

Book Review: The Lessons of Tragedy - Statecraft and World Order

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Book Review: The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order, by Hal Brands and Charles Edel, Yale University Press. New Haven – London, 2019¹

The subject regarding the decline of the United States from its position of primacy in the international system and replaced by a new great hegemonic power, is not new and preoccupied researchers in the realm of International Relations. In this regard, I can mention John J. Mearsheimer², or Graham Allison³, who analyzed the American decline and power erosion from the position of preponderance in the international system, a place that can be filled by a new great power, in ascension, such as China, which is on the rise. Another author that can be mentioned in this line is Fareed Zakaria, who argued about the rise of the rest of the world, catching up the West from behind⁴. Moreover, the subject of the Peloponnesian war as a source of inspiration and relevance for the contemporary IR studies is not new, as Robert Gilpin came with a theory of hegemonic war in 1988, based on this historical

event⁵. The book of Hal Brands and Charles Edel lays in the same category of works that analyze the decline of the American hegemony, focusing on the causes that led to this phenomenon, with a parallel to the Peloponnesian war as a tragic event that provoked systemic changes in the ancient world.

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Hal Brands and Charles Edel base their analysis regarding the causes of the American decline by using an interesting conceptual framework, inspired from ancient times, namely the Greek tragedy, as a source which represented more than an artistic work of art, with another facet, the one of a source of warning, call to action and inspiration, as it was in Athens⁶. As the authors stated, “[t]he purpose of this book is to use history to help Americans and other supporters of the U.S.-led international order rediscover their sense of tragedy *before* they have to experience it themselves”⁷. The book is organized in seven chapters – (1) The Virtues of Tragedy, (2) Tragedy as the Norm, (3) Tragedy as Inspiration, (4) The Great Escape, (5) The Contemporary Amnesia, (6) The Darkening Horizon, and (7) Rediscovering Tragedy – in which the

authors explain the meaning of the tragedy in ancient Greece, illustrate the tragic aspect of the international affairs in history, whose underlying logic remained unchanged since the time of Thucydides, where the wars represent the norm and peace just a short interval between them⁸ and then explore the reasons of losing the sense of tragedy by the Americans and what is to be done to regain it. Therefore, the book is organized on two main lines – the meaning of tragedy and its usefulness for the contemporary world as inspired from the ancient times, followed by the signal drawn in the sense of regaining the sense of tragedy for the United States to preserve its primacy on the international arena.

To illustrate their conceptual framework, the authors start with presenting their concept of tragedy inspired by Thucydides, with the events and consequences of the Peloponnesian War. By starting with the example of the Peloponnesian War and continuing with examples from the Thirty Years' War, up to the recent confrontations, such as the Cold War, the work of the two authors can be paralleled with the book of Graham T. Allison – *Destined for War, Escaping the Thucydides's Trap*, where he also found inspiration in the Peloponnesian War and advanced the concept of Thucydides' trap. Their view also resembles when the two authors affirm that the war has started from trivial causes⁹, the same as Allison mentioned in his book¹⁰. In other words, the mechanism of such a conflict, a hegemonic war between a declining state and a rising one, can be triggered by a minor event, then evolves in a systemic war, encompassing all the relevant actors from the international arena¹¹.

The great merit of the ancient tragedy is that it developed a sense of tragedy that it triggered a sort a red signal about a great catastrophe that was looming in the horizon. In the Greek world, the tragedy as a theatrical piece had a dual meaning, as a catastrophic event and as “the portrayal of such catastrophes in ways meant to provoke awareness and constructive action”, an educative piece of art regarding a possible disaster. Furthermore, the tragedies were designed to warn against overconfidence, hubris, while, in the same time, encouraging sacrifice and bravery¹². As a parallel and comparison with the contemporary world, Brands and Edel argue that “[t]he ancient Greeks tried to escape tragedy by confronting it head on”, while “[t]oday, we try to escape tragedy by hoping it will never happen”¹³.

