The Tragedy Trap: On the Tragicized Politics of Nuclear Weapons and Armed Drones and the Making of Unaccountability

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At first glance, it is difficult to imagine two military technologies more different from each other than armed drones and nuclear weapons. While the former is associated with precise and surgical violence, at least in comparison to alternatives, the latter evokes destruction without limits, potentially on a planetary scale. Amid these material and conceptual differences, however, commonalities can be observed in terms of justification. In the politics of both, discourses of tragedy have played an outsized and problematic role.[1]

Tragic discourses have significant value in the military context, reminding us of the temptations of hubris, the prevalence of moral dilemmas, and the inescapable limits of foresight. Today, however, this discourse is drawn upon too heavily in policy discussions. Within the tragicized politics of nuclear and drone violence, foreseeable and solvable problems are reconceptualized as intractable dilemmas,

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and morally and politically accountable agents are reframed as powerless observers. The tragedy discourse, when wrongly applied by policymakers and the media, indulges the very hubris that it is intended to caution against. This is what we call the "tragedy trap." Our article clarifies the limits of "tragedy" in the context of military violence and argues for a renewed focus on political responsibility.

These insights on the limits of tragedy are necessary for an accurate accounting of harms produced in the drone and nuclear context. They are also important if we are to avoid overly tragicized discourses going forward, as we debate the status of current and future emerging technologies, including military artificial intelligence.

We make our argument in two steps. First, we define tragedy and clarify the value and limits of the tragic recognition, understood as an awareness of and openness to the existence and lessons of tragedy. The overapplication of tragedy in international politics, we argue, has distorted the distinction between foreseeable and unforeseeable challenges, and closed off space for moral and political agency. In the second section, we apply these insights to the politics of drone and nuclear violence.[2] We argue that in both cases foreseen-but-neglected or negligently unforeseen harms have been mischaracterized as tragically unforeseeable outcomes. The agency of leaders has also been wrongly downplayed in both cases. Prioritizing discourses of tragedy over moral and political responsibility enables, rather than mitigates against, hubris.

The Utility and Folly of Tragedy

Tragedy was and remains a complex genre, one that yields "multiple, sometimes contradictory insights."[3] In this article, we focus on tragedy's *core* lessons, those applied most commonly to the study of international politics. With this purpose in mind, we define tragedy narrowly, as an unforeseeably or unavoidably destructive outcome caused or enabled by individuals within conditions of heavily circumscribed agency. Variations of this definition are commonly deployed as a cautionary lesson against hubris, and as a reminder of the permanence of uncertainty and the immutable limits of foresight and control.

While the tragedy discourse is useful for understanding and navigating international politics, we argue that the label of "tragedy" is too often misapplied to non- or insufficiently tragic circumstances, where challenges are neglected rather than

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unforeseeable and where agency is misused or surrendered rather than constrained by external forces.

In recent years, scholars have reengaged tragedy as a discourse through which to better understand and navigate world politics.[4] Tragedy, it is argued, imparts a transhistorical wisdom, reminding us that the world is "complex, contradictory, conflict-prone and in a state of constant flux."[5] Tragedy can help guide us through this complexity by reminding us of the frequent unforeseeability of negative outcomes, and both the limits and endurance of human agency:

> By making us confront our limits and recognize that chaos lurks just beyond the fragile barriers we erect to keep it at bay, tragedy can help keep our conceptions of ourselves and our societies from becoming infused with hubris.[6]

Chris Brown argues similarly, writing that tragedy "ought to cause us to act more modestly, to be aware of our limitations and to be suspicious of grand narratives of salvation which pretend that there are no tragic choices to be made."[7] Tragedy reminds us that not all problems have an easy or obvious solution and that virtuous intention, unmoored from prudence, can sometimes be as or more destructive than outright malice. Above all, tragedy cautions us to tread carefully; for the world, and particularly the future, is more complex and untamable than we know.

We do not dispute that the discourse of tragedy, properly applied, can enrich our understanding of human affairs and politics. At its most instructive, tragedy helps cultivate an awareness of the "ontological conditions under which politics is performed"[8] and the structural pressures and human frailties that infuse it. What tragedy is not, however, is the sole or solely accurate representation of either past or present.[9] The mistaken designation of tragedy as a permanent "quality of existence,"[10] rather than a permanent *possibility*, distorts our understanding of the world we inhabit.[11]

The category of tragedy is overdrawn—wrongly applied to the nontragic or excessively applied to the partially tragic. Correcting this overapplication matters, we argue, epistemically, but also morally and politically. A "tragic sensitivity"[12]— an awareness of and openness to the existence and lessons of tragedy—accepts the painfully common occurrence of tragedy but nurtures the disposition to act in ways that best ensure its avoidance. In doing so, it leaves open the possibility of enacting less destructive political outcomes. A tragic *hyper*-sensitivity, in contrast, anchored as it is to an assumption of tragedy as a *chronic* condition, deadens our

capacity to detect and prevent avoidable suffering, and induces a fatalistic resignation that nothing better can be done.

The warnings of C. Wright Mills are useful here. In his 1958 work, *The Causes of World War Three*, Mills lamented "the replacement of the straightforward idea of 'political accountability' with the dead-beat notion of 'tragic responsibility.'" The latter, he argued, "was not good enough," functioning as little more than "a lugubrious and fatalistic dodge."[13] Today, this dodge is a fixture among political elites, who routinely employ the discourse of tragedy to mischaracterize their choices as inevitabilities and, in doing so, bypass the accountability they ought to face for morally problematic courses of action.[14]

A misapplication of tragedy is particularly common, we argue, within the politics of war and military technology, where it plays a role in the construction of political unaccountability. Here, the discourse of tragedy is too often used not to explain, or caution, but to exculpate. It is applied to situations in which harm was foreseeable and even foreseen but allowed to manifest; and where agency was wrongly exercised, rather than constrained by structure, in a way that made harm inevitable.

The Mischaracterization of Foreseeable Military Harms as Tragic

While the particular emphasis and narrative differ between various types of tragedy in literature and in politics, all are grounded in suffering; and specifically, a suffering that was unintended from the outset. Tragic circumstances are often brought about through miscalculation or failings of judgment on the part of otherwise well-intentioned protagonists, errors that lead either directly or indirectly through a causal chain of events to a final, painful outcome.[15] Key to most tragedy is that the protagonist is only in hindsight able to recognize this causal chain and their own role within it. Tragedy "shows us that we can initiate a course of action without being able to understand or control it—or adequately calculate its consequences."[16]

These lessons on the limits of foreseeability are of critical value to weapons development and use, given the centrality of uncertainty within both. Prediction is difficult, and we are often confronted by a pace or type of military change radically at odds with initial expectations. Viewed through a tragic lens, such difficulties become the inevitable outcome of the inescapable limits of foresight. Problems emerge, however, when tragedy is misapplied to these same issues. In many cases, the unintended harms of military technologies stem not from the unforeseeable

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but rather from a failure to act responsibly in the face of challenges that were, or at least could have been, anticipated. What is needed, in such cases, is the *ambition* to act. Accounts of tragedy that wrongly frame it as a permanent and inescapable condition of international politics invisibilize the possibility of such ambition.

