

## **The Need for Both Passion and Humility in Politics**

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to participate. The Chautauqua Institution is truly a national treasure. It is a place for contemplation and a place for reflection, a place where platitudes and slogans can be set aside and be replaced by thoughtfulness and introspection.

When I last spoke here in the summer of 2004, I talked about our work in the Attorney General's office – specifically about the failure of self-regulation in the marketplace and the periodic need for government intervention.

So it's especially gratifying to be here with you again – both to contribute my ideas in some small way to this year's program on national security and to reflect on my first seven months as Governor.

Those of you who know me recognize my core belief that without passion and conviction in politics we are doomed to fail. What I'd like to reflect on today – and this may come as a surprise to some of you – are the inevitable risks that occur when passion and conviction are not sufficiently tempered by humility. How we manage these risks, it turns out, may be just as critical as the fight itself.

I will make this case in two distinct arenas: our current foreign policy and our effort to challenge the status quo in Albany.

As a starting point, I want to spend a moment reflecting on the challenges facing this country and the world after the last World War. How we responded, or didn't, to those challenges can help us understand how to respond today.

After Fascism was defeated, the world faced another system that was just as vicious and just as cruel: Communism. At the time, the United States was divided on a basic issue. Some wanted to retreat into the post-war glow and disengage from the rest of the world. Others wanted to arm and fight anywhere and everywhere, no matter what the means or the consequences.

One person who attempted to bridge this divide was a Missouri-born minister named Reinhold Niebuhr – who, I must point out, became a New Yorker, moving here in 1928 to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and remaining in New York until his death in 1971.

### **A Balanced Path**

Niebuhr came of age during the worst years of what Isaiah Berlin called “the most terrible century in Western history.” When he toured French-occupied Germany in the aftermath of World War I, Niebuhr witnessed firsthand the carnage of war. And as the minister of a church in

working-class Detroit, he witnessed the brutality of poverty and the precariousness that characterized daily life for too many who struggled at the lower end of the economic pyramid.

At first, he confronted these injustices with moral persuasion and reason, subscribing to pacifism.

But his thinking evolved. In 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression and on the eve of Hitler's coming to power, he published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which decried the moralist response, both secular and religious, as naïve. He observed of the moralists: "They do not recognize that when collective power...exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it."

As he examined the dehumanizing condition of Detroit's working class, the injustices of Jim Crow racism and the ravages of modern warfare, Niebuhr concluded that neither religion nor rationality alone could address these and other blights – that one could not simply reason these injustices away. Without the use of political power, Niebuhr believed, we could not really address injustice.

As he grew more realistic about the status quo's resistance to change, he cast aside his pacifist tendencies and became an influential supporter of American intervention to prevent the rise of fascism.

If *Moral Man and Immoral Society* defined the necessity for power, it was another of Niebuhr's works, *The Irony of American History*, which defined the risks attendant to unbridled power.

Twenty years after *Moral Man and Immoral Society* – after a Second World War and the rise and fall of fascism – Niebuhr recognized the threat I discussed at the beginning: the growing specter of Communism. However, he was also disturbed by what he saw as the two prevailing public responses, which he saw as equally naïve.

He wrote that: "Our idealists are divided between those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous."

Here, he denounces both the woolly idealists *and* the "us v. them" and "all or nothing" mentality that would lead to the many misadventures of war, the imposition of dictatorships, and the domestic hysteria of McCarthyism.

Instead, Niebuhr argued for a third way.

He defended the use of power to confront Communism – but not the kind of unfettered, unreflective power advocated by some. He cautioned against the dangers of power with this corollary: "We ought neither to believe that a nation is capable of perfect disinterestedness in its exercise, nor become complacent about particular degrees of interest and passion which corrupt the justice whereby the exercise of power is legitimized." Inherent in the exercise of power

driven by moral compunction is the danger of overreaching.

Indeed, it was the combination of these two forces – power and humility – that allowed Niebuhr, as the late Arthur Schlesinger observed, to vehemently oppose without contradiction both Joes at the time – Joseph Stalin, the embodiment of Communism at its worst, and Joseph McCarthy, the personification of the paranoia that gripped some in our nation throughout the 1950s.

