

**Between Nihilism and Utopianism:
Military Intervention, the Tragic and Rescuing the Human**

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Many men have imagined republics and principalities that never really existed at all. Yet the way men live is so far removed from the way they ought to live that anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursues his downfall rather than his preservation; for a man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin, since there are so many men who are not good. Hence it is necessary that a prince who is interested in survival learn to be other than good, making use of this capacity or refraining from it according to the need.

Niccolo Machiavelli¹

Introduction: What Matters More?

Humanitarian intervention. Should we undertake it? Should the military be engaged for humanitarian purposes? As an entry into the topic allow me to pose a question. I know it is an extreme question and that it can be emotionally manipulative; although that is not my intention. I raise the question because sometimes extremities can bring clarity – perhaps not unlike military training that tests you to your core and clarifies who you are and the stuff of which you are made.

So, the question is, What matters most? Let me rephrase it. What matters more? More than preventing or stopping genocide?

In the passage quoted above, Machiavelli, that Renaissance thinker often placed near the fount of the modern realist tradition of politics, offers us one answer: preservation, survival. If you wish to survive, he says, in this world and not some imaginary republic of the virtuous, then you must be prepared to abandon the good when the need arises. Assuming that intervening to prevent the suffering and slaughter of others is a good, it is a good that should be set aside when upholding it endangers our preservation or survival.

I must admit that it always feel rather odd discussing realism with soldiers. After all, when you put on that uniform you made a very public statement that you think there are more important things than survival, that there are things for which it is worth dying and for which it is worth those you care about and even love dying. In other words, the uniform is a reminder that there is such a thing as a good death, or what military traditions often call an honorable death. Conversely, and perhaps less explicitly but no less important, the uniform suggests there is likewise such a thing as a dishonorable life, that is, a life that refuses to give the last full measure of devotion for the good and instead chooses self-preservation or survival over the good.

To be fair to the modern realist tradition, it is not always as nakedly amoral as Machiavelli suggests. Rather, modern realism represents a consequentialist moral vision that, at least when it comes to international affairs and the interactions of states, is very clear about what matters most, what the end is that should guide one's actions and that justifies intervention or non-intervention.

In what follows, I want us to think about what matters most, what is most important when contemplating military humanitarian intervention. Rather than argue for or against humanitarian intervention I am going to argue for a particular way of approaching the question, of framing the issue. I am going to encourage us to reflect on intervention in terms of the best that we claim to be

about, in terms of our moral identity, the identity represented in what that uniform promises to uphold and defend.

Now, military ethics education has been criticized as frequently little more than sloganeering and cheerleading, and I want to avoid that.² So I am going to forego beginning with lofty ideals that sound like they sprang from Machiavelli's imaginary republic of the virtuous and instead consider what America has said and done over the last hundred years or so when faced with the extreme, with genocide,³ drawing largely from Samantha Power's highly regarded and justly acclaimed work, "*A Problem From Hell*" *America and the Age of Genocide*.

This is a worthwhile endeavor, again, not for the sake of scoring easy and unhelpful emotional points, (Indeed, I deliberately avoid emotional triggers) but for facing squarely and honestly the moral challenges presented by humanitarian intervention.

After considering the history, I will return to the question of realism and of ideals, offering an account of the "American experiment" that asserts the primacy of the moral / the good in politics against nihilism (which is what realism finally amounts to) while avoiding the pitfall of utopian idealism (that offspring of Machiavelli's imaginary republic). This amounts to a reclaiming of tragedy, which is crucial both to honoring the good in this world where indeed, as Machiavelli says, so many are not good and to rescuing the human.

1. Never Again, and Again, and Again ...

We are all familiar with the slogan "Never Again" that is associated with remembrance of the Holocaust during. Unfortunately, if one considers the decades since the Holocaust, one could easily conclude, with David Reiff, that "never again" means little more than "never again will Germans kill Jews in the 1940s."⁴ This is the case because, as Samantha Power demonstrates, there are a lot of things that matter more than the prevention and halting of genocide. Allow me to name a few of them.

1. National Sovereignty

Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, national sovereignty has been a central principle of international relations. Time and again, it has been invoked as a rationale for not intervening in genocidal situations. As one US diplomat said, arguing against holding Turkish leadership responsible for the slaughter of the Armenians in 1915, the essence of sovereignty is the absence of responsibility.⁵ National sovereignty absolves people on both sides of borders of responsibility for addressing genocide.

