

### The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order

By Hal Brands and Charles Edel  
Yale University Press, 2019  
200 pp. \$25.00  
ISBN: 978-0300238242

Reviewed by Joseph J. Collins

The field of international relations is awash with books on world order, “the system of norms, rules, and power relationships that regulates international affairs” (p. 42). While military concerns often focus on technical or operational issues, senior officers and strategists need to understand the evolving world order to understand the strategic context that underpins their work.

Hal Brands, the Henry Kissinger Professor of Global Affairs at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Charles Edel, a senior fellow in the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Australia, have sought the wisdom of the past to help us understand the future world order. Their thesis is that tragedy has been a recurring but not inevitable part of international affairs. To

understand world politics, one must be alert to the potential for tragedy. Sadly, the United States today has lost its tragic sensibility at a time when it must work with purpose and vigor to shore up a faltering world order. In the process of proving this thesis, the two authors have published a book that is relatively comprehensive, well-written, and original in its approach.

The authors begin with Aristotle, who noted that a tragic sensibility is about understanding “not the thing that has happened but a kind of thing that might happen” (p. 3). The citizens of volatile Greek city-states had a much better sense of what could happen at the extremes of state relations, but Americans, the authors argue, are “serial amnesiacs.” After 75 years of peace among the major powers, Americans “are losing their sense of tragedy” (p. 5). The authors assert that Americans “must re-discover their inner sense of tragedy *before* they have to experience it themselves” (p. 6, emphasis in the original). Who better to teach Americans about tragedy than the ancient Greeks, who invented the art form more than 20 centuries past?

The ancient Greeks warned against both hubris and complacency. Blending fact, fiction, and recreation, their plays often shocked the audience into contemplating a contemporary world in relation to tragedies of the past. The authors offer as a prime example Aeschylus’s dissection in *The Persians* of how Xerxes abused his superior capabilities and underestimated his determined Greek opponents. Persian hubris ruled, and “dangers abound when leaders reach beyond their grasp” (p. 14). Greeks and Persians paid heavily for Xerxes’ folly. The high prices paid by Americans and the indigenous people in the invasion of Iraq and the war in Vietnam were prefigured by the price paid by Greeks and Persians. Unfortunately, the Greek ability to learn from tragedy was not perfect; their refined tragic sensibility did not prevent them from initiating the disastrous Peloponnesian War 50 years later.

As the eras unfolded, progress and development had their day, but tragedy, riding in the trains of large-scale wars,

made repeat appearances. The Thirty Years’ War, the Napoleonic Wars, and World War I all had increasingly tragic outcomes. The authors worry that today the potential for great power conflict appears to be growing as the proclivity of Western powers to take collective action is fading. The last time that happened was in the late 1930s, where the high casualties of World War I, isolationism, the prominence of idealistic thinking, and poor economic conditions induced paralysis among the Allies in the face of the Axis threat.

The post-World War II period was grounded in the lessons of the tragedy of that greatest of all conflicts. The United States and its Allies created a comprehensive world order that included security organizations, trade rules, monetary policy management, a developmental assistance bank, and the United Nations system. Still, the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union accommodated limited wars and proxy conflicts. Wars of national liberation, often aided and abetted by the Soviet Union or China, were frequent, but great power war was avoided. Prosperity returned to the developed world, and economic progress spread in the developing world. The potential for tragedy faded in the American mind.

Brands and Edel argue that after 75 years of great power peace, the United States has lost the tragic sensibility that “impelled it to do great things—and in doing so, it is undermining the exertions that have long held tragedy at bay” (p. 91). The end of the Cold War, the desire for a peace dividend, idealistic “end of history” thinking, and a real reduction in defense spending all took place before the costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After nearly a decade of fighting the unanticipated war on terror, the United States endured a serious financial crisis. At the same time, China and Russia had become more powerful and aggressive internationally. In 2008, the Russians invaded Georgia. A half-decade later, they seized the Crimea and invaded Ukraine. In 2017, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping told the Party Congress that China could now “take center stage in the world” (p. 131)

and potentially establish a Sinocentric world order.