The authors argue that the American people confront with a “contemporary amnesia”, a loss of the “tragic sensibility” after the Cold War, because “most Americans have no personal recollection of the tragedies that spurred creation of the U.S.-led order”¹⁴. By experiencing the long period of peace since 1945 and with United States as the victor of the Cold War, the “Americans began to lose their understanding of tragedy and that the intellectual foundations of U.S. strategy began to weaken”, a process that was doubled by the replacement of a generation of statesmen with no experience regarding the U.S. international role¹⁵. In the eyes of the authors the election of Donald Trump represents a proof that this sense of tragedy is weakening¹⁶.

The revisionist actions, with China in front, appear on the horizon, as the authors characterize the relations between great powers as conflictual, as the established global norms are contested¹⁷. The fact that the two authors elaborate on the rise of China as a contesting power regarding the U.S. preeminence on the international arena shows that this subject represents a constant preoccupation in the academic field, but, however, it is not new. As I have mentioned, other authors elaborated earlier on this subject and made predictions regarding a potential war between China and United States.

In the end, Brands and Edel come with the solution of building a tragic sensibility for the American people “that would allow them to better understand and confront the dangers that

threaten to upend that success” since 1945¹⁸. In the eyes of Brands and Edel, the tragic sensibility has some components. First of all, it acknowledges the normalcy of tragedy and fragility of the international orders. A second aspect lies in the fact that tragedy is coming back on the international arena and that the American order may be in danger in the future. A third and vital aspect lies in the fact that a tragic sensibility needs to avoid fatalism while rejecting complacency. A fourth aspect emphasizes the need for collective action and sacrifice to preserve the present order. Fifth, opportune and durable action is urgent to preserve the present order and meet the revisionist claims of the other great powers. A sixth aspect of the tragic sensibility emphasizes the need for mitigating the efforts “by a sense of proportion and restraint”¹⁹.

The book of Brands and Edel can be seen as a manifesto, a call to action to build the fading tragic sensibility in the eyes of the American people to meet the possible challenges, as new revisionist great powers started to take action and contest the U.S. primacy on the international arena. The book represents a preoccupation, even though not new, about the possibility of a tragic event that would represent the collapse of the American led international order, which, as the Peloponnesian war, can be catastrophic. Although innovative and interesting, the concept of tragedy and the solution of building a tragic sensibility as in the ancient Greece can be debatable. What is to be done if the effort of building this sense of tragic sensibility fails? The present generation of the American people can develop a sense of tragic sensibility? Moreover, the strategy required by developing this sense of tragic sensibility can represent a useful tool to prevent a possible catastrophic war between the great powers in the future? Or, even though it can be developed a sense of tragic sensibility for the American people, it can be enough to prevent a catastrophic great power war and a change of the U.S. led international order? These are questions that require more investigation, while, on the other hand, reflect the difficulty that lays in the predictions made by the authors in order to prevent the collapse of the current international order.

This book of Brands and Edel represents an insightful and interesting contribution to the debate regarding the decline of the United States from its leadership position. The book emphasizes the preoccupation in the field regarding the importance of the ancient past – the Peloponnesian war and the Greek tragedies – and its relevance for our present. More than that, the book represents a part of the effort made by the academic field in understanding and explaining the present situation of the U.S. led international order in order to offer solutions and strategies aimed to be taken into account by the political leaders.

Notes

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² See John J. Mearhseimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company: New York and London, 2001), chapter 10, *The Liberal Delusion* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2018) and “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order”, in *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 7–50, Spring 2019, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00342;

³ Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston – New York, 2017);

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World. Release 2.0* (W. W. Norton & Company: New York and London, 2011);

⁵ Robert Gilpin, „The Theory of Hegemonic War”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars (Spring, 1988), pp. 591-613, https://www.jstor.org/stable/204816?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents;

⁶ Hal Brands and Charles Edel, *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2019), 17;

⁷ Ibid., 15;

⁸ Ibid., 32;

⁹ Ibid., 29-30;

¹⁰ Graham Allison, *Destined for War...*, 42;

¹¹ For a good insight regarding the characteristics of a hegemonic war, see Robert Gilpin, „The Theory of Hegemonic War”...;

¹² Hal Brands and Charles Edel, *The Lessons...*, 20-21;

¹³ Ibid., 27;

¹⁴ Ibid., 78-79;

¹⁵ Ibid., 83;

¹⁶ Ibid., 97;

¹⁷ Ibid., 102-103;

¹⁸ Ibid., 120;

¹⁹ Ibid., 120-132.

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