured. But such is the nature of the beast. If we restrict historical explanations to only those factors that can be seen and touched, quantified and compared, we run the risk of embracing a sterile sort of precision, which keeps its record clean by refusing even to ask the most interesting questions.

I'm not alone in attributing such high importance to guilt. In his grand and gloomy book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud declared that "the sense of guilt" is "the most important problem in the development of civilization." In fact, he continued, it seems that "the price we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt." Such guilt made for an elusive quarry, however. It was hard to identify and hard to understand, since it so frequently dwells on an unconscious level, and may easily be mistaken for something else. It often appears to us, Freud argued, "as a sort of *malaise* [*Unbehagen*], a dissatisfaction," for which people seek other explanations. It is something of a trickster, and a chameleon, capable of disguising itself, hiding out, changing its size and appearance, even its location.

Whatever one finally thinks of Freud—and I count myself among the respectful unbelievers in his fanciful systems—this seems to me a very rich and insightful passage, and a useful starting place for an inquiry into guilt's role in the structure of our moral lives. It is useful not only for the intrinsic value of Freud's reflections, but because it serves to remind us of his role in affecting our thinking on the subject. As W.H. Auden wrote of him, "if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,/ to us he is no more a person now/ but a whole climate of opinion/ under whom we conduct our different lives."

For better or worse, Auden was right. We now live in a therapeutic age, and nothing shows that fact more clearly than the ways in which guilt and its antidotes have changed their meaning for us. Freud sought ways to relieve in his patients the worst burdens and pathologies imposed by their oppressive and hyperactive consciences, which he redefined as *superegos*, without rendering any judgment as to whether the guilty feelings emanating from those superegos were or were not justifiable. In other words, he sought to release them from guilt's moral weight by removing guilt's moral significance, and redesignating guilt as just another psychological phenomenon. After all, since the superego was for him nothing more than the introjection of impermissible aggressive impulses, it was not exactly a product of sweet Kantian reasonableness. *Health* was to be the only remaining criterion for success or failure, and health was a matter of managing a tolerable equilibrium among the competing elements in the psyche—less a state of harmony than a fair fight, so to speak, which allowed for mature adult functioning, and perhaps even some faint semblance of happiness now and then.

Americans are always very selective in the ways they appropriate their intellectual imports. The gloominess of Freud was unlikely ever to be more than a minority taste here. His arguments for the easing of Victorian sexual mores, on the other hand, were a early vote-getter, particularly among the most advanced libidos of Greenwich Village. And the nonjudgmental therapeutic worldview whose seeds he planted has come into full flower in modern America, which in turn has profoundly affected the standing and meaning of the most venerable of moral transactions.

Take for example the various ways in which “forgiveness” is now understood. Forgiveness has long been one of the golden words of our culture. It glistens with a hundred admirable qualities, and its purity and moral prestige seem beyond challenge. Even when we cannot ourselves forgive a transgressor, we usually credit the generosity of those who can. To forgive others is taken to be a sign of a full and munificent and sacrificial heart, and moreover a heart that wisely recognizes the fleeting nature of life and the universal weakness of all human beings, very much including oneself. In the face of our shared human frailty, forgiveness expresses a kind of transcendent and unconditional regard for the humanity of the other, free of any admixture of interest or punitive anger. Yet forgiveness rightly understood does not deny the reality of justice, for to forgive, whether one is

forgiving trespasses or debts, precisely means suspending all such just and legitimate claims in the name of the higher ground of love and human solidarity. That is why it is both costly and rare.

Scan the self-help shelves of American bookstores today, however, and you will find something very different. You will see books bearing such titles as *Total Forgiveness*, and *Forgiveness: How to Make Peace With Your Past and Get On With Your Life*, and *Choosing Forgiveness: Your Journey to Freedom*, and *Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All*. Dozens of websites devote themselves to the subject, including a website called “Forgive for Good” by one Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., director and cofounder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project (and author of *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness*), who declares that “forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.” Even the respected journalist Gregg Easterbrook has posted an article on the Beliefnet website entitled “Forgiveness Is Good For Your Health.”