2. Geopolitical Influence and Foreign Relations

Another theme that one hears repeatedly as a reason for not acting against genocide is the fear of jeopardizing particular foreign relations or undercutting one's influence upon the regime committing the atrocities. Thus, the US administration, seeking stronger ties with Pakistan and hostile to India, said nothing when Pakistani forces kill several million Bengalis in 1971. Or not wishing to jeopardize newly warming relations with China, the US resists denouncing the Khmer Rouge and, for the same reason, after the KR has been deposed and unmasked as the murderous regime that it is, the US provides it with aid and supports its retaining a seat at the UN. Then, of course, there is Saddam Hussein, whom the US favored through the 80s even as he gassed and murdered his own

people, in the hopes that he could be our guy in the Middle East and stand against Iran.

3. American Lives

A third refrain that is fairly constant amid the bloodshed of the last century is that American lives are not worth risking for others.⁶ Some times this is identified as being “casualty adverse” while other times it is called “force protection.” What ever you call it, a constant refrain is that the US populace will not tolerate casualties on behalf of others. Sometimes this appears as part of the debate whether and how to intervene, and results in limiting intervention to air strikes and bombing from altitudes that diminish effectiveness. Other times it is an absolute that shuts down any discussion of intervention before it even begins, as in Rwanda.

4. Domestic Politics

A fourth dimension of the debates regarding intervention that frequently trumps moral considerations is domestic politics. How will intervention or non-intervention play at the voting booth? How will this play with various interest groups? As one official said about Rwanda, if we acknowledge that it is genocide and do nothing, how will it affect the upcoming Congressional elections?⁷ Indeed, on more than one occasion, it is clear that only when an Administration felt that its standing was being eroded in the polls did it begin to consider some form of intervention in a genocidal situation.

Along these same lines, with some frequency we see officials weighing genocide against the effects of intervention on various sectors of the domestic economy. Thus, acting against Iraq in the 80s was resisted for the sake of US manufacturing, agricultural and chemical interests.

5. National Interest

A fifth theme that is constant, clear, and I would argue incorporates all the others, is that of “national interest.” With few, if any, exceptions, national interest is the overriding concern that determines whether or not intervention is justified. In other words, national interest is not just *one* factor among several; it is *the* overriding factor to which all other factors – including the moral – are subordinated and to which they must conform. It is the “what matters most.”

Thus, in the face of the Rwandan genocide a leading US politician declared, “I don’t think we have any national interest there. The Americans are out, and as far as I am concerned, in Rwanda, that ought to be the end of it.”⁸ Or as another high-ranking official said, reflecting on US reluctance to get involved in Bosnia, “We could never satisfy ourselves that the amount of involvement it would take was justified in terms of the U.S. interests involved. . . . We were heavily national interest oriented . . . If [the conflict] stayed contained in Bosnia, it might have been horrible, but it did not affect us.”⁹

This last comment is important. The official notes that the atrocities are horrible. The people making decisions are not amoral; most everyone condemns atrocities – at least personally even if they are not willing to do so publically for the reasons previously cited. The point is, again, what matters most. The moral is not absent; rather, it takes a back seat to matters of national interest.¹⁰

The 20th Century: A Success Story

Having completed her study, Power offers the following striking conclusion. She writes,

Before I began exploring America's relationship with genocide, I used to refer to U.S. policy toward Bosnia as a "failure." I have changed my mind. It is daunting to acknowledge, but this country's consistent policy of nonintervention in the face of genocide offers sad testimony not to a broken American political system but to one that is ruthlessly effective. The system, as it stands now, *is working*.¹¹

As she explains, because no vital national interests were deemed at risk by mere genocide, those situations do not garner the moral attention that they ought and concomitant engagement along a continuum of responses. Cutting through the well-worn and thread-bare refrain "we did not know" or "there is nothing we could do," she asserts:

The real reason the United States did not do what it could and should have done to stop genocide was not a lack of knowledge or influence but a lack of will. Simply put, American leaders did not act because they did not want to. They believed genocide was wrong, but they were not prepared to invest the military, financial, diplomatic, or domestic capital needed to stop it.¹²

Put a little differently, and perhaps a bit more charitably, the political leadership lacks the moral will because realism is the dominant mode of foreign policy and because there is insufficient domestic pressure to dislodge the primacy of national interest over morality.

This is not to deny that there were individuals and groups both within and without the government who pressed the moral issues, even at significant personal cost. (One of the best known, although not American, is General Dallaire. Others, such as Rafael Lemkin or senator William Proxmire, are not as well known.) Power's point is that realism¹³ is the dominant and so determinative vision.¹⁴

In what follows, I suggest that such cracks in realism's ideological hegemony are signposts of another kind of politics in better alignment with who we claim and aspire to be.