Niebuhr understood that the exercise of power can be shocking and, at times, corrupting. But he also understood that power is absolutely necessary to fight the battles that must be fought. The trick is to fight these battles with humility and constant introspection, knowing that there is no monopoly on virtue. Moreover, this combination is simply more effective. For power untethered from humility is certain to eventually fail.

### **Power and Humility in Foreign Affairs**

So how can our understanding of these principles strengthen our fight against global terrorism – the central question of this week’s program?

I understand it is somewhat easy to wax critical on the current state of foreign affairs from the relative comfort of a state capital, but, nevertheless, allow me to explore this for a moment.

Think back to the time when the United States was founded. We began a national experiment in liberal democracy, based upon a set of principles: individual rights, checks and balances, free enterprise, the free exchange of ideas, the rule of law and democratic government – principles of tolerance – of a certain realistic view of human nature that echoed James Madison when Niebuhr wrote: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

At the time, such a democracy was unprecedented. It was based on ideas that had only been written about, but never fully tested.

And so the rest of the world looked on and waited for our experiment to fail.

But in the last 200 years, something remarkable has happened. Liberal democracy has thrived. During this stretch, at least a half-dozen other governmental systems have fallen by the wayside. Not just the monarchies, tyrannies, aristocracies and theocracies that dominated 200 years ago, but also systems like fascism and communism – each of which had their run at one time, but, with important exceptions, have been discarded into the dustbin of history.

It is liberal democracy that has emerged as the dominant form of government – so much so that at the moment of the Soviet Union’s collapse, one leading thinker ventured that we had reached “the end of history.” Francis Fukuyama wrote that “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such – that is, the end point of man’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

At the time, however, some people with a broader view pointed out: “Wait a minute. You’re forgetting about the rise of fanaticism” – and, implicitly, terrorism.

What makes the fight against terrorism so different than any we have faced in the past? My former political science professors probably would have better answers, but several reasons come to mind.

First, it’s because of the convergence of fanaticism and technology – weapons of mass destruction, electronic communication, the Internet – that allows individuals or groups of individual terrorists – without the support of state infrastructure – to wreak havoc on a level unmatched in our history. Terror bred by fanaticism has always been present. Yet it’s this opportunity presented by technology that fundamentally transforms it today.

Second, because terrorist groups have become trans-national – their ideological moorings not necessarily tethered to the needs or interests of any one place – our old paradigm of negotiation through diplomacy, the balancing of power, and containment and deterrence is far less central.

And third, it’s because many of the old dynamics that fostered stability are no longer as relevant. For many terrorists, mutually assured destruction is the *objective*, not the deterrent.

So how have we responded to this threat? Not with power tempered by humility – but by pure, untempered, hard, raw, shock-and-awe power.

We *must* begin with the premise that terrorism is an insidious threat, and that we must not shy away from directing the full measure of our power against it. But, this represents only one half of Niebuhr’s thinking, and our national leadership has forgotten the corollary.

In the wake of World War II, Niebuhr warned that “we are so deluded by the concept of our innocence that we are ill-prepared to deal with the temptations of power which now assail us.”

Yet, that is exactly what has happened in the wake of 9/11. Niebuhr’s warning means just as much today as it did back then. Because while the threat has changed, human nature remains the same.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon shook our nation to the core. Americans were deeply frightened, sad, and angry, and they rallied around a President who, at the time, showed impressive certitude and calm.

In that moment, with the public and the world fully behind him, with no Congressional opposition to speak of, and with extraordinary national wealth at his disposal, President Bush had enormous, nearly unprecedented power.

And yet he failed.

Why?

I believe it goes much deeper than the reasons we usually hear – stubbornness, a refusal to hear differing perspectives, an inability to adapt to changing circumstances on the ground and a misunderstanding of other cultures.

These are all true, but they are each symptoms of a much more fundamental flaw.

At the heart of it, the intervention in Iraq has failed because the Administration lacked any sense of humility and embraced a self-righteousness, which destroyed their judgment.

Interestingly, that is not what President Bush spoke of before assuming office. During a debate in the 2000 election, the president was asked how he would project America's power in the twenty-first century. The president answered: "If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us. Our nation stands alone right now in the world in terms of power, and that's why we have to be humble."