I don’t mean to disparage these writings in a blanket way or label them utterly wrong. There is a great deal to be said for an act that can release the soul from captivity to hateful emotions. But the shift in emphasis is notable. In the new acceptance, forgiveness is all about the forgiver, and his or her well-being. And the motivation is sometimes bordering on the suspect. As the somewhat egregious Dr. Luskin puts it, in arguing for the health-giving benefits of forgiving, “Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge...Forgiveness is about personal power.”

This puts a rather different cast on the idea that the forgiving heart “rises above” the one that wounded it. In seeing forgiveness as a form of revenge and a locus of power, we are a long way from Shakespeare’s Portia, who spoke so memorably in *The Merchant of Venice* about the unstrained “quality of mercy,” which “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” and blesses both “him that gives and him that takes.” And an even longer way from Christ’s anguished cry from the cross, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And perhaps even further from the most basic sense of forgiveness, the cancelling of a monetary debt or the pardoning of a criminal offense, in either case constituting a very conscious suspension of the rightful demands of justice.

We still value forgiveness, but we are very confused about it, and in our confusion we may have produced a situation in which forgiveness has in fact

very nearly lost its weight as well as its meaning. Like the similar acts of confession or apology, and other transactions in the moral economy of sin and guilt, forgiveness is in danger of being debased into a kind of cheap grace, a waiving of standards entirely, standards without which such transactions have no meaning. Forgiveness only makes sense in the presence of a robust sense of justice. Without that, it is in real danger of being reduced to something passive and automatic and empty. A sanctimonious way of simply moving on.

We live in an age in which being nonjudgmental in our dealings with others is increasingly viewed as part and parcel of being a civilized person, the only truly generous and humane stance. But without the exercise of moral judgment there can be no meaningful forgiveness, as surely as there cannot be mercy without a prior commitment to justice, or charity without a prior respect for private property. Forgiveness can't be understood apart from the assumption that we inhabit a universe in which moral responsibility matters, moral choices have real consequence, and justice and guilt have a salient role. Forgiveness in its deepest sense is something different from "letting go of anger" so that we can individually experience wholeness and healing. It involves an extraordinary suspension of the normal workings of justice: of the normal penalties for crimes, and the normal costs for moral failings. By definition, it is something that can only be done rarely without undermining the very moral basis upon which it rests, and creating an entirely different set of moral expectations. The famous admonition from *Tuesdays With Morrie*, that we should "Forgive everybody everything" is perhaps appealing as a psychological instruction, but it is appalling as a more general dictum, like a child's dream that every day should be Christmas.

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So there is a problem with the understanding of guilt and forgiveness in our day, a transformation of them into floating signifiers without any clear connection to the antecedents to which they once corresponded. As I've tried to establish, this state of affairs arises partly out of the influential therapeutic view that the experience of guilt does not involve any genuine moral issues but rather the interplay of psychic forces that do not relate to anything morally consequential. One might call this position an assertion of the fundamental *unreality* of guilt.

But that is not the only thing that confuses us. There is another factor at work too, one that be called the *infinite extensibility* of guilt. This proceeds from a very different set of assumptions, and is a surprising byproduct of modernity's proudest product: its ever-growing capacity to comprehend and control the physical world.

In a world in which the web of relationships between causes and effects becomes ever better understood, in which the means of communication and transportation become ever more efficient and effective, and in which individuals become ever more powerful and effective agents, the range of our potential moral responsibility, and therefore of our potential guilt, expands to literally infinite proportions. In an ever-shrinking and ever more interconnected world, it is theoretically possible for every living person to go anywhere that he or she wants to go, and to be made literally, or at least virtually, present to any other person, in ways that promise to become ever more vivid and high-definition in the future. In such a world, where there are few intrinsic limits to what I can do, there is almost nothing for which I cannot be, in some way, held accountable. I can see pictures of a starving child in a remote corner of the world on my television, and know for a fact that I could travel to that remote place and relieve that child's immediate suffering, if I cared to. Whatever donation I make to a charitable organization, it is never as much as I could have given. I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or support medical research enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless.