2. Just Who In This Hell Are We?

"This is not just a vote about Bosnia. It's a vote about America. It's a vote about what we stand for. About our humanity and our principles." A prominent member of Congress on a vote to authorize humanitarian intervention.¹⁵

Realism's Dance with the Devil

The subtitle for this section is a play on the reference to genocide as a problem from hell. Exactly what the diabolical dimension of the problem is, however, is unclear. Is it a reference to the hellish suffering of peoples? Is it a reference to the challenges that genocide presents to politicians determined to avoid acknowledging and opposing it? Or is it a reference to realism's construal of international politics as a chaotic, morally tenuous space where one must necessarily get one's hands dirty by engaging in morally dubious acts?

Here we might recall the passage from Machiavelli regarding the necessity of setting aside the good. Or we might consider Max Weber, the early 19th century thinker who also contributed much to the American realist political tradition. About politics, he says,

the world is governed by demons and . . . he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for

power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers and for his actions it is *not* true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.¹⁶

Or we can call upon Hans Morgenthau, that towering force behind 20th century American political realism. He too appeals to the necessarily diabolical character of politics when he writes of Western Civilization:

In this tradition God is challenged by the devil, who is conceived as a permanent and necessary element in the order of the world. The sinfulness of man is likewise conceived, . . . not as an accidental disturbance of the order of the world sure to be overcome by a gradual development toward the good but as an inescapable necessity which gives meaning to the existence of man and which only an act of grace or salvation in another world is able to overcome.¹⁷

Morgenthau goes on to state that political action and doing evil are inevitably linked and that “it is unattainable for an action at the same time to conform to the rules of the political art (i.e. to achieve political success) and to conform to the rules of ethics (i.e. to be good in itself).”¹⁸ Thus, “political ethics is indeed the ethics of doing evil.”¹⁹

The Primacy of Politics: Ethics Subordinated to Interests

Highlighting the diabolical character of politics in the realist tradition is not meant to suggest that they are necessarily immoralists. On the contrary, many, such as Morgenthau, insist that morality has an important and necessary role in politics. As E. H. Carr put it, political action must be based on a compromise or co-ordination of morality and power.²⁰

The point is that according to the realist tradition, morality is *not* primary in politics. Rather politics is governed by something else, something more important than morality that adjudicates the coordination or compromise between power and morality. Thus, Carr observes that one of the foundational principles of realism is that ethics is a function of politics, not the other way around, as utopians pretend.²¹

That “something more” is, as we have seen, national interest. Interest, which in our historical moment is particularly *national* interest, is the perennial standard by which political action must be judged and directed.²² As Morgenthau says, “the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. . . . We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out.”²³ Certainly it was born out in Power’s history of genocide in the twentieth century.

The American Experiment and Justice for All

It is widely recognized that the realist vision rests on a particular understanding of the human being and of the relations between human groups. Less frequently is it remarked that the realist vision implies a particular understanding of the nature and character of America.

Embedded in the realist vision is a conception of America as a collection of possessive, self-interested individuals – egoists basically – who under the force of some sanction can rise to a degree

of sociability – cooperation and mutual good will.²⁴ For the sake of our own private goods or interests, we band together in a kind of *modus vivendi*, or social contract.²⁵ That is, we agree to rules that will manage or regulate the clash of all these individuals with their competing and conflicting interests so that we can avoid the Hobbesian condition where life is reduced to a war of all against all.²⁶

This is what the political theorist Judith Shklar calls the "liberalism of fear."²⁷ What unites us is not a shared vision and practice of the good; a *summum bonum*, but a *summum malum*, a common fear of death. Thus, the overriding concern of political action is the use of power to secure our interests, which are deemed vital to our survival.²⁸

This is a common understanding of politics and of America. However, alongside it stands another vision of America, which is often referred to as the "civic republican," which should not to be confused with the modern political party of a similar name.²⁹

This vision rests upon a conception of human beings and human relations that does not subordinate morality to amalgamations of egoists wielding power against other egoists for the sake of survival.

Rather, it understands human ends – classically associated not with interests, but *eudaimonia* (imperfectly translated as “happiness”) – as a shared project, shared with *all* of humanity. Moreover, it recognizes that these shared ends are fragile and so require governments and power.

As the *Declaration of Independence* says, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men....”

This civil republic vision of a moral politics is further displayed in the preamble of the *Constitution*: “We the people...to form a more perfect Union, justice, domestic tranquility, common defence, general welfare, secure blessings for ourselves and our posterity....”

This is not the language of possessive individualism and endless conflict to secure the interests of “our group” over against other egoists and their groups. It is a vision of a moral politics, which includes the moral use of power/force. It is a vision of people united in a common moral project of shared welfare and flourishing that embraces all of humanity, which could be summed up in the phrase “justice for all.”