Mistakes, misjudgments, and miscalculations are an unavoidable presence in the development and deployment of weapons systems. Weapons programs may commence in accordance with well (or well enough) intentioned goals but evolve in unexpected and problematic ways. Actual weapons use is also characterized by error, both technical and human. But alongside these byproducts of uncertainty are other problems—moral incuriosity or explicit immorality in the face of foreseeable, foreseen, and correctable (even if only partially) harm. The misapplication of tragedy blinds us to this less forgivable category of harm, centered as it is on mistakes and regret rather than misdeeds and remorse.[17]

The Wrongful Erasure of Moral Agency

Greek tragedy often projected a theocentric vision of the world, where agency was active but heavily restricted by fate or the supernatural. Structural forces also played an important role in later tragedy, with Shakespearean plots inspiring sympathy in the audience, but also awe. Dramatic reversals of fortune served as a reminder

> that man is blind and helpless, the plaything of an inscrutable power, called by the name of Fortune or some other name—a power which appears to smile on him for a little, and then on a sudden strikes him down in his pride.[18]

Critically though, no matter the structural forces that pressure it, human agency remains a key feature of most tragedy. In his work on Shakespearean tragedy, Bradley points out that structure—in this case, the supernatural—is but an element of the narrative; it is never so overwhelming as to disrupt the status of "human action" as the "central fact" of tragedy.[19] Hoxby argues similarly, distinguishing between "mere suffering or misfortune" and tragedy by the presence of human agency in the latter.[20] Our actions are guided and circumscribed by structure—not dictated by it.

When applied to domestic and international politics, this lesson from tragedy offers an important counter to the Great Man narrative. Even the very powerful and the seemingly free may experience "a radical circumscription of freedom of choice and be guided by perceptions of necessity."[21] The choices of leaders are

shaped by structure: the environmental context makes certain actions more achievable and desirable and others less so. The choice, however, remains that of the leader, as does some degree of moral responsibility for the consequences of that choice. Tragedy reminds us that agency and structure are an interplay: "Man is free but fated, fated but free."[22] This qualified account of human agency leaves us with a more complex, less simplistic understanding of both causation and moral responsibility.

Misapplied tragedy distorts this complexity, transforming structure from a force that shapes and limits agency to one that absolves it. The unjust harm produced by weapons development and use, when acknowledged at all, is frequently defended on the grounds of exigency. As we will show in the next sections, those involved will often claim to have had no choice, defending the resulting harm as a regrettable but largely inescapable outcome of necessity.

Scholarship on weapons development and use[23] often refers to the techno-logics of war—technological forces and incentives that distort how armed conflict is understood and morally navigated. This tragicized account typically undervalues the role of agency in the cause, perpetuation, and alleviation of harmful policy. As our cases will reveal, most of the decisions made in relation to nuclear weapons and armed drones were made by individuals with the capacity to do otherwise; that is, to pursue and enact less destructive policy outcomes. Tragic discourses that depict agency as excessively or entirely constrained create space for policymakers complicit in unjust harm, either directly or indirectly, to escape appropriate moral scrutiny. They also erode the capacity of the public to render moral judgment on those same individuals.

To be clear, we do not discount the structural forces that shape and restrain individual agency, including the agency of the very powerful. Drone warfare and nuclearism are embedded within a broader military-industrial complex that limits both individual freedom and political possibility. However, *diminished* agency and *eliminated* agency are two different things, and we should contest political sleights of hand that wrongly characterize the former as the latter.

It is not surprising that political leaders are so quick to claim the mantle of tragedy. Tragedy provides us with flawed, but often admirable, figures; individuals who strive to uphold good or effect positive change but are ultimately brought low through their own character flaws, outside forces beyond their control, or a combination of both. Even in defeat, the protagonist is "ennobled."[24] This framing is common in the historical and contemporary politics of military technology. It is also overused. Not all

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leaders err because of the fiendish difficulty of balancing security with morality. Some are owed condemnation, not sympathy, for the morally suboptimal choices they consciously make, and for the harm they visit on the innocent as a consequence.

In the next section, we apply these lessons to the context of nuclear weapons politics and the ongoing U.S. armed drone program. We argue that the misapplication of tragedy to both has blinded many to the foreseeability of the unjust harms produced, and downplayed the role of agency to a degree that does not comport with empirical reality.

Nuclear Weapons

The tragedy discourse is widely used in reference to most decisions related to nuclear weapons.[25] Going back to the inception of these weapons, the co-director of the Manhattan Project, J. Robert Oppenheimer, has been commonly described as a "tragic figure."[26] Tragedy is also used to interpret decisions related to the use of nuclear weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.[27] The questions asked about the Manhattan Project in the scholarship also implicitly accept the tragedy discourse. It is well established that most scientists joined the Manhattan Project for fear that the Nazis would build a bomb first and that physicist Joseph Rotblat left when it became clear that this possibility could no longer materialize.[28] What is notable, however, is that the limited scholarship interested in this moment focuses on why he left, not on why no one else followed given that their rationale for joining was no longer valid.[29] The failure to recognize the agency of these other scientists, and hold them properly to account, suggests an implicit acceptance of the inevitability of the outcome of building the bomb. These narratives are consistent with the tragedy discourse, which presents humanity's bargain with the atomic bomb as "Faustian."[30] Finally, the nuclear arms race that led to the production of over 120,000 nuclear weapons worldwide, including tens of thousands in the United States, is characterized by John Mearsheimer as "not misguided" but as an inevitable outcome of the "tragedy of great power politics,"[31] a sentiment shared by other widely cited scholars in the same tradition.

The Foreseeability of the Adverse Effects of a Nuclear Arms Race
In the nuclear weapons realm, we have seen an undue emphasis on the unforeseeability of the adverse effects of reliance on the technology. These efforts are sustained by an excessive tragicizing of this issue, which, in turn, impedes accountability and encourages hubris. In reality, "unforeseeable" is not an adequate descriptor of

three key consequences of nuclear weapons choices: the destructive effects of future weapons, the moral challenge they pose, and the drivers of the nuclear arms race.