Colonialism, slavery, structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation—there's an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap. The demands on an active conscience are literally as endless as an active imagination's ability to conjure them. And indeed, as those of us who teach young people often have occasion to observe, it may be precisely the most morally sensitive individuals who have the weakest common-sense defenses against such overwhelming assaults on their over-receptive sensibilities—assaults that may amount to little more than propagandizing and manipulation, particularly when questions of environmental sin are at stake. If you have never seen it, I invite you to have a look at one the most widely circulated viral videos in use in American secondary schools today, a breezy little confection called “The Story of Stuff,” found at <http://www.storyofstuff.com/>, which is designed to bring every guilt-inducing possibility to the fore, and leave a significant deposit of hard and

unassuageable guilt in the minds of the unfortunate kids who pay attention to it.

These two factors—the “therapeutic” unreality of guilt paired with the crushing hyperabundance of it—would seem to be diametrically opposed. How can something *illusory* also be something *omnipresent*? Are we guilty of nothing—or everything? But in practice the two tend to reinforce one another. The utter disproportionality of the latter leads to its being managed by means of the former. Not knowing how to cope with the monumental scale of our infinitely extensible guilt, we dissolve it into a Woody Allen joke. But what cannot be laughed entirely out of existence is a tenacious sense of moral incompleteness, and a weighty sense of moral burden, a burden that all of us, except perhaps the sociopathic, share to a greater or lesser extent. And as Freud knew, this sense can hide for a very long time in the dark, moving the chess pieces with its invisible hand.

Notwithstanding all claims about our living in a post-Christian world devoid of censorious public morality, we in fact live in a world that carries around an enormous and growing burden of guilt, and yearns to be free of it. That burden is ever looking for an opportunity to discharge itself. Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate how many of the deeds of individual men and women can be traced back to the powerful and inextinguishable need of human beings to feel morally justified, to feel themselves to be “right with the world.” One would be right to expect that such a powerful need, nearly as powerful as the merely physical ones, would continue to find ways to manifest itself, even if it has to do so in odd and perverse ways.

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Which brings me to a very curious story, full of significance for these matters. It comes from a New York Times op-ed column by Daniel Mendelsohn, published on March 9, 2008, and aptly titled “Stolen Suffering.” Mendelsohn, a Bard College professor who has written a book about his family’s experience of the Holocaust, tells of hearing the story of an orphaned Jewish girl who trekked 2,000 miles from Belgium to Ukraine, surviving the Warsaw ghetto, murdering a German officer, and taking refuge in forests where she was protected by kindly wolves. The story was given wide circulation in a 1997 book, and its veracity was generally accepted. But it was recently discovered to be a complete fabrication, created by a Belgian Roman Catholic woman named Monique De Wael.

Such a deception, Mendelsohn argued, is not an isolated event. It needs to be understood in the context of a growing number of “phony memoirs,” such as the notorious child-survivor Holocaust memoir *Fragments*, or *Love and Consequences*, the putative autobiography of a young mixed-race woman raised by a black foster mother in gang-infested Los Angeles. These books were, as Mendelsohn says, “a plagiarism of other people’s trauma,” written not, as they claim to be, “by members of oppressed classes (the Jews during World War II, the impoverished African-Americans of Los Angeles today), but by members of relatively safe or privileged classes.” Interestingly, too, he notes that the authors seemed to have an unusual degree of identification with their subjects—in fact, a degree of identification approaching the pathological. Ms. De Wael for example declared, rather astonishingly, that “the story is mine....not actually reality, but my reality, my way of surviving.”

Mendelsohn goes on to draw very pertinent conclusions from these stories, about how we have lost a sense of reality and have been taken in by the claims of “empathy” in our culture. But I believe there are perhaps even profounder inferences to be drawn from this strange phenomenon. There have always been stories about “stolen valor,” about those who inflate their standing with others by boasting of wartime exploits that never occurred. And it is not hard to understand the motive behind such fraudulence: the desire to be thought a hero, and identified with heroic virtues. But this is different.

What these authors are appropriating is stolen *suffering*, and the identification they are pursuing is an identification, not with certifiable heroes, but with certifiable victims. It is a particular and peculiar kind of identity theft. How to account for it? What is motivating it? Why would comfortable and privileged people want to identify with victims? And why would their efforts appeal to a substantial reading public?