The Primacy of Morality and Military Intervention

It is this vision of the American experiment – America embodying a moral project of ordered liberty – that I want to bring to the forefront of our deliberations regarding military intervention. It is, in contrast with realism, a vision that recognizes the primacy of morality in politics.

It also contrasts with the early twentieth century utopianism to which realism was a reaction. That utopianism was essentially pacifist. That is, even as it imagined the primacy of morality in international affairs, it eschewed power. It did not aspire to pursue its imaginary republic, to advance its idealism with the sword; it did not think power was required. Rather, it was convinced that reason, knowledge and education would suffice to carry the day.³⁰

The civic republican vision of America is not pacifist; it acknowledges the necessary place of power/force in politics.³¹ Accordingly, it is, I believe, consonant with the best the US military says about itself and what it pledges to uphold and defend. It is a vision worthy of moral warriors and ought to serve as the moral basis for assessing military intervention.

3. The Tragic Between Nihilism and Utopianism

At this point, no one should believe a word of this perverse little morality tale that I have told. I call it a “perverse morality tale” because as pretty as it may sound – rejecting the diabolical compromises of realism in the name of a moral politics – does it not in fact amount to the worst of all possible worlds? This is to say, is it not a call for an armed idealism that promises war without end? Endless, aggressive³² war in the name of justice, morality and human rights? Thus, are we not trading a toothless utopianism for one that is more vicious, perhaps even inhumane in the perversity of its unintended consequences?

The task that remains is to show that this vision of the American experiment, this moral politics, does not commit us to endless wars and crusades for human rights and so forth. I will do so by way of considering the nature of tragedy and a tragic politics.

Realism, Nihilism, and the Loss of the Human

Realists often claim the mantle of tragedy. Against utopians, with their optimistic view of humanity and human relations where power is not necessary, realists claim that their’s is a tragic vision because it recognizes the corruption, indeed the evil, that is a permanent feature of human existence. It is the permanence of human depravity that prompts Morgenthau to write, “Man cannot hope to be good but must be content with not being too evil.”³³

To call this a tragic vision is a mistake. It is not tragic but fatalistic. It is a vision of resignation and despair.³⁴ It is, finally, nihilistic. Nihilism is associated with the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose thought is deeply, if somewhat covertly, influential on the development of American realism.³⁵ Whether they acknowledge Nietzsche’s influence or not, the similarities are unmistakable. Like Nietzsche, for realists life is a battle, a clash of wills driven by the *animus dominandi* or lust for power, where the strong prevail over the weak, often by means of a “transvaluation of values” (read “the subordination of morality to power” or think of Henry Kissinger, that consummate realist who casts a long, dark shadow over 20th century American politics).³⁶

No wonder humanitarian intervention proves such a hellishly difficult problem for realists. They do not believe in humanitarian intervention; they believe one ought to intervene only for the sake of interest. As E. H. Carr makes clear, the very notion of a harmony of interests is a ruse of power.³⁷ According to realists there simply is no shared or common interest that might unite us as human.³⁸

I am tempted to suggest that realists do not believe in humanitarian intervention because they do not actually believe in the human, but this would perhaps be uncharitable. They recognize the human but what they call human is barely distinguishable from a beast. As Morgenthau puts it, what separates us from beasts is our bad consciences. Like beasts, we are driven by a lust for power, but unlike beasts we feel regret.³⁹ This regret does not change anything. Well, maybe it tempers our evil so that it is “lesser.” (But how would one know? No one sets out to do the greater evil.) It does not change anything because the antinomy between who we are – egoists seeking dominion – and the

ethical rejection of domination is insoluble.

If you think I am unjust with regard to realism, then allow me to ask you this. Consider a person who when facing the on-going slaughter of 8,000 fellow human beings a day says, “We got the Americans out and there is no national interest at stake, so we are done with it” or says, “if we call it genocide and do nothing, will it hurt our side in the elections?” Does that person display an adequate grasp of what it means to be human?

Like I said, if that is realism, that is not tragic; it is nihilistic. Nihilism, with a bad conscience.

The Irony of Realism

Of course, clever realists who aspire to elected political office cannot come right out and say they do not believe in humanitarian intervention, because it runs against the grain of how we prefer to see ourselves, of who Americans aspire to be. (Hence, as Power noted, its hegemony is not uncontested in the chambers of government.) In other words, if realism adequately captured who we are, then we would not even be having this conversation. Humanitarian intervention would simply be dismissed as an oxymoron. Just as little men cannot be big, intervention cannot happen on humanitarian grounds.