While it is true that the climate effects of nuclear explosions were unforeseeable before the concept of "nuclear winter" was crafted and the instruments to assess its effects built, the intuition of the very large scale of those effects and the critique of the concept of "limited nuclear war" existed very early on.[32] As early as February 1940, over five years before the first nuclear explosion, the material vulnerability created by this technology was foreseen, if disputed. According to the Frisch-Peierls Memorandum, "It must be realized that no shelters are available that would be effective and that could be used on a large scale."[33]

In 1942, Manhattan Project scientists Edward Teller, Enrico Fermi, and Hans Bethe seriously considered the risk that the nuclear explosion might set the atmosphere on fire, but that did not stop them from carrying out the test. In his memo of April 25, 1945, U.S. secretary of war Henry Stimson explained to the president that the weapon that would soon be completed would be "the most terrible weapon ever known in human history [. . . and] modern civilization might be completely destroyed."[34] After the Trinity test on July 16, 1945, the first-ever test of an atomic bomb, physicist I. I. Rabi wrote about a threat to all forms of life. Scientists issued similar warnings against the destructiveness of H-bombs when they were developed in the early 1950s.[35] On March 16, 1958, President Eisenhower's special assistant for national security affairs, General Robert Cutler, had just participated in a war game and worried that "the effect of any such exchange is quite incalculable. . . . It is possible that life on the planet may be extinguished."[36] Subsequent decisions and requests to construct thousands of A-bombs and then H-bombs were not taken out of excusable ignorance for the material effects of nuclear arsenals. These warnings have been repeated throughout the nuclear age.[37]

Regarding the moral consequences of developing nuclear weapons, a minority of the committee of scientists put together by the U.S. government in 1949 to decide whether to authorize the development of a thermonuclear bomb explicitly opposed doing so on moral grounds:

> The fact that no limits exist to the destructiveness of this weapon makes its very existence and the knowledge of its construction a danger to humanity as a whole. It is necessarily an evil thing considered in any light.[38]

But this concern was present as early as April 25, 1945, in Henry Stimson's memo to President Truman, when he wrote: "The world in its present state of moral

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advancement compared with its technical development would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon."[39] As demonstrated by these myriad early concerns and predictions, the destructiveness of nuclear weapons cannot be characterized as having been either unforeseeable or unforeseen.

In 1967, the U.S. arsenal peaked at thirty-one thousand weapons.[40] This number should not be portrayed as an unfortunate and unforeseeable consequence tragically driven by the actions of the Soviets, the demands of allies, or the interaction of the two. On the contrary, the nuclear arms race, and the insecurity and enormous expenditures it created, was largely foreseeable: these outcomes were overdetermined by the assumptions made about nuclear weapons and international politics by the players setting the requirements of the nuclear policy they advocated. Indeed, if nuclear weapons are treated as fully controllable instruments, as solutions to problems of possibly excessive damage in a war-prone world in which adversaries' future intentions cannot be known for sure, and as a part of reality that is here to stay, then reducing the vulnerability of your own weapons and increasing the vulnerability of the adversary's weapons become the foremost concern. This becomes even more obvious if one assumes that it is wiser to plan for the worst: a diversification of the arsenal to maintain superiority over opponents at every level of the escalation ladder therefore appears as a net benefit and the only conceivable solution.

In the United States, Albert Wohlstetter was an early advocate of this policy approach and derived his support for it from this exact series of assumptions. He argued that even with the coming of nuclear weapons, "the basic aims of warfare had not changed. The destruction of an opponent's fighting power remained the ultimate objective of any attempt to engage a predatory enemy. The best form of deterrence, then, would be to upgrade . . . 'second strike' in favor of a war-winning strategy of counterforce." For Wohlstetter, "the best defense would be a spending offense: an investment in technologically sophisticated nuclear arms that possessed both offensive and defensive capacities."[41] Independently from the influence of Albert Wohlstetter as an individual strategist, this logic of damage limitation was indeed one of the drivers of U.S. nuclear weapons procurement.[42] The adverse effects of this logic in terms of incentives for arms buildup are aggravated if one underestimates the destructive capacity of one's own weapons by not taking into account the fire effects of nuclear explosions, as was the case with the U.S. Air Force for "more than half a century."[43]

Nuclear vulnerability and its moral challenges, as well as the dynamics of the nuclear arms race, were foreseeable and indeed often foreseen. This was not tragedy but active acceptance of foreseeable consequences.[44] The retrospective use of a tragedy discourse unduly reduces moral agency.

The Minimization of Moral Agency

Prominent thinkers have claimed that nuclear weapons simply make our moral categories obsolete. According to this position, the destructive capacity of these weapons, and the singular role they play in international politics, insulates them from the moral scrutiny they would otherwise attract. This tragic thinking serves to artificially narrow our moral agency, recasting the development of nuclear weapons as the outcome of moral fate, rather than moral choices. Most famously, Michael Walzer has argued that nuclear weapons "explode the theory of just war. They are the first of mankind's technological innovations that are simply not encompassable within the familiar moral world."[45] This claim of radical disconnect between moral agency and material possibility unduly reframes the moral *choice* to embrace particular weapons systems and reject necessary regulation into a tragic inevitability.[46]

Such a gesture is also visible in political rhetoric and bargaining. For instance, right after then U.S. president Barack Obama stated in Prague in 2009 that "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act," emphasizing "clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," he added: "I'm not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime."[47] In these words, Obama framed nuclear weapons policy change as externally driven and only derived from structural constraints. The possibility that the commitment he just articulated may be a meaningful driver for change was immediately made inconceivable by this additional comment. But Obama's action in this realm could have achieved much more, as President George H. W. Bush's unilateral nuclear initiatives in the early 1990s remind us. As a matter of fact, what appears as a structural constraint on the president's agency was largely the outcome of his own empowerment of veto players. For instance, Obama gave in to Senator Jon Kyl's request for a multidecade nuclear modernization program at odds with the promise made in Prague, with a hope that Kyl, then the Republican minority whip, would vote for the New START Treaty and bring with him seven Republican senators needed for the treaty to pass.