That is precisely the right point. But President Bush didn't understand that humility has to be more than just a talking point.

In the wake of 9/11, he ramped up exactly the wrong way. His approach, and the rhetoric that would define it, perverted our foreign policy with arrogance and moral complacency – laying the groundwork for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. We had no exit strategy because the Administration didn't think we needed one. The President and his neoconservative cohort were so sure history had ended and that the triumph of liberal democracy was inevitable. Mission accomplished.

Reasonable people disagreed about the invasion – often because of false intelligence – but that's not the point. Rather, the point is that the hubris of this administration clouded judgment and prevented them from exercising power intelligently. It led to a lack of planning, failure to use alliances, premature declaration of victory, torture, misrule, and the undermining of rights. All of these failings were justified by the belief that any means was acceptable to obtain our stated ends.

Of course, recognizing the importance of humility does not mean we should abandon what we believe is morally right. The difference between us and terrorists is clear. The danger of a foreign policy driven by hubris, as Iraq illustrates, is that we become blind to our own fallibility and make terrible mistakes.

Yet hubris is even more dangerous than that. In time, without a greater amount of humility, great power will not simply cause us to make mistakes. It will be our undoing.

As Niebuhr wrote, "If we should perish, the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory."

To quote an old saying: "Hubris is terminal."

Going forward in our foreign policy, we must balance power and strength with some humility. That does not mean that we don't fight power with power. But it does mean that when we do, we realize that we cannot possibly anticipate every outcome, so we plan an exit strategy; that our power alone is not always enough to overcome every enemy, so we build alliances; that, as circumstances change, our current path may not always be the most effective, so we must be willing to admit mistakes and adapt; and that – even if the danger is so clear and present now – there will one day be a time when our war is over, so we have to look beyond near-term victory as the only end in sight.

### **Changing the Status Quo in Albany**

As I have described, Niebuhr attacked those wooly idealists who would not stand up to foreign enemies and would retreat into isolationism. But he was equally cutting against those who did not stand up to domestic dangers.

He observed that “the injustices in society...will not be abolished purely by moral and rational suasion.” Instead, he argued, “Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power.”

It was this point that I raised in my Inaugural Address: that only when we are willing to confront power with power – only when we are willing to enter what New York Governor and President Teddy Roosevelt called “the arena” – can we even begin to address the injustices of our time.

So I would now like to shift to domestic affairs and get closer to the current context in which my own administration finds itself.

To confront the power that drives the domestic injustices of our time, we have to understand its nature. Fundamentally, the drivers are not the usual suspects we hear about on TV – such as big corporations, globalization or the wealthiest one percent.

The most powerful force that drives the domestic injustices of our time is the status quo. And we will never achieve real progress unless we confront it head-on.

When I talk about the status quo, I'm not offering up a straw man – that the status quo simply represents the policies I oppose.

To me, the status quo is a real force, a product of several things, including: a combination of interests that are directly vested and benefit from current policy; the resistance to change inherent in human nature; and the totality of despair, exhaustion and cynicism that have worn people down and discouraged them from believing that real change is possible.

That's why we need to push as hard as we do. Because we are not just pushing *for* certain policies or *against* certain interests – we are pushing against a constellation of forces that are financial, psychological and sometimes even inherent in human nature itself.

Because what we're up against is so powerful, our effort to change the status quo will sometimes be marred, as it has been, "by dust and sweat," as Roosevelt said. But that does not mean we can back down.

It was in this spirit that I campaigned for Governor.

I ran for office with the slogan that "On Day One, Everything Changes." Now, everyone loves to make fun of that. "Hey Spitzer, it still rains." "Spitzer, people still make fun of me." "Spitzer, my kids still misbehave." What can I say? They are all right. Every single wrong in New York was not suddenly righted on January 1<sup>st</sup>.

But that wasn't my point. The voters knew what I meant was that something fundamental *would* change on Day One because there would be a new passion and energy in Albany to match the power of the status quo.

As I noted in my first State of the State Address: "The status quo always has powerful friends. But we in New York have our own more powerful friends – we have the men and women of this state who work and struggle each day to give their children a better life."