They cannot say it because the American experiment is founded on claims that humanity is endowed with a dignity that is more important than bare survival. Remember what donning the uniform means. Remember Patrick Henry’s cry, “Give me liberty or give me death.” There are things worth dying for.

Because realists who aspire to political office cannot renounce the foundations of the American experiment, they end up feeding a kind of utopianism / American exceptionalism. They give cynical speeches about our unmixed virtue, cloaking national interest in moral principle.⁴⁰ (Cynical because as realists they do not believe in virtue; only lesser evils).

Domestically, we see the results of this style of politics. It feeds what Richard Hofstadter once famously called “the paranoid style in American politics.”⁴¹ On the domestic side, it results in deep division that abhors compromise; in foreign affairs it nurtures an all-or-nothing approach that inclines either to isolation or to engage with no limits. In war, it fosters a crusade mentality that has little patience for the intricacies of diplomacy, compromise, and restraint.

Ironically, realist politicians cynically stoke the very utopianism they despise, and as a result we cannot deal with tragedy, which has a devastating effect for suffering peoples everywhere, not the least of which are wounded warriors. More on this in a moment

Defining Tragedy

There is no single definition of tragedy,⁴² but it is certainly the case that central to tragedy is the recognition of the imperfection of humanity. Classically, this imperfection has been articulated in two ways.⁴³ First, tragedy is driven by character flaws – errors of judgment and execution. Second, tragedy is driven by circumstance – good persons find themselves caught in a conflict of values or restrained by limited resources such that they cannot do the (whole)good they desire.

But equally central to tragedy is the conviction that the good at which the agent aims is attainable;

it is a genuine possibility. This real potential for good is the source of both the dramatic tension in tragedy and the poignancy of the suffering that results. And it is this real possibility for good that distinguishes the tragic from the pathetic, from the *pathos* of one naturally, permanently evil, who lacks real possibilities for achieving good.⁴⁴

Thus, a genuinely tragic politics is one that has a real possibility of achieving good but is vulnerable to missing the mark.

The American experiment in ordered liberty is just such a tragic politics. It seeks to develop a genuine good but, unlike the utopian vision, it does not ignore the real possibility that humans can and do fall short of the good to which they aspire. For this reason, it acknowledges the necessity and realities of power and establishes a system of accountability, checks and balances.

This is why it is often referred to as the American *experiment*. There is no guarantee that we will be successful. Goodness is a fragile, vulnerable thing. It is a tragic politics – aspiring to the good but recognizing there is no guarantee we will (fully) realize or sustain it.

Just War and Reasonable Chance of Success

More to the point of military humanitarian intervention, it is the tragic character of the American experiment that prompts us to reject the crusade mentality, which recognizes no limits on the use of power, and instead embrace the just war discipline.

Just war embodies a tragic politics in that it both aims for the genuinely good (just cause, just peace) and yet recognizes the vulnerability of that good to corruption; hence the limitations it imposes on when and how military force may be used.

Consider, for example, the criterion of Reasonable Chance of Success. It is particularly relevant to the contemporary geopolitical situation, to the tragic character of our politics, and to the topic of military humanitarian intervention.

The criterion holds that one should engage in military intervention only when and where there is a reasonable chance of intervention being successful, with success encompassing both military and political dimensions.⁴⁵ Which means that even where there is gross injustice we may not be able to intervene militarily, because cause alone is not sufficient justification for intervention; we must also have a reasonable chance of success.⁴⁶ The criterion thus embodies the tragic sense that sometimes we cannot attain the good we want. It is tragic that sometimes we will not be able to rescue everyone.⁴⁷

Conclusion: Tragedy and Honoring the Human

In the early 70s, reflecting on the Vietnam War, Anthony Lake penned an article entitled “The Human Reality of Realpolitik.”⁴⁸ In it he laments the dominance of the realist vision in American foreign policy, noting in particular how it leads to a “dehumanized pattern of decision making” where the human issues and human costs invariably are marginalized.

Realism, and the utopian offspring of its cynicism, cannot deal with the human. Under its influence, as Andrew Bacevich has argued so well, America is ill-equipped to face the human costs, to bear the sacrifice and suffering that our commitments require.⁴⁹ As Power’s narrative suggests, realists

cannot handle humanitarian intervention.

When realists do act, they are not capable of dealing with less than perfect results, admitting failures of judgment and character. Instead, they declare “mission accomplished,” cover-up and scape-goat, and finally walk away (think of the Kurds after the first Gulf War; Libya today).

This inability to forthrightly face the tragic dimension of human action – both the failures and limits of our ability to achieve the good – intensifies the inhumanity of realism.