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Obama did so even after Vice President Biden called Senator Kyl and heard him say that he could not be persuaded to vote for the New START Treaty, regardless of concessions. The treaty passed without Kyl's support. But as a result of Obama's agreement with the senator, it came with a nuclear modernization budget that was $10 billion over the final budget of his predecessor, President George W. Bush, and paved the way for the next round of the nuclear arms race.[48] This was neither inevitable nor tragic. It was a decision made deliberately by an informed and empowered president who had at his disposal numerous other options, some of which would likely have led to morally preferable outcomes.[49]

How the Tragedy Discourse Enabled Hubris

As noted earlier, the nuclear arms race led to the production of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, most of which were subsequently dismantled. It is important to keep in mind that this number wildly exceeds any conceivable military requirement and was therefore characterized as "absolutely absurd" by Manhattan Project scientist Hans Bethe.[50] In a top-secret note to President Johnson drafted on December 3, 1964, the U.S. secretary of defense estimated that four hundred strategic nuclear weapons would have been enough for what he called "assured destruction" of the Soviet Union.[51] And yet, the thousands upon thousands of nuclear weapons produced were viewed by many, in Mearsheimer's words, as "not misguided" but as an inevitable outcome of the "tragedy of great power politics."[52] This view provides scholarly validation to what Soviet physicist Andreï Sakharov articulated during his visit to Washington in 1988, reflecting on his decisive work on Soviet thermonuclear weapons: "I think what we were doing at the time was a great tragedy. It was a tragedy that reflected the tragic state of the world that made it *necessary*, in order to maintain peace, to do such terrible things."[53] If one accepts this framing, the decision-makers who ordered the Cold War arms race and the scientists who made it possible become unaccountable for their contribution to the resulting harm, and those who have to decide whether or not to contribute to the next arms race will make this choice knowing that there is no accountability for it. Overall, the discourse of tragedy mischaracterizes the foreseeability of the destructive effects of nuclear weapons, the moral challenge they pose, and the drivers of the nuclear arms race; it also underestimates the moral agency of policymakers as well as the scientists who designed the weapons and, as a result, enables the *hubris* it was intended to caution against.

U.S. Drone Program

Armed drones are not the first technology to expand the physical distance in war between those who kill and those who die, nor the first to facilitate zero-casualty warfare.[54] They are, however, distinct in the degree to which they have intensified both trends in the context of remote warfare. More than a weapon, armed drones have long been conceived of by the United States as an *antidote*: a clean and effective way to bypass the political, military, and ethical challenges generated by more intensive, on-the-ground operations.[55]

The reality, of course, has proven very different. Armed drones, and the remote military operations in which they feature prominently, have received extensive criticism, on both moral and prudential grounds. American drone strikes have regularly been criticized for failing to uphold necessary standards of civilian protection.[56] Questions have also been raised about the effectiveness of drone-centric remote war; specifically, the failure to translate tactical gains into political ones.[57] An overreliance on this weaponry by American policymakers was a key feature of what came to be termed the "forever wars."

It is possible, and even tempting, to view these failures in tragic terms. American policymakers, unable to resist the "seductive"[58] draw of these "unusually usable weapons,"[59] enacted harmful policies that ran counter to their more noble intentions.[60] Central to this unfolding dilemma was Obama himself, a "Hamlet-like"[61] figure who "anguish[ed]"[62] over the use and potential overuse of drone strikes. This tragic casting, we argue, obscures more than it illuminates.

The Foreseeability of Drone Harm

Armed drones are not a neutral technology. They possess a political quality that shapes how American policymakers understand and use them.[63] Whatever the force of these techno-logics, however, American drone violence has never been entirely, or even primarily, "tragic." The U.S. drone program was a policy choice, favored over alternatives, and defined by a willful and consistent failure to meet political, legal, and moral responsibilities.[64] The injustices it produced, particularly to civilians, were foreseeable and foreseen, and addressed too slowly and inadequately.

In 2013, then-president Obama responded to long-standing criticism of armed drone use, signing a Presidential Policy Guidance that imposed more restrictive standards for use. From this point on, strikes conducted outside active battlefields

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were to be authorized only if the capture of the suspect was not feasible and there was a "near certainty" that the individual was a lawful target and that noncombatants would not be harmed during the attack.[65] Speaking in 2020 on his decision to impose these changes, Obama said the following:

> The problem with the drone program was not that it caused an inordinate amount of civilian casualties . . . the problem is that it starts giving you the illusion that it is not war . . . and what I discovered . . . the machinery of it started becoming too easy, and I had to actually impose internally a substantial set of reforms in the process to step back and remind everyone involved this isn't target practice.[66]

This reference to "discovery" echoes a theme common within the tragedy discourse—the difficulty of anticipating and controlling the likely consequences of a particular course of action.[67] Understood as tragedy, the U.S. drone program highlights the inescapable limits of foresight; the program, originally conceived in far narrower terms, escaped the control of the presidency.[68] The result was too many drone strikes and too few safeguards.

This tragic discourse, favored by Obama, was made more convincing by the frequent use, by observers and critics, of the term "slippery slope" to describe the expansion of the program.[69] A slippery slope framing emphasized the structural *process* rather than the individual *choices* of the drone program. Initially justified as a necessary measure against "high-level" enemies,[70] the program expanded, with policymakers "devoting tremendous resources to kill off a never-ending stream of nobodies."[71] In much of the analysis of this period, and the decline in *ad bellum* and *in bello* standards that characterized it, emphasis was given to the inertial force of the technology itself:

> Through altering our risk calculations and goals, drones go beyond being a mere tool, but rather have distinct political qualities that shape how we act. . . . Drone technology might have brought the United States the capability of continuously monitoring and striking targets remotely, but it also led the United States to lose sight of its goals and drift into a growing number of conflicts worldwide.[72]

This tragic discourse is misleading, obscuring the foreseeability of the problems created by U.S. drone strikes. The civilian cost of these strikes was evident from the genesis of the program; and it was especially clear by the Obama presidency. Three days after his inauguration, Obama authorized two drone strikes in Waziristan that missed their high-value targets, killing fourteen people, including civilians.[73] Obama was reportedly angry at the outcome, but nevertheless opted to

enhance the scope of the program.[74] The subsequent harms borne by civilians were neither unforeseeable nor unforeseen.[75] Just as predictable were the negative consequences of Obama's decision to embrace a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that classed all military-age males killed in a strike as combatants unless explicit intelligence posthumously proved them to be civilian.[76] Depicting these injustices as the outcome of a slippery slope obscures the predictable and entirely nontragic deficiencies of the program.

These problems endure today. The much publicized Kabul drone strike, launched during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2022, showcased many of the foreseeable moral deficiencies that have characterized this program from the beginning. The botched strike, labeled a "tragic mistake" by the Pentagon,[77] killed ten civilians, including three children, an outcome U.S. officials initially sought to conceal through misleading statements. The 2022 plan announced by the Pentagon in response to these deaths imposed a number of new measures to mitigate confirmation bias and the misidentification of targets.[78] These measures, aimed at limiting future civilian deaths in armed conflict, were praised by human rights organizations for their intended robustness.[79] This praise, however, should not distract from the enduring failure of U.S. policy in this area. The challenges addressed in the 2022 Pentagon plan were evident from the first drone killing in Afghanistan twenty-two years earlier—itself a botched strike. The risk of excessive civilian harm from U.S. drones was foreseeable enough for long enough to undermine appeals to "tragedy."