Or, to pose the question even more generally, in a way that I think goes straight to the heart of our dilemma: how can one account for the rise of the extraordinary prestige of *victims*, as a category, in the contemporary world?

I believe the explanation is traceable back to the extraordinary weight of guilt in our time, the pervasive need to find innocence through moral absolution, and to discharge one’s moral burden somehow, and the fact that

the conventional means of finding that absolution—or even of keeping the range of one’s responsibility for one’s sins within some kind of reasonable boundaries—are no longer generally available. Making a claim to the status of certified victim, or identification with victims, however, offers itself as a substitute means by which the moral burden of sin can be shifted, and one’s innocence affirmed. Recognition of this substitution may operate with particular strength in certain individuals, such as these authors. But the strangeness of the phenomenon suggests a larger shift of sensibility, which represents a change in the moral economy of sin. And almost none of it has occurred consciously.

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In the modern West, that moral economy remains deeply tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the fundamental truth about sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that sin must be paid or otherwise discharged. It can neither be dissolved by divine fiat nor repressed nor borne forever. In the Jewish moral world in which Christianity originated, and without which it would have been unthinkable, sin had had always to be paid for, generally by the sacrificial shedding of blood; its effects could never be ignored or willed away. Which is precisely why, in the Christian context, forgiveness of sin was specifically related to Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice, his vicarious payment for all human sins, procured through his death on the cross, and made available freely to all who embraced him in faith. Forgiveness has an enormously high standing in the Christian faith. But it is grounded in fundamental theological and metaphysical beliefs about the person and work of Christ, which are in turn traceable back to Jewish notions of sin and how one pays for it. It makes little sense without them.

But how, in a society that retains its Judeo-Christian moral reflexes but has abandoned the corresponding metaphysics, can a credible means of discharging the weight of sin be found? A workable way to be at peace with oneself and feel innocent and “right with the world” is to identify oneself as a certifiable victim—or better yet, by identifying oneself with victims. This is why the Mendelsohn story is so important and so profoundly indicative, even if it deals with a rather extreme case. It points toward the way in which identification with victims, and the appropriation of victim status, has become an irresistible moral attraction. It suggests the real possibility that claiming victim status is the sole sure means left of absolving oneself and securing one’s sense of fundamental moral innocence.

Why should that be so? The answer is simple. With moral responsibility comes inevitable moral guilt, for reasons already explained. So if one wishes to be innocent, one must find a way to make the claim that one cannot be held morally responsible. This is precisely what the status of victimhood accomplishes. When one is a certifiable victim, one is released from moral responsibility, since a victim is someone who is, by definition, not responsible for his condition, but can point to another who is responsible.

(I should mention too, in passing, that the “medicalization” of bad behavior is a close cousin to this strategy, since it casts the victimizer not as a *person* but as a *disease*. Consider the readiness with which many people are willing to explain their failures or misbehaviors by reference to “objective” medical conditions, such as “sexual addiction.” Hence the ever-more sprawling incoherence through successive editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the American Psychiatric Association’s official way of deciding who has a mental disorder and who is normal.)

But victimhood at its most potent not only promises release from responsibility, but an ability to displace that responsibility onto others. As a victim, one can project onto another person, the victimizer or oppressor, any feelings of guilt he might harbor, and in projecting that guilt, lift it off of his own shoulders. The designated oppressor plays the role of scapegoat, upon whose head the sin comes to rest, and who pays the price for it. By contrast, in appropriating the status of victim, or identifying oneself with victims, one can experience a profound sense of moral release, of recovered innocence. It is no wonder that this should have become so common a gambit in our time, so effectively does it deal with the problem of guilt. At least in the short run.

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There is no doubt that none of this would have happened absent the influence of Christianity. Such a story would not have been credible in ancient Greece or Rome, for example, whose pagan virtues did not notably include compassion, humility, and willingness to forgive. There would be no moral status there to be drawn from identification with the victim. Indeed, such reflections cause one to remember the shocking contrast between the proud glories of the classical world and those of this strange emergent Jewish sect, which believed in an incognito God who came into the world as the least among us, emptied of all majesty, and submitted without resistance

to a horrifying and humiliating death. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has insisted, the great moral reversal wrought by Christianity was the indispensable source of most of today's commonplaces about universal human rights and human dignity, equality, sympathy, compassion, generosity, and much else that the secular world proudly claims for itself.