This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the nation’s inability to deal with wounded warriors.⁵⁰ Entering war on realist grounds wrapped in utopian rhetoric, we cannot handle the tragic wisdom that war makes visible – that all-too-human gap between aspirations and action, and the suffering that may result. A tragic wisdom that is inscribed on the bodies and souls of the dead and wounded.

Peter Marin, reflecting on the experience of Vietnam, speaks of society’s inability to handle the tragic wisdom of war and the effect that inability can have on soldiers:

Though this is perhaps a terrible and demanding wisdom, it is no more and no less than what all men should know But because our age is what it is and because most Americans flee from such knowledge, this wisdom is especially hard for the vets to bear. Though it ought to bring them deeper into the human community, it isolates them instead, sets them irrevocably apart, locks them simultaneously into a seriousness and a silence They become suffering pariahs not only because of what they have done but because of the questions it raises for them—questions that their countrymen do not want to confront, questions for which, as a society, we have no answers.⁵¹

Likewise, more recently, Edward Tick has remarked on how this realist-fueled utopian vision handles the tragic side of life that is so vividly revealed in war:

[Our veterans] come home stumbling out of hell. But we don't see them as they have become. Instead, we offer them beer and turkey dinners, debriefing and an occasional parade, and a return to routine jobs and weekends in the shopping malls. Because we as a nation are trapped in a consciousness that cannot acknowledge abject suffering especially if we have caused or contributed to it, we do not see the reality of war.⁵²

What does a realist say? They might feel bad, but in the end there is no consolation. Life is evil and the evil is unavoidable. Thus has it always been and thus will it always be. So suck it up and soldier on.

And what do those who have imbibed the utopian rhetoric of American perfection say? What can they say? In their world, war is immaculate⁵³; good always triumphs over evil and never strays from the straight and narrow while doing so.⁵⁴ There is no space for living with the tragic truth – that doing good may require sacrifice and suffering, that we may fail, that we may not be able to do all that we desire (remember reasonable chance of success).

Only a tragic vision, one that pursues good while acknowledging the human limits that attend such a pursuit, can face human suffering and act to overcome human suffering in this world.

For a tragic vision sees human failures and limits but – unlike the realists – does *not* succumb to

the temptation to despair. It does not allow the persistence of failure and of evil to become an excuse for abandoning the human – writing off hundreds of thousands or even millions because they don't line up with our "interests."

For a tragic vision – unlike the realists – also recognizes *the good*. A tragic vision remembers the good – not as a pipe dream in some other world or imaginary republic – but as that which humanity is indeed capable of. It recognizes the genuine good that is constantly on display all around us. In peace and in war. Respect, honor, integrity, selfless service, justice, mercy, moral courage are not illusions. Virtue may be fragile and it may not be as common as we would like, but it is real. We have all seen it. Have we not known people who have risked and suffered, lost and died – not merely for interest or national egoism⁵⁵ but for the human. (Some might call this virtue "love" – but we don't want to get too sentimental or soft when talking politics and policy.)

* * *

If we intervene, we do so because we are human. And because we are human, limited in virtue and resources, we are not always able to do the good that we desire. This gap between the good of which we are capable and what we may achieve, is tragic.

Because we are human and not beasts, we can grieve for those we were not able to help, for those we harmed when we failed to do what we ought and are capable of; and for those who suffered and who died in doing what is right.

Yet because we are human and not beasts, because we are capable of good, we refuse to resign ourselves to the gap; we refuse to surrender to the selfish existence of beasts.

Because we are human and not beasts, we will not abandon our fellow humans.

Because we are human and not beasts, we will not settle for the easier wrong, the lesser evil, but instead will persevere in the harder right.

This is what it means to be human, to be endowed with a desire for life, liberty and happiness and to share this project, this mission with all other humans.

1. Nicciolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* chptr 15.
2. See Martin Cook, "Ethics Education, Ethics Training, and Character Development: Who 'Owns' Ethics in the U.S. Air Force Academy?" In *Ethics Education in the Military*, eds. Paul Robinson, Nigel de Lee and Don Carrick. (Padstow, Cornwall: Ashgate, 2008), 57-65.
3. Even as I use the term "genocide," I recognize that precisely to what it refers remains contested. Indeed, Samantha Power's work traces the contours of the conversation well. For the sake this paper, however, I need not pin down what it means precisely. It is sufficient to say that it refers to a gross injustice that clearly rises to the level of a just cause for hostilities according to the just war discipline.
4. Quoted in Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell" America and the Age of Genocide*. (NY: HarperCollins, 2002), 504.
5. Power, 14.
6. Dallaire reports a conversation with a US officer who said that when calculating the costs of intervention, they were figuring one US casualty is worth about 85,000 Rwandan dead. Power, 381. In the debates over Bosnia, some politicians argued that Bosnia was not worth a single American life. See Power, 440.
7. Power, 359.
8. Power 352.
9. Power, 288.
10. Note that sometimes morality takes a backseat to national interest by way of distraction. This is to say, the pursuit of national interests elsewhere around the globe can distract resources and attention from the moral issues in a give place. This is how Power interprets the elder Bush's lack of interest in Bosnia. See Power, 287, 509.
11. Power, xxi, cf 509. It may be worth noting the WWII and Nazi Germany is *not* an exception to this claim. It is only in retrospect that WWII became about rescuing the Jews. At the time, anti-Jewish sentiment was deeply ingrained in the west. Power notes that the Allies refused to state publicly that the rescue of Jews was a purpose / reason for fighting (36). For a detailed treatment of this, see David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (NY: New Press, 1998).
12. Power, 508
13. A note on my use of the term "realism." I use it in this essay as it is commonly used in the field of international relations. As such, it is a particular school of thought associated with the figures I cite in this essay. Furthermore, as a school or tradition, it is not monolithic but encompasses a range of thinkers and political figures, some of whom have less use for morality than others.

This use of the term realism differs from the popular use of the term. This is to say, many claim to be "realistic" and adhere to a "realism," by which is typically meant that one is not blind to the way humans and history are not pure manifestations of the good.

It is worth noting that there is another use of the term “realism” in the field of philosophy and epistemology, pertaining to claims regarding the existence of things independent of human perception and cognition. This use of the term is not relevant to this essay.

14. It is also worth noting that there were also officials not committed to realism but who nevertheless failed to speak out due to moral fading: they could not muster the moral courage to speak, or were convinced / deceived by the realist rhetoric. A different essay would take up Power’s narrative as a foil for considering the problem of moral fading.

15. Power, 429. Interestingly enough, this is the same person who was quoted utterly dismissing the suffering in Rwanda. See note 8 above.

16. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1946), 123.

17. Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man v Power Politics*, p. 204. Cited in Mark Gismondi, *Ethics, Liberalism and Realism in International Relations*.(NY: Routledge, 2008), 154-5.

18. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 196. Cited in Gismondi, *Ethics*, 156. See also Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil,” *Ethics* 56.1 (October 1945): 14.

19. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 202. Cited in Douglas Klusmeyer, “Beyond Tragedy: Hannah Arendt and Hans Morgenthau on Responsibility, Evil and Political Ethics.” *International Studies Review* 11 (2009): 343. See also Morgenthau, “The Evil of Politics,” 17.

20. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939*. (NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 97. The more extreme sounding statements of realists, particularly realists in the early and mid-twentieth century, ought to be read in the context of the "utopianism" to which they were responding – the early liberal tradition of international politics that thought ethics without recourse to power could easily resolve international conflict and usher in an era of world peace and prosperity.

21. Carr, 64. At one point he notes that realists rightly posit that ethics are not the expression of a universal absolute but the product of circumstance and interest, and that they function as “weapons framed for the furtherance of interests.” p. 68.

22. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 7th ed. (NY: McGraw Hill, 2006), 11.

23. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5. Note that according to the realists, the meaning of this key concept of interest / power is not fixed once and for all but can vary with time and place, even if in our day and age it is largely a matter of military and economic power. See Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 10; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove IL, Waveland Press, 2010), 153. See also Power, 260

24. Carr, 95.

25. On political arrangements as a kind of *modus vivendi*, see Morgenthau, “Evil of Politics,” 18. It is worth noting that realists like Morgenthau and Carr give very little credence to notions of “society” as anything more than a collection of individuals, in a manner that brings to mind Margaret Thatcher’s well known remark “There is no such thing as society.” See Morgenthau, “Evil of Politics,” 10; Carr, 151-2.