American policymakers have a moral responsibility to work to identify the foreseeable implications of their favored drone policy and to address the challenges that are foreseen, particularly those relating to civilian injury and death. They too often fail to do this. The discourse of tragedy obscures this failure, transforming avoidable errors of policy into regrettable inevitabilities of war.

The Minimization of Moral Agency

Alongside the issue of foreseeability, the tragedy discourse wrongly minimizes the role of agency in the use and misuse of armed drones. As already noted, drone technology, and the courses of action it enables, guided and incentivized U.S. policy, making some conduct more thinkable and other conduct less so. It did not, however, *compel* action. The failure to recognize this has created an accountability vacuum in which policymakers evade the degree of moral responsibility they should rightly assume.

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It is important to clarify that whatever the broader incentives and inertial forces structuring the U.S. drone program, there has arguably never been a mode of warfare in American history with as much direct oversight by the president. The process by which the Obama administration determined drone targets has been well documented:

> [It was] the strangest of bureaucratic rituals: Every week or so, more than 100 members of the government's sprawling national security apparatus [would] gather, by secure video teleconference, to pore over terrorist suspects' biographies and recommend to the president who should be the next to die.[80]

In his reflections on this same process, however, Obama offered a significantly less empowered account of his role in such violence:

> They were dangerous, these young men, often deliberately and casually cruel. Still, in the aggregate, at least, I wanted somehow to save them—send them to school, give them a trade, drain them of the hate that had been filling their heads. And yet the world they were a part of, *and the machinery I commanded*, more often had me killing them instead.[81]

Obama presents himself here as an object of sympathy. It is his suffering at having to kill that is the focus, not the suffering of those subjected, sometimes wrongly, to drone violence. Much of the media coverage of the U.S. drone program had a similar emphasis. Obama, it was claimed, "never seemed entirely comfortable" with drone signature strikes: "he would squirm."[82] He "wrestled with his growing reliance on drones,"[83] but nevertheless assumed the burden, reserving for himself "the final moral calculation."[84] This was Obama as a tragic actor, empowered but constrained; steadfast but anguished. It is a morally inadequate depiction, downplaying the degree of freedom retained by Obama in relation to drone policy. As Conor Friedersdorf writes:

> Obama *chose* to allow the CIA, a secretive entity with a long history of unjust killings, to carry out strikes, he *chose* to keep the very fact of drone killings classified, deliberately invoking the state-secrets privilege in a way guaranteed to stymie oversight, public debate, and legal accountability, and he *chose* to permit killings outside the greater Afghanistan warzone, in countries with which the U.S. was not at war. Those choices made more unjust killings predictable and inevitable.[85]

The weight of these choices, as well as those made by subsequent American presidents, can be appreciated by observing the shifting effects of drone policy.[86]

Obama's 2013 introduction of more restrictive drone rules, while far from perfect, *did* lower the risks of civilian harm.[87] The decision by Trump to relax these same standards did the inverse. Biden, who has vowed to "maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan from over the horizon,"[88] has reversed some but not all of Trump's changes. He has returned to the Obama-era policy of limiting drone strikes to targets that pose a "continuing imminent threat to U.S. persons" and who cannot be feasibly captured, and also reinstated the "near certainty" standard that the target is present and civilians will not be harmed.[89] Like Trump, however, Biden has given commanders in the field greater license to conduct strikes in places where they "are likely to be more routine."[90] The policies of Obama, Trump, and Biden have differed in important ways, but what binds all three is the *choice* to deploy drones with a frequency and in a manner that is in tension with the moral and legal standards of war. This is not a story of tragedy; it is one of political responsibility and irresponsibility.

The Hubris of Drone "Inevitability"

One problematic feature of the tragedy discourse is its tendency to exaggerate the prevalence of moral dilemmas. Much of the analysis of the U.S. drone program, even the very critical, has indulged in this. The "proliferation of shadow wars," of which drones were a feature, "came as an unintended result of . . . [Obama's] noble" intention "to avoid costly wars like Iraq," writes Michael Boyle.[91] The drone program is framed here as problematic, but less so than the recklessness of Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld's global-war-on-terror approach. U.S. drone strikes have likewise benefited from comparison to potentially less precise tools of violence on the battlefield itself.[92] While neither comparison is incorrect, an emphasis on how things could have been worse too often fails to sufficiently detail that things could also have been better. From the outset of the U.S. drone program, superior policy choices were available: a stricter criterion for determining who was liable to lethal harm; a more transparent and restrictive set of standards regarding collateral civilian deaths;[93] and a greater willingness to rule out strikes altogether in instances where it was prudential and moral to do so. To ignore this availability, in favor of an artificial determination of inevitability, enables and excuses the very hubris that tragic recognition is meant to caution against.

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan now complete, we have seen a resurgence of tragedy-infused analysis of armed drone strikes. "Like a black hole with its own gravitational pull," the *New York Times* reported,

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"Afghanistan could draw the C.I.A back into a complex counterterrorism mission for years to come."[94] Absent from this commentary is the necessary recognition that the United States, and Biden himself, could and should have resisted this gravitational pull. Reframing anticipated, or at the very least anticipatable, injustices as unforeseeable harms morally shields policymakers from the accountability that their conduct in relation to armed drones should warrant.

Conclusion

Drawing on examples from the nuclear arms race and the U.S. drone program, we have argued that too much of the contemporary political discourse over military technology and violence has been tragicized. The overuse and, in some cases, misapplication of "tragedy" has produced a tragedy trap, that is, the opposite of what reflections on the concept are intended to do. First, in both the nuclear weapons and drone program cases, a tragic framing emphasizing the limits of human agency and foresight has obscured the foreseeability of the adverse effects of developing and expanding these weapons systems, legitimized both technologies and the conduct of those empowered to use them, and problematically shifted the terms of debate from accountability to inevitability. Informed policies, favored over alternatives, have been recast as tragic blunders and what was foreseen but neglected or negligently unforeseen has been transformed into the unforeseeable. Second, and as a result, instead of preserving a space for moral agency in the face of fate, tragic framing has incentivized and excused a *surrender* of moral agency in the face of technological and material pressures. Third, instead of guarding against hubris, this framing has enabled and shielded from judgement those who indulge in it. As a result, we have seen an atrophy of the accountability that should be borne by those who can, but fail to, pursue better outcomes in relation to the problems of nuclear and drone violence.

These findings open two avenues for avoiding the (re)production of unaccountability. First, we must recognize that tragic discourse is not simply descriptive, but also performative. When overapplied or wrongly applied, this discourse impedes rather than facilitates allocations of accountability. Second, we must remain alert to the *foreseeability* of harm in international politics, rather than automatically and wrongly assuming conditions of tragic unforeseeability.