So this new sensibility is a product of Christianity, but one should quickly add that it is a perversion of Christianity, a religion that in its orthodox form has no way of understanding forgiveness independent of sin, or of the earthly ministry of Christ, and our human response to it. It is not a coincidence that the rise of the cult of victimization in our culture corresponds fairly exactly with the decline of Christian orthodoxy. As Nietzsche predicted, the sense of guilt that Christianity sought to alleviate has not disappeared. But the nature of the demands has changed. Identifying with the poor because Christ commands it is a very different matter from caring about the poor because the cult of victimization demands it, and offers psychological rewards for doing so.

All of this creates enormous problems, especially in our public life, precisely because it does not deal honestly with the problem of sin, but merely plays a game of projection and displacement, of offloading out toxic wastes onto one another, a game in which everyone is pinning his own guilty tail on someone else's vulnerable donkey. One sees some of these problems in, for example, the public apologies for the institution of slavery, such as the recent one put forward by the United States Senate. Not that such an apology is necessarily a bad thing in every way. It is important, and in the national interest, to find ways to achieve reconciliation on such matters of longstanding pain and woundedness. But when one is apologizing for something for which one had no direct responsibility, one is seeking absolution at another's expense, scapegoating those who are not even present to defend themselves.

Perhaps it will be said that an apology in this instance is also owed by the living, because of all the ways that present-day non-black Americans are privileged, economically, socially, and politically, thanks to the prior existence of slavery. Leave aside the fact that a highly profitable industry has been erected upon around the unchallengeable truth of this assertion, and its continued promulgation in schools and in the workplace. Consider instead how completely it serves to support the infinite extensibility of guilt, an empire without boundaries, in which no feature of American life is so

remote or intimate as to be immune from that charge. In that realm, nothing can ever be forgiven, because moral responsibility is everywhere and nowhere, too pervasive and diffuse ever to be located, let alone answered.

Journalist Jonathan Kay offers a particularly instructive account of his attendance at a “whiteness workshop” in the April 2 edition of the *National Post*. The attendees were themselves all earnest opponents of racism: graduate students, community activists, equity officers, women’s studies instructors, and the like. Yet, Kay reported, they spent much of the course “unburdening themselves of their own racial guilt.” They seem consumed by their own sins, “regarding their pallor as a sort of moral leprosy.” And Kay goes on to offer a perfect description the tangled moral state of those caught in the entrails of infinitely extensible guilt:

While politically correct campus activists often come across as smug and single-minded, I realized their intellectual life might more accurately be described as bipolar—combining an ecstatic self-conception as high priestesses who pronounce upon the racist sins of our society, alongside extravagant self-mortification in regard to their own fallen state.

As this account suggests, some of the most poisonous effects of this changed sensibility and the cult of victimhood are visible in academe, where both the unreality of guilt and infinite extensibility of guilt are prime tenets, where common sense is often weak to nonexistent, and where the atmosphere is often charged with a half-mad level of moral electricity. Faculty and administrator watchdogs leap with both feet upon would-be transgressors who fail, in even slight and well-meaning ways, to observe the regnant pieties regarding race, class, or gender in their public statements.

Such watchdog figures are not only policing discourse in a way that conflicts with the very purposes of the academy, but in so doing, they are, as Jonathan Kay’s account so vividly suggests, working out their own salvation with fear and trembling. They are seeking justification for themselves, and protection for themselves, through identification with a victim, or putative victim, and by establishing the distance between themselves and the oppressor. By attacking the scapegoat oppressor (who is often merely a hapless and vulnerable colleague) forcefully and ostentatiously, they displace their guilt onto him, and prove to all the world their own innocence. Upon his head are transferred the sins of the community, enacting one of the most ancient acts

of moral transference, leaving the community purified thereby. It is an ugly and corrosive little ritual, and in the end serves only to exacerbate differences and erode the very possibility of civility. But at bottom it is driven by a general moral compulsion, the pursuit of innocence that operates in most of us, even if we do see or sense it.