And we need all of these friends. Because in Albany, as in anywhere else in the world, moral and rational persuasion, while necessary, are not enough to change something so entrenched and so powerful as the status quo.

Take any number of issues we have fought for in our first seven months.

We inherited a health care system that was funding the wrong kind of care in the wrong kind of setting, and we were breaking the bank to do it. New York spends more on health care per capita than any state in the nation and yet 15 percent of our population lives without health insurance; a greater percentage of New Yorkers die of a chronic disease than anywhere in America; one in four children have asthma, and one in twelve have diabetes.

Our Medicaid bill was at \$46 billion per year, growing at a rate of eight percent annually without generating the results to warrant those expenditures.

In January, we came in and said, "Wait a minute. How can the most expensive health care system in the country produce these kinds of results?"

The answer was simple: the status quo. What had happened was that health care decision-making had been co-opted by every interest other than the patient's interest. So we were left pumping billions of dollars into a broken system with no deliverables and no accountability.

That is what we set out to change.

We proposed a budget that, at its core, was an effort to move from an institution-first health care system – in which policy and funding decisions were driven by large health care institutions – to

a patient-first system, in which every decision, every initiative and every investment we make would be designed with the patient's interest first.

But the health care system was not going to restructure itself. The powerful health care interests were too invested in the status quo, and there was absolutely no reason for them to change. So they didn't.

When we got here, we started pushing back, and something powerful emerged. A coalition of patients, providers, advocates and legislators, who had long realized the failures of the current system, emerged to exert the political pressure necessary to change the system.

To be sure, the status quo responded, and did so with fervor – launching a multi-million dollar ad campaign – the largest ever by an interest group – to keep the system the same.

And while we still have a long way to go, in the end our coalition prevailed. We were not just able to achieve \$1 billion in savings – reducing our Medicaid growth rate from eight to one percent – but we were also able to expand health insurance to all of New York's 400,000 uninsured children and were able to begin fundamentally transforming our health care system to put patients first. And, importantly, we were also able to establish a \$600 million fund for stem cell research.

Take our education system as another example. We inherited a system that was inadequately and inequitably funded. For over a decade, the previous governor fought an epic court battle to keep the system the way it was.

Just like the health care system, our school aid formula – which had been frozen in concrete for decades – was not all of a sudden going to change itself. Even a court mandate was not enough.

It took the mandate we were given by the people to force change. We were able to build a coalition of teachers, parents, advocates and legislators that resulted in not just the largest-ever investment in our schools, but the institutionalization of a new funding formula that will allocate that investment according to academic instead of political needs.

The property tax system that is driving our young people out of the state and our seniors out of their homes was not all of a sudden going to become fairer on its own. We had to exert the political pressure necessary for this kind of change to occur.

Several months ago, we enacted the largest property tax cut in State history, but we did so in a way that targeted the greatest cuts to those who need it most – middle class New Yorkers whose property taxes have been rising too fast for their wages to keep up. Yet, to this day, there are forces working to strip out the fairness that we fought so hard to make real.

The campaign finance system that was one of the weakest in the nation was not going to magically become one of the strongest. Why would those who got elected under the current system want to tinker with what has worked for them for decades? But we were able to marshal

the support of New Yorkers everywhere who were fed up with a corrupt system, and prove that it really was in everyone's interest to change the system.

Several weeks ago, working with the Legislature, we were able to achieve a bipartisan agreement that will mark the most significant reform on this scale and scope since the Watergate era. We will for the first time put a hard limit on soft money contributions. We will ban all contributions from lobbyists. And we will close the two most porous loopholes in the system, which have allowed corporations and individuals to contribute unlimited amounts of money to political candidates. Ultimately, these reforms will help weaken the special interests' grip on the status quo and increase the voice of the average New Yorker in Albany.

I could go on, but I think I've made the point: Even if we believed we had reason on our side in every one of these cases, reason was not enough. We had to aggressively use the mandate the people gave us to change the rules of the game.

What it all adds up to is that we have proved in the last seven months that change is possible – that when you push hard enough, you can galvanize a new coalition that is more powerful than even the status quo. While a few sparks may fly, the result in the end makes it all worth it.

Because change *is* possible. As this becomes more and more apparent, our momentum will build, our coalition will grow and the hopes of New Yorkers will be realized.