While the focus of this article has been on two technologies of war, the insights of tragicization are readily applicable to a range of international policy issues.

Climate change; refugee crises; the growing suffocation of human creativity via artificial intelligence—these challenges are significant but not intractable. Political responsibility and moral accountability are needed, not a fatalistic shrug at the tragic state of things. Recognition of this need is especially important going forward. The world is tragic enough without exaggerating the severity and insolubility of the challenges before us. And the future is too important to be relinquished to those who can but fail to do better.

NOTES

[1] Nuclear weapons and armed drones are only two examples of a broader problem in which tragic discourses are used to perpetuate, and give cover to, the production of unaccountability for modern means of violence and war.

[2] Our analysis of armed drones is restricted to the U.S. drone program and that of nuclear weapons policy is primarily focused on the U.S. case.

[3] Derek W. M. Barker and David W. McIvor, "Tragedy and Politics," in Michael T. Gibbons, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 1.

[4] Richard Ned Lebow, *Ethics and International Relations: A Tragic Perspective* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Richard Ned Lebow, *Tragic Vision of International Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Toni Erskine and Ned Lebow, "Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations," in Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Tragedy and International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Neil C. Renic, "Tragic Reflection, Political Wisdom and the Future of Algorithmic War," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78 no. 2 (2024), pp. 247–56. See Alister Wedderburn, "Tragedy, Genealogy and Theories of International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2018), pp. 177–97 for a critical overview.

[5] Lebow, *Tragic Vision of International Politics*, p. 3.

[6] Erskine and Lebow, "Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations," p. 9.

[7] Chris Brown, "Tragedy, 'Tragic Choices' and Contemporary International Political Theory," *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007), pp. 5–13, at p. 11.

[8] Wedderburn, "Tragedy, Genealogy and Theories of International Relations," p. 180.

[9] Tragedy, argues Hidemi Suganami, is a "pedagogical emplotment" (2008: p. 349), one way (among others) of representing the past and present. Hidemi Suganami, "Narrative explanations and international relations: Back to basics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008), pp. 327–356, at p. 349.

[10] Nicholas Rengger, "Tragedy or Scepticism? Defending the Anti-Pelagian Mind in World Politics," *International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2005), pp. 321–28, at p. 326.

[11] Joshua Billings convincingly shows how the modern idea of tragedy as reflecting an *essential* condition of existence was produced by late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century German idealists interested in applying Greek tragedy to questions of agency, history, and theology. See Joshua Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[12] Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 11.

[13] C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (New York: Literary Licensing LLC, 2011), pp. 39–40.

[14] Benoît Pelopidas and Sanne C. J. Verschuren, "Writing IR after COVID-19. Reassessing Political Possibilities, Good Faith, and Policy-Relevant Scholarship on Climate Change Mitigation and Nuclear Disarmament," *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2023), pp. 1–12.

[15] Erskine and Lebow, "Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations," p. 3. In some cases, protagonists move in a direction they think will result in success but, in fact, leads to failure. In others, there exists, unbeknownst to the protagonist, *no* successful path and the effort itself is the folly. Many tragedies stress the *insolubility* of challenges. According to Steiner: "Where the causes of disaster are temporary, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy." George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 8.

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16 Erskine and Lebow, "Learning from Tragedy and Refocusing International Relations," in Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Tragedy and International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 185.

17 For analysis on the distinction between regret and remorse, and the role of tragedy in distorting our understanding of both, see Jamie M. Johnson, Victoria M. Basham, and Owen D. Thomas, "Ordering Disorder: The Making of World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 4 (October 2022), pp. 607–25, at p. 613.

18 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 8–9.

19 Ibid., p. 31.

20 Blair Hoxby, *What Was Tragedy? Theory and the Early Modern Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 5.

21 Erskine and Lebow, "Learning from Tragedy and Refocusing International Relations," p. 202.

22 Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, new ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 13.

23 Michael Boyle, *The Drone Age: How Technology Will Change War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Neil C. Renic, *Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and the Warrior Ethos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2006).

24 Hoxby, *What Was Tragedy?*, p. 4.

25 This section builds on Zia Mian and Benoît Pelopidas, "Producing Collapse: Nuclear Weapons as Preparations to End Civilization," in Miguel A. Centeno, Peter W. Callahan, Paul A. Larcey, and Thayer S. Patterson, eds., *How Worlds Collapse*: *What History, Systems, and Complexity Can Teach Us about Our Modern World and Fragile Future* (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 315–32.

26 See also the biographies by Sherwin and Bird (Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)) and Charles Thorpe, *Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) as well as the perceptive review essay by Elizabeth Borgwardt, "Site-Specific: The Fractured Humanity of J. Robert Oppenheimer," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 3 (2008), pp. 547–71.

27 See, inter alia, Sean L. Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb against Japan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

28 Joseph Rotblat, "Leaving the Bomb Project," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 41, no. 7 (August 1985), pp. 16–19.

29 Andrew Brown, *Keeper of the Nuclear Conscience: The Life and Work of Joseph Rotblat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

30 See, inter alia, Bradley A. Thayer, "Nuclear Weapons as a Faustian Bargain," *Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1995), pp. 149–63.

31 "This situation, which no one consciously designed or intended, is genuinely tragic. Great powers that have no reason to fight each other—that are merely concerned with their own survival—nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system." John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 3, 231. Similarly, Keir Lieber and Daryl Press treat arms racing as a logical consequence of how the world works. See Keir Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*: *Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020), p. 66 and conclusion.

32 Among works advocating for nuclear deterrence, see Bernard Brodie, "More about Limited Nuclear War," *World Politics* 10, no. 1 (October 1957), pp. 112–22; among criticism of it, such as that by Günther Anders, Bertrand Russell, and John Herz, see Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, *Nuclear Realism: Global Political Thought during the Thermonuclear Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 51–52.

33 Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls, "Memorandum on the Properties of a Radioactive Superbomb," March 1940; repr. in Lorna Arnold, "The History of Nuclear Weapons: The Frisch-Peierls Memorandum on the Possible Construction of Atomic Bombs of February 1940," *Cold War History* 3 (April 2003), pp. 111–26, at p. 120.

34 Henry Stimson, "Memorandum Discussed with the President, April 25, 1945," nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28505-document-6b-memorandum-discussed-president-april-25-1945, pp. 1–2.

35 See, for instance, Enrico Fermi and Isidor I. Rabi, "Statement Appended to the Report of the General Advisory Committee: An Opinion on the Development of the 'Super,'" October 30, 1949; repr. in York, *The Advisors: Oppenheimer, Teller, and the Superbomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 160–61.