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Needless to say, all of these things end up profoundly affecting our politics, making deliberation upon already difficult issues even more fractious and less productive. I could discuss all of that in much greater detail. But since my time is not infinitely extensible, and I don't want to make myself feel any more guilty than I already do, I'd like to concentrate on one event: the 2008 presidential election.

It seems so far away now, but we should not forget that it was in many ways a therapeutic election: a psychocultural event, far more than it was a political one. It is hard for me to think of another large-scale public event in my lifetime that can more accurately portrayed as a sustained psychodrama. In the guise of being a postracial election, it was fully and self-evidently a racial one, although in ways that were rarely stated, since acknowledging them explicitly would break the spell and banish the magic. I don't think it is ungenerous to insist that Barack Obama would never have been elected, never have been nominated, never have gotten the time of day from anyone, had it not been for his race, and his particularly graceful way of embodying his race. Even his oratory, which is surprisingly limp when one reads it in print, would not have its well-known effects, were he a typical white politician. His racial identity was, and is, absolutely central to his appeal, and it is at the core of his moral authority. Again, I say this not to disparage him, but to get at the source of his moral appeal to Americans.

He was not elected because of his political ideas, but in spite of them, or perhaps more accurately in lieu of them, because he had something far more powerful to offer: a sense of racial absolution to white Americans, and a sense of vindication and affirmation for nonwhite ones, particularly African Americans and Hispanics. Even if the close analysis of the electoral details shows that this was, beneath all the hype, a closely fought turnout election very much like its two predecessors, there is a cultural difference that cannot be ignored, and that is at the heart of what the world found to have been so significant and heartening and extraordinary about the election.

This therapeutic dimension went beyond the question of race, of course. It linked to a need, profoundly felt in many quarters of American life, for moral absolution in the wake of world criticism of American foreign policy, and restoration of America's reputation in the eyes of the world. Hence the phenomenon of Obama's campaign speech in Berlin, which in any other presidential campaign would have seemed unspeakably bizarre, but made perfect sense in this one, given the nature of the campaign's appeal. Nor, under other circumstances, would we have been hearing about the pro-Obama results of public-opinion polls in Europe and Asia. But generating images of the world's approval of Obama was important, because such images would certify his power to authorize and pronounce a yearned-for American innocence. Hence, it was not flippant to refer to him as a "messiah" figure in the eyes of his followers, since he did seem to offer, in his very person, a kind of release from the weight of national guilt. Hence too the need for a designated scapegoat, a target toward which the moral opprobrium could be directed, a figure upon whose head the sins of the nation could be laid. And George W. Bush was overdetermined as the perfect casting choice for that role.

It is a familiar moral drama. But of course with election comes responsibilities, and much suddenly looks rather different in the sober aftermath of the drama. It is not my purpose here to offer a comprehensive critique of Obama's presidency. I am more interested in the moral economy of innocence and guilt that helped induce so many Americans to vote for him, despite his immense inexperience and a thousand other warning signs. In retrospect it seems clear that, in electing Obama, the nation chose to overlook too much, look away at too much, think wishfully too much, and invest him with too much, out of a deep and hungrily self-redemptive desire to elect a black president and restore our sense of national innocence. But such a sense of innocence is a mirage, an imaginary oasis whose still waters are simply unavailable to a nation that has no honorable choice but to assume terrible responsibilities in the world. If we do not understand this now, events are waiting in the wings that will ensure that we come to understand it very soon.

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The idea that America might be led astray by the mirage of innocence is not new. No one reflected upon the matter with more insight than the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, due in no

small part to Obama's claim to have been influenced by his writings. But quite independently of Obama, Niebuhr's book *The Irony of American History*, published in 1952 during in the depths of the Cold War, has been taken up by some as an anti-Iraq War document *avant le lettre*, an early draft indictment of what J. William Fulbright would later call "the arrogance of power" in American foreign policy. Such a reading is not entirely wrong, but it most emphatically does not do Niebuhr justice.

