



*The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order* by Hal Brands and Charles N. Edel.

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Review by Jordan Becker, United States Army (jordan.becker@westpoint.edu).

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In *The Lessons of Tragedy*, Hal Brands (Johns Hopkins Univ.) and Charles Edel (Univ. of Sydney) argue that the classical Greeks' "tragic sensibility" (146) helped inoculate them from the specter of tragedy in human affairs. They further maintain that originators of successful international orders throughout history have similarly kept "company with [their] worst fears." Using these criteria, they derive one basic lesson: that present-day Americans are suffering from amnesia, even as the world becomes increasingly dangerous. Drawing on their backgrounds in academia and statecraft, Brands and Edel set out to help Americans and their allies "rediscover their sense of tragedy" (6) through a knowledge of history, rather than painful experience. Their argument is straightforward and intuitively appealing.

*The Lessons of Tragedy* aims to familiarize a general readership with connections between ancient history, Greek tragedy, and modern statecraft. The book's tone is terse and polemical in the best sense of the word; it is meant to dispel a complacent approach to international order among Western societies.

The book's introduction lays out its thesis: that Greek tragedies helped ensure the stability of Greek polities. Brands and Edel's concern that the comfort provided by stable orders can be the seeds of their destruction aligns with a long tradition of thinking on orders: Guglielmo Ferrero, writing about the Concert of Europe, astutely defined order as "the set of rules that man must respect in order not to live in the permanent terror of his fellow men, of the innate madness of men and its unpredictable explosions—a set of rules that man calls freedom."<sup>1</sup> One may wonder, however: were tragedies staged at Athens as a salutary reminder that disaster lurked just around the corner even in the best of times? Athens's fate suggests otherwise.

Chapter 1 contends that "theatrical and other dramatic representations of tragedy were public education ..., meant to serve as both a warning and a call to action" (10). By forcing themselves to confront tragedy, Athenians aimed to shock themselves "out of torpor" (11). The chapter concludes with praise for Thucydides's ability to evoke the insecurity of the human condition in his account of the disastrous Peloponnesian war. This makes one wonder what exactly the Athenians *had* learned from all their tragedies and whether that learning had saved them from their own complacency.

Brands and Edel make their argument explicit in chap. 2: claims that war is going out of style are dangerous, because breakdowns of order and associated descents into violence are now in fact the norm. Such arguments are nothing new, and recent work has given them significant empirical force. The authors link this debate explicitly to the timeless lessons of ancient Greek history. Their argument that "after all, it happened to the Greeks" (25) will lead empirically minded scholars to ask whether the Greeks' vaunted tragic sensibility in fact kept them safe from their own version of the stability-instability paradox.

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1. My translation from *Ricostruzione: Talleyrand a Vienna (1814-1815)* (Milan: Garzanti, 1948) 379.

In chapter 3, the authors contend that tragedy can inspire the creation and maintenance of orders that “steer history onto a better path” (40). They catalog orders arising after tragic violence. They cite the Peace of Westphalia and the Concert of Europe as successes and the Versailles treaty as a failure. But why, exactly? Were the statesmen of 1648 and 1815 more attuned to tragedy than those of 1917? The authors believe so. But their argument rests mostly on the mid-term outcomes of the Versailles Treaty: because it was a failure, those who negotiated it must, ipso facto, have lacked tragic sensibility. Researchers should test this causal argument empirically.

Chapter 4 maintains that the post-World War II world order was constructed by American leaders who understood “what disasters ... could occur if the United States failed to foster a thriving international economy whose benefits were broadly distributed ... What really drove them was fear of a return to something worse” (72–73). The authors find it ironic that the postwar order is at risk because its success has induced “complacency by causing individuals to lose their awareness of potential disasters that lurk just over the horizon” (88–89). This claim seems sound intuitively, but Brands and Edel do not demonstrate systematically the extent to which Americans have lost risk awareness. Did Athenians somehow stop paying attention to their own tragic dramas, and therefore recede from history? Chapter 5 is meant to confirm the validity of this assertion. It offers a plausible narrative indicating as much but does not enable readers to test (or really even evaluate) alternative narratives and arguments suggesting that excessive concerns about potential tragedy may lead to costly—perhaps tragic—overreach. Brands and Edel cite the Trump administration’s obliviousness to the notion of tragic sensibility (115) and see his election as symptom of the same unawareness in the American electorate.

Chapter 6 analyzes the “disorienting array of dangers which are occurring on multiple fronts and often compound one another’s effects” (118). The authors try to make a case that the global distribution of power drives international politics, with brief attention to the challenges posed by authoritarian “backlash states” like China, Iran, and Russia. They point to the (in their view) misguided belief in the 1990s that such states would be overtaken by the inexorable march of progress. It is unclear what “backlash states” actually are and what they are lashing back against.

After concluding chap. 6 by stressing that Americans must “rediscover their tragic sensibility” (144) in order to weather the coming storm, Brands and Edel devote their concluding chapter to reminding readers how frail the stability many of them enjoy actually is. They identify seven components of a tragic sensibility that Americans must recover in order to preserve their current success. First, they must recognize that tragedy is normal and the current international order is exceptional. Second, they must acknowledge the gathering storm Brands and Edel describe in chap. 6. Third, they must not succumb to fatalism, but instead “defend this existing order against the depredations of those attacking it,” which their nation “undoubtedly has the power” to do (151–52). Fourth, they must be ready to take united action and endure sacrifices both nationally and as alliance members. Fifth, they must act “early” (158) to avert risks and retain credibility. Sixth, they must emulate the ancient Greeks in avoiding hubris, which is “no less a sin than complacency.” Finally, they must learn the lessons of redemption that run through history by “reacquaint[ing] themselves with a tragic sensibility, or by experiencing the real-world tragedy that their amnesia, if not corrected, may help bring about” (165).

Hal Brands and Charles Edel communicate their thesis in a relentlessly repetitive and vivid narrative style. This is well advised and highly effective, given their intended nonspecialist audience. Scholars who question the lesson itself, however, will find such reiteration less compelling.