26. See Morgenthau, "Evil of Politics," 13. What is striking about Morgenthau's account is that this condition is actually endorsed by the ethics of unselfishness.
27. 23. Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," pp. 3-20 in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
28. It is worth noting that Morgenthau remarks that "successful political action," which is synonymous with the pursuit of interest, is "itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival." See *Politics Among Nations*, 12. This is reminiscent of Machiavelli's comment about ethics subordinated to survival. See also Carr, 160, where he remarks that states have a right to self-preservation that overrides morality and also Michael Walzer's well-known concept of the "supreme emergency," where survival legitimates discarding ethical restraints. See his *Just and Unjust Wars* 2d ed (NY: Basic Books, 1977), 251-68 and *Arguing About War* (New Haven CT: Yale, 2004), 33-50.
29. The meaning and political-philosophical lineage of this vision is hotly contested. My understanding of the term will become clear momentarily.
30. See Carr, 25. See Richard Gamble, *The War for Righteousness* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003) for an interesting account of how, when they finally embraced force, these utopian pacifists became crusading interventionists.
31. This is not the extent of the difference between my reading of civic republicanism and utopianism. Realists were also critical of the utopian belief in the rationality of humanity, to the exclusion of the will, as well as of the utopian belief in history's progress. A civic republican vision does not necessarily entail either of these problematic convictions.
32. This proposal does indeed renew a space for aggressive war. Prior to modernity, when the traditional notion of just cause was deemed veritably impossible to determine and so reduced to self-defense, just war and just permitted aggressive or offensive war on behalf of unjustly attacked third parties.
33. Morgenthau, "Evil of Politics," 13.
34. On the embrace of despair, which he calls "moral courage," see Morgenthau, "Evil of Politics," 18. Douglas Klusmeyer argues that Morgenthau's reflection on tragedy was not particularly deep. Comparing Morgenthau to Hannah Arendt, Klusmeyer shows Arendt to be much better suited to the tragic label because she had a stronger sense of responsibility for the good. See his "Beyond Tragedy: Hannah Arendt and Hans Morgenthau on Responsibility, Evil and Political Ethics." *International Studies Review* 11 (2009): 332-51.
35. See Mark Gismondi "Tragedy, Realism and Postmodernity: *Kulturpessimismus* in the Theories of Max Weber, E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Henry Kissinger," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 15.3 (2004): 435-64. Note that Morgenthau once referred to Nietzsche as "the god of my youth." See Gismondi, 455.
36. In Gismondi's account of Kissinger's work, Kissinger's chaffing against the bonds of "ordinary morality" that would hinder the statesman's pursuit of a vision of the future exudes the anguish of Nietzsche's superman. See Gismondi, "Tragedy, Realism, and Postmodernity," 449.

37. Carr, 52-3, 75.

38. The history of the emergence of the concept of “interests” bears this out. See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1997) and Milton L. Myers, *The Soul of Modern Economic Man: Ideas of Self-Interest Thomas Hobbes to Adam Smith* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983).

39. Morgenthau, “Evil of Politics,” 17.

40. See Martin Cook, *The Moral Warrior: Ethics and Service in the U.S. Military* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2004), 118-9. Note that the label “cynical” is mine not Cook’s. Also note that Cook thinks the end of the cold war has created a space where a new, more moral politics might emerge.

41. Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1965), 3-40.

42. Terry Eagleton suggests that “very sad” is about as close as we can arrive to a general definition of tragedy. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

43. Drawing from Toni Erskine and Richard Led Nebow, “Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations,” in *Tragedy and International Relations*, eds. Toni Erskine and Richard L. Nebow (NY: Palgrave MacMillian, 2013), 1-20.

44. It is not tragic that I cannot dunk a basketball; such an inability is not a failure to attain my potential. Rather, that inability is simply a manifestation of the natural limits of my body. Dunking a basketball is not part of my nature. Similarly, when a young person dies, we call it tragic because (among other things) of the real potential that goes unrealized. Whereas when a person rich in years and experience dies after a long decline, we may grieve that death but rarely do we call it tragic. Tragedy is created by the tension between two equally real possibilities.

45. Success does not refer only to military victory – defeating enemy forces – but to the political as well. Given the military superiority of US forces, it may be the political problem that poses the greatest challenge in many situations and so limits the military options.

46. The other criteria must be met as well.

47. Note that where the criterion of reasonable chance of success rules out military action, this does not mean that we are justified in standing on the sidelines and doing nothing. A just war people will also attend to the criterion of Last Resort, which means they will develop and pursue an array of means short of war to address injustice. One of the constant refrains in Power’s survey is not simply that the US failed to intervene militarily but that so often it failed to pursue non-military options.

48. Anthony Lake and Roger Morris, “The Human Reality of Realpolitik,” *Foreign Policy* 4 (Autumn 1971): 157-62.

49. See Andrew Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

50. See Ann Jones, *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013) and the growing body of literature on moral injury among soldiers.
51. Peter Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," *Psychology Today* 15 (Nov 1981): 74.
52. Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005), 169.
53. The concept of "immaculate war" is Martin Cook's. See *The Moral Warrior*, 117.
54. "America claims innocence and goodness as fundamental traits. We believe that our young men and young women should be able to go to war, get the job done, and return home blameless and well." Tick, *War and the Soul*, 155.
55. Morgenthau speaks of individuals transferring their egoism and lust for power to the nation. See "Evil of Politics," 15. See also Carr, 162, 166.