The United States, according to the authors, faces a “darkening horizon” and increasingly “contested primacy” (p. 123). The onset of the Trump Presidency has complicated the U.S. response, weakening the strong U.S. alliance focus, and detracting from its propensity to exercise international leadership. The potential for great power conflict today is higher than it has been since the Cold War. Were that not enough to worry about, Iran and North Korea provide additional sources of regional instability. The authors compare the contemporary period to the late 1930s and assert that today’s defenders of world order “seem demoralized, divided, and unreliable” (p. 140).

In the final chapter of the book, Brands and Edel summarize their argument and leave the reader with what amounts to a set of conceptual recommendations. They remind us that tragedy in international politics is normal and that today tragedy is “again stalking global affairs” (p. 149). At the same time, they reject both complacency and fatalism. All is not lost. To repair the world order, they recommend collective action and communal sacrifice. This will require consistent U.S. leadership, which they believe has been lacking for many years. The authors recommend “timely and enduring action” (p. 158) to solve both immediate and unending long-term problems. Finally, they recommend a sense of restraint and proportion, avoiding both complacency and hubris, which just happens to be a central message of Greek tragedies.

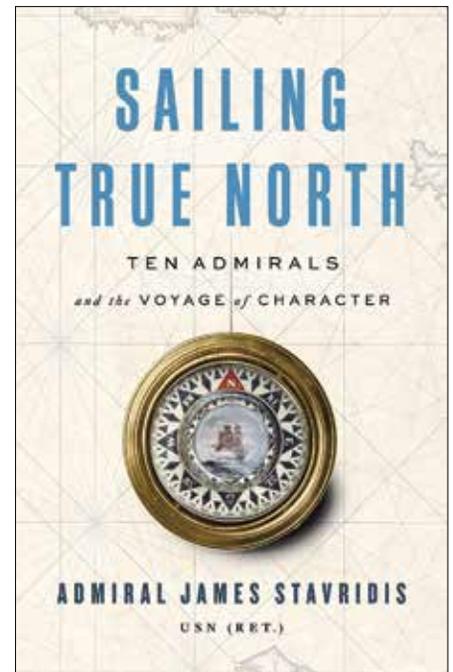
*The Lessons of Tragedy* is an excellent book, but the analysis is focused on great power politics. The centrality of survival and security supports that approach, but the fraying of the international order has a number of important aspects beyond interstate security politics. The issues of international political economy, trade, globalization, and regional/global organizations are a big part of the world order story, as are Chinese and Russian futures, critical metrics in appreciating the potential for tragedy.

The curious reader may want to cast a wider net on the issue of world order. Three new books that would be useful are Kori Schake, *America vs. the West: Can the Liberal World Order Be Preserved* (Penguin Specials, 2018); Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (Knopf, 2018); and Michael Mazarr and Ashley Rhoades, *Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order* (RAND, 2018).

But if you have a chance to read only one book on world order, you would do well to read and meditate on *Lessons of Tragedy*. Aristotle would salute your prudence. JFQ

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### **Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character**

By James Stavridis  
Penguin Press, 2019  
336 pp. \$28.00  
ISBN 978-0525559931

Reviewed by Peter H. Daly

Character is being widely discussed on the national stage today, and it is the main subject of *Sailing True North: Ten Admirals and the Voyage of Character*. This new title spans the arc of time from Themistocles to current-day admirals. For each of his subjects, the author distills their stories and key attributes. I have known Jim Stavridis for more than 30 years and most recently worked closely with him in my role as CEO and Publisher at the U.S. Naval Institute when he was Chair of the Board.

The short histories and examples that he provides in *Sailing True North* do not just focus on successes; the book does a good job of giving balanced treatment to both successes and failures. The flaws are covered, and from these flaws and failures, we learn the most. It is a heavy lift to see so many historic subjects in one