A New York where every person has the opportunity to realize his or her full potential;

A New York where no one falls through the cracks;

A New York that we hand over to our children in better condition than the one we inherited; and

A New York that is built to compete in today's flat world that is both more integrated and more competitive.

That means more good-paying jobs and economic opportunity; better quality health care at a lower price; smaller class sizes and more accountability; less government spending and more tax cuts, housing we can afford to rent and buy; cleaner air, lakes and land; and a higher education system that is both affordable and preeminent.

Indeed, we must realize a Progressive Era for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Now some have said that we have been *over*-aggressive in this effort.

I *do* get exercised when I travel the state and meet the real New Yorkers behind the problems I just outlined. I meet people without good-paying jobs, people without health insurance and people who have to say goodbye to their children who are leaving for opportunity elsewhere. I meet homeowners doing everything they can just to hold on to their homes under the crushing burden of property taxes. And I meet parents who know that their children are not getting a good enough education to compete in the knowledge economy.

Some say that I should settle down, go slower and not push so hard, so quickly for such transformational change. To them, I say that you misunderstand the size of the problems we face, the strength of the status quo and the urgency of the people's desire for change.

I promised to take their frustration and their call for action with me to Albany and channel it into real change. And to a great extent, it's worked.

When asked one time why I push so hard, I answered that "you can't change the world by whispering," and I truly believe in raising our voices against injustice and apathy. But it is also true, as one writer said, that the greatest gift you can give others is to truly listen, and I want to listen to *all* New Yorkers, regardless of party or political persuasion, to hear their ideas for making this state a better place.

As Niebuhr observed, we "need a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us" and "a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demonry and our vanities."

That gets me to what I want to conclude with today.

As we engage in our fight for change, we must remember what history has taught us about the danger of power and passion – the very lesson I discussed earlier – that without vigilance and humility, righteousness can become self-righteousness.

Over the past few weeks, it has become evident that this principle was forgotten. We were fighting so hard for what we believed was right that we let down our guard and allowed our passion to get the best of us. I have accepted responsibility for these failures.

In case anyone thinks that my allusions to the Bush administration earlier in my talk suggest that I am comparing what went on in the last several weeks to the failed policies in Iraq, let me disabuse you of that. But there is a thread that binds this all together: whether you're fighting wars abroad or fighting for change at home – is that we must always balance strength with humility.

So how does one avoid descending into the self-righteousness that can so easily overtake good intention?

I can't claim to know the entire answer. But I know it begins with acknowledging that a layer of self-examination and self-criticism is necessary. As a public official, the question of how to maintain that equilibrium must be one of the questions you ask yourself every day.

Another critical part of the answer is that humility comes from remembering who and what you're fighting for.

As I was saying earlier, I've spent a lot of time over the last nine years traveling the State and talking with New Yorkers about what needs to be done. Every week, I take trips like this one, to

get out of Albany so I can better understand the needs and priorities of the people in this state, like the ones I discussed a moment ago – like the mayor whose inner-city is crumbling around him, or the family that can't afford health insurance or the senior who is struggling to pay her property taxes. Their faces and their challenges serve as a constant reminder of the need to stay grounded in what our goal must be.

So to maintain the right equilibrium, you can never lose touch with the people who sent you here. That is why there is no place for self-righteousness in my administration. That's my renewed promise to New Yorkers. But, there's also no room to stand down in the face of a still-powerful status quo. That's the promise that sent me to Albany.

Power must be used, but it must be tempered by soul-searching and the recognition of our human capacity for error. That is the maxim that should inform our approach to every challenge, from reforming state government to engaging in foreign affairs. In both areas, we cannot become so convinced of the rightness of our cause that we give less scrutiny to the rightness of our means.

In Albany, going forward, we will apply this understanding as we continue our fight for a revitalized economy, lower taxes, more jobs, lower health care costs and better schools.

What happened was clearly a setback. But we are just at the beginning. We have learned an important lesson. And in the end, our fight for change will be stronger for it.

I have spent the last half hour calling on a Protestant minister to help me analyze our current situation, but I would like to close with a proverb from my own faith. The Jewish prophet Micah once asked: "What is good, and what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Thank you.