36 Robert Cutler, quoted in Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2020), p. 136.

37 Of course, the destructive capacity of nuclear weapons has varied enormously over time, but this does not invalidate the argument given that the United States, the Soviet Union, and NATO, as well as countries with smaller nuclear arsenals, have had plans to use such weapons and communicated a readiness to cause unprecedented harm, at least from the 1950s, regardless of which weapons were used to do so. See Mian and Pelopidas, "Producing Collapse"; on French and joint French-U.K. and U.S. plans and capabilities in the early years, see Benoît Pelopidas and Sébastien Philippe, "Unfit for Purpose: Reassessing the Development and Deployment of French Nuclear Weapons (1956–1974)," *Cold War History* 21, no. 3 (2021), pp. 243–60; on the U.K., see Lawrence Freedman, "British Nuclear Targeting," *Defense Analysis* 1, no. 2 (1985), pp. 81–99; on NATO, see Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave McMillan, 1997), pp. 32–52.

38 Fermi and Rabi, "Statement Appended to the Report of the General Advisory Committee: An Opinion on the Development of the 'Super,'" October 30, 1949; repr. in York, *The Advisors*, pp. 160–61.

39 Henry Stimson, "Memorandum Discussed with the President, April 25, 1945," nsarchive.gwu. edu/document/28505-document-6b-memorandum-discussed-president-april-25-1945.

40 Lynn Eden, "The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal and Zero: Sizing and Planning for Use—Past, Present and Future," in Catherine McArdle Kelleher and Judith V. Reppy, eds., *Getting to Zero: The Path to Nuclear Disarmament* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 69–89.

41 Albert Wohlstetter, quoted in Ron Robin, *The Cold World They Made: The Strategic Legacy of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 85–86.

42 Eden, "The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal and Zero"; Daniel Ellsberg, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 120–23, 341, 344–45, 349; and Patrick M. Morgan, "The Practice of Deterrence," in Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds., *International Practices* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 139–73, at p. 155.

43 Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, & Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 1.

44 The effects of nuclear explosions on the climate, such as nuclear winter, or the effects of nuclear weapons policies on democracies (Thomas Fraise, *Restricted Democracies: Nuclear Weapons Programs, Secrecy, and Democracy in the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden (1939–1974)*, PhD dissertation in political science, Sciences Po, Paris, 2023 theses.hal.science/tel-04419040v1/file/2023IEPP0026_Fraise_Thomas.pdf) were not foreseen because the questions had not been asked. These are examples of the incuriosity evoked in the introduction.

45 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 280. Earlier examples would include Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers. Arendt's most eloquent formulation of this point is in her posthumous volume, *The Promise of Politics*, in which she writes: "There is in fact hardly a single political category or a single political concept that has been passed down to us that, when measured against the possibility of putting an end both to humankind and to all organic life, does not prove to be theoretically obsolete and practically inapplicable, precisely because in a certain sense what is now at issue for the first time in foreign policy is life itself, the survival of humankind." Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 145. One could also cite Arendt's earlier essay "Europe and the Atom Bomb," where she writes: "With the appearance of atomic weapons . . . the ancient appeal to courage has for all practical purposes become meaningless, and, with it, the whole political and moral vocabulary in which we are accustomed to discuss these matters. . . . No human courage would be conceivable if the condition of individual life were the same as that of the species." Hannah Arendt, "Europe and the Atom Bomb," *Commonwealth* 60, no. 24 (September 17, 1954), pp. 578–80. Along similar lines, Jaspers writes in *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*: "The atom bomb is today the greatest of all menaces to the future of mankind. . . . The solution . . . calls for forces in man to well up from such depths as to transform him in his moral, rational, political aspects—a transformation so extensive that it would become the turning point of history." Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 4. Many thanks to Dan Zimmer for pointing me to those quotes.

46 See Sharon K. Weiner, "The Ethics of Choosing Deterrence," *Ethics & International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2023), pp. 29–38 for a critique.

47 The full text of this speech is available at Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered" (Hradcany Square, Prague, April 5, 2009), obamawhitehouse. archives. gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered.

48 Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), pp. 233–36.

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49 Kjølv Egeland identified the figure of the "tragic disarmer" who claims to pursue disarmament but whose progress is always hampered by external obstacles deemed unexpected. However, they have been consistently similar over the last seven decades and are therefore perfectly foreseeable. See Kjølv Egeland, "Nuclear Weapons and Adversarial Politics: Bursting the Abolitionist 'Consensus,'" *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 4, no. 1 (2021), pp. 107–15.

50 Hans Bethe, quoted in Eden, *Whole World on Fire*, p. 2. In his quote, Bethe is commenting on "twenty thousand, thirty thousand weapons."

51 Robert S. McNamara, "'Intolerable Punishment to Any Industrialized Nation' Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson, 'Recommended FY 1966–1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense,'" December 3, 1964, nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/25224-document-23-intolerable-punishment-any-industrialized-nation-memorandum-secretary. The figure of four hundred weapons appears on page 11.

52 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 231.

53 Andreï Sakharov, quoted in Silvan S. Schweber, *In the Shadow of the Bomb: Oppenheimer, Bethe and the Moral Responsibility of the Scientists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 169. Italics added.

54 Renic, *Asymmetric Killing*, pp. 151–52. To be clear, "zero-casualty warfare" refers specifically to the combat casualties of one side.

55 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University" (National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C, May 23, 2013), obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university. In this speech, Obama recognized the administration's tendency to view drone strikes as a "cure-all for terrorism."

56 "US Military Shows Appalling Disregard for Civilians Killed in Somalia Air Strike," Amnesty International, October 1, 2019, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/us-military-shows-appalling-disregard-for-civilians-killed-in-somalia-air-strike/#:~:text=US%20military%20shows%20appalling%20disregard%20for%20civilians%20killed%20in%20Somalia%20air%20strike,-New%20evidence%20that&text=An%20investigation%20by%20Amnesty%20International,links%20to%20the%20armed%20group; Dave Philipps, Eric Schmitt, and Mark Mazzetti, "Civilian Deaths Mounted as Secret Unit Pounded ISIS," *New York Times*, updated December 27, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/civilian-deaths-war-isis.html; Baraa Shiba and Camilla Molyneux, "The Human Cost of Remote Warfare in Yemen," in Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson, and Megan Karlshøj-Pedersen, eds., *Remote Warfare: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Bristol, U.K.: E-International Relations, 2021), pp. 110–31; and The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Drone Wars: The Full Data," January 1, 2017, www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-01/drone-wars-the-full-data/.