True, parts of the book can be read usefully as a trenchant critique of the same propensities toward naïvete and blindness that afflicted some aspects of the Iraq campaign, and indeed have afflicted many aspects of American foreign policy at many times in the past. The problem of American history, Niebuhr argued, was founded upon our belief in our primal innocence, our birth in a virgin land, natural and uncorrupted, chosen and set apart, having turned our backs on the vices of Europe and made a new beginning for the human race. Such a presumption of our national innocence, Niebuhr believed, laid America wide open to the worst dangers of spiritual pride. Thus could a source of strength become transformed into a source of weakness, and the nation's virtues become the source of its vices.

So the nation needed to be more rigorously self-critical in its use of its power. That indeed was one of the consistent messages in Niebuhr. But that was not all he said. In the 1930s he had been harshly critical of the pacifist delusions of his coreligionists, who sought to appease tyrants rather than confront them. By 1952, he was decrying "those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul." He insisted that we "must exercise our power," even when it was "morally hazardous" to do so, in order to "preserve our civilization." We must resist "the temptation to escape the tragic dilemma in which we find ourselves," by the renunciation of atomic weapons or by turning the world's problems over to international institutions. In Niebuhr's view, the desire to certify one's innocence in the eyes of the world is every bit as dangerous and irresponsible as is the assumption that one's innocence is already a settled fact.

So Reinhold Niebuhr would, I suspect, have been at least as critical of Obama as he would have been of Obama's predecessor, and for reasons that are surprisingly similar. He would clearly have seen the hold that the mirage of innocence continues to have on this administration, and its initiatives in the rest of the world: the President's airy declaration that he would close the

detention facility at Guantanamo Naval Base and renounce the Bush-era homeland-security measures, an act of symbolic self-purification that he has found impossible to implement; his so-called “apology tour,” featuring many foreign speeches, beginning with that campaign event in Berlin, in which he apologized to the world for the past actions of his country, with almost nothing positive to show for it; his strange tendency to defer to America’s rivals, such as Russia and Iran, while disparaging our oldest and very best allies, such as Great Britain and Israel. Perhaps the most momentous foreign-policy error he has made so far, his stubborn unwillingness to lend any support to revolutionary forces in Iran, which was the best hope for peacefully averting the nuclearization of that country, was dictated by the mirage of innocence: the desire to prove, and certify by the force of his persona, that a newly-innocent United States would not interfere in Iranian internal affairs as it had in 1953. Similar motives, and similar Cold War memories, seem to be behind the steady stream of unreciprocated accommodations to Russia, culminating in the confused Nuclear Posture Review just promulgated and the hastily constructed START treaty just signed.

It is not always clear whether Obama disdains the use of American power out of a modest belief in the need for a more humble American foreign policy, or out of an immodest belief that such parochialism is incompatible with his true position as President of the World. The two things are not incompatible, at least not in the short run. But in any event, it made for a great, if unintended, symbolic moment last year when Secretary of State Clinton presented her Russian counterpart with a symbolic “reset button,” meant to signify the Obama administration’s desire to “start over” after the unspeakable horrors of George W. Bush. What made it so richly symbolic was the fact that the word attached to the button was not the Russian word for “reset” but the Russian word for “overload.”

The resultant embarrassment was richly deserved, for an administration that has loudly advertised its braininess and its cosmopolitan bona fides, and is overloaded with a sense of its moral superiority, and a propensity for deflecting blame onto its predecessors. But even if the advance work had been less sloppy, there was an inherent problem. There can be nothing more innocent, in the worst sense, than the belief that relations between great nations can be reset by any single act, and least of all by the intervention of a single magical personality. Now that the intoxicating magic is gone, and the hangover is in full bloom, we look upon an increasingly disliked and

distrusted administration which has healed nothing, and whose dubious accomplishments, particularly on the domestic front, are barely described by the word “overload.”

But I digress. It would be missing the point, I think, to spend too much of my time criticizing Obama. The blame here is not only in our superstars, but in ourselves—or at any rate, in those of us who remain transfixed by the burden of guilt and the mirage of innocence, and who believed that electing Obama would expiate our national sins and certify us as pure in the world’s eyes. It was a foolish belief, and now we are living with the consequences of it. Let us hope that we have learned something from the experience—not only about the foolishness of investing such grand moral hopes in any political leader, but about the strange moral environment we now inhabit.