57 Wali Aslam, "A Critical Evaluation of American Drone Strikes in Pakistan: Legality, Legitimacy and Prudence," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 3 (December 2011), pp. 313–29, at p. 324; Sinan Hatahet, "The Limitations and Consequences of Remote Warfare in Syria," in McKay, Watson, and Karlshøj-Pedersen, *Remote Warfare*, pp. 173–86; and Abigail Watson and Alasdair McKay, "Remote Warfare: A Critical Introduction," in McKay, Watson, and Karlshøj-Pedersen, *Remote Warfare*, pp. 7–33, at p. 16.

58 Daniel Klaidman, *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency* (Boston: Marina Books, 2013), p. 10.

59 David Cole, "The Drone Presidency," *New York Review of Books*, August 18, 2016, www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/the-drone-presidency/.

60 There is, of course, some truth to this framing. The technical character of drones did play a role in shaping how the technology was morally conceived and practically utilized. See John Williams, "Distant Intimacy: Space, Drones, and Just War," *Ethics & International Affairs* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 93–110; and Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

61 Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, p. 15.

62 Jane Mayer, "Obama's Challenge to an Endless War," *New Yorker*, May 23, 2013, www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/obamas-challenge-to-an-endless-war.

63 Boyle, *Drone Age*; and Renic, *Asymmetric Killings*.

64 Matthew Talbert and Jessica Wolfendale, "Drone Warfare, Civilian Deaths, and the Narrative of Honest Mistakes," in Carola Lingaas and Habashi Nobuo, eds., *Honest Errors? Combat Decision-Making 75 Years after the* Hostage Case (Hague: T.M.C. Asser, 2013), pp. 261–87.

65 "Presidential Policy Guidance: Procedures for Approving Direct Action against Terrorist Targets Located Outside the United States and Areas of Active Hostilities," *International Legal Materials* 56, no. 6 (December 2017), pp. 1209–25, at p. 1209, www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-legal-materials/article/presidential-policy-guidance-procedures-for-approving-direct-action-against-terrorist-

targets-located-outside-the-united-states-and-areas-of-active-hostilities/B8C3EF3F3B8FFE263989705E58D
361D2.

66 x.com/RikeFranke/status/1334433044208508928.

67 See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (London: Latimer House Limited, 1947). Morgenthau wrote that in the social world, it was impossible "to foresee with any degree of certainty which effects will be brought about by this particular cause, nor is it possible to state in retrospect with any degree of certainty what particular cause has produced this effect" p. 122.

68 Emerson, cited in Chris Woods, *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars* (London: Hurst, 2015), p. 160.

69 Rachel Stohl, "Rachel Stohl on KPFK, Background Briefing discussing Stimson Task Force on U.S. Drone Policy," July 8, 2014, www.stimson.org/2014/rachel-stohl-kpfk-background-briefing-discussing-stimson-task-force-us-drone-policy-0/.

70 Renic, *Asymmetric Killing*, pp. 175–76.

71 Ryan Devereaux, "Manhunting in the Hindu Kush: Leaked Documents Detailing a Multi-Year U.S. Military Campaign in Afghanistan Reveal the Strategic Limits and Startling Human Costs of Drone Warfare," *Intercept*, October 15, 2015, theintercept.com/drone-papers/manhunting-in-the-hindu-kush/. To give one example, a 2010 Reuters investigation found that of the five hundred individuals killed by American drone strikes in Pakistan from 2008, low-level al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters were targeted at a rate 12 times greater than mid- to high-level fighters. See Adam Entous, "Special Report: How the White House Learned to Love the Drone," Reuters, May 18, 2010, www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-drones-idUSTRE64H5SL20100518.

72 Boyle, *Drone Age*, pp. 22, 77.

73 Spencer Ackerman, "Victim of Obama's First Drone Strike: 'I Am a Living Example of What Drones Are,'" *Guardian*, January 23, 2016; and Brian Glynn Williams, *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on al Qaeda* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), pp. 89–91.

74 Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, p. 40. By the end of 2009, the CIA had launched over one hundred drone strikes in Pakistan. Conor Friedersdorf, "Obama's Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings," *Atlantic*, December 23, 2016, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/.

75 See Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "Pakistan Drone War Takes Toll on Militants—and Civilians," CNN, October 28, 2009, edition.cnn.com/2009/OPINION/10/29/bergen.drone.war/; Declan Walsh, "Obama's Enthusiasm for Drone Strikes Takes Heavy Toll on Pakistan's Tribesmen," *Guardian*, October 7, 2010, www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/07/pakistan-drone-missile-obama-increased; and Mary Ellen O'Connell, "Unlawful Killing with Combat Drones: A Case Study of Pakistan, 2004–2009" (University of Notre Dame Law School Paper 75, 2012), scholarship.law.nd.edu/book_chapters/75.

76 Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will," *New York Times*, May 29, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html.

77 Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., quoted in Azmat Khan, "Military Investigation Reveals How the U.S. Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul," *New York Times*, January 6, 2023, www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html.

78 Ibid.

79 "US: Significant Plan by Pentagon to Protect Civilians: New Effort Needs Focused Attention from US Military to Reduce Deaths," Human Rights Watch, August 26, 2022, www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/26/us-significant-plan-pentagon-protect-civilians.

80 Becker and Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will."

81 Ulrike Franke (@RikeFranke), "Obama on #drone warfare 'The problem is that it starts giving you the illusion that it is not war . . .,'" Stephen Colbert interview of Barack Obama, video posted on X (formerly Twitter), 1:48, December 3, 2020 (our emphasis), twitter.com/RikeFranke/status/1334433044208508928.

82 Klaidman, *Kill or Capture*, p. 42.

83 Christi Parsons and W. J. Hennigan, "President Obama, Who Hoped to Sow Peace, Instead Led the Nation in War," *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2017, www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-pol-obama-at-war/.

84 Becker and Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will."

85 Friedersdorf, "Obama's Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings" (emphasis in original).

86 As Neta Crawford notes, "The argument that 'civcas' [civilian casualties] were inevitable and unforesee-able is belied by the fact that when U.S. rules of engagement or procedures changed, the incidence of civilian killing waxed and waned." Neta Crawford, *Accountability for Killing: Moral Responsibility for Collateral Damage in America's Post-9/11 Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 157.

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Abstract: The discourse of tragedy has significant value in a military context, reminding us of the temptations of hubris, the prevalence of moral dilemmas, and the inescapable limits of foresight. Today, however, this discourse is drawn upon too heavily. Within the tragicized politics of nuclear and drone violence, foreseeable and solvable problems are reconceptualized as intractable dilemmas, and morally accountable agents are reframed as powerless observers. The tragedy discourse, when wrongly applied by policymakers and the media, indulges the very hubris the tragic recognition is intended to caution against. This article clarifies the limits of "tragedy" in the context of military violence and argues for a renewed focus on political responsibility.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, armed drones, tragedy, accountability, war, armed conflict