





**Rough Waters and Other Stories**  
*Facing Ethical Dilemmas*

By  
**Richard Ned Lebow**

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## DEDICATION

To Alex George (1920-2006) who first encouraged me to write fiction.

To Nora Franglen, Tony Grenville, Julia Pascal, and Amy Shuman for being so supportive of my efforts.

# INTRODUCTION

What follows can be read as an introduction to my stories or a conclusion to them. It describes my incentives for writing, and puts the stories in personal, conceptual, and collective perspectives. I hope it provides a framework that enhances your reading experience. Some of you may want to form your own impressions and make your own connections across stories. I urge you to proceed directly to the stories and read my introduction as a conclusion.

All my tales address different ethical questions and dilemmas. They collectively make the case for a tragic approach to ethics. My characters must make or finesse ethical choices, some of them straight-forward, others involving very difficult trade-offs between seemingly irreconcilable but important goals. Alternatively, they require characters to commit to decisions or policies whose outcomes are uncertain. We are desperate to avoid dilemmas of this kind and prone to convince ourselves – often in the face of good evidence – that we can satisfy all of our desires or needs instead of making tough choices between or among them. We also tend to convince ourselves that our decisions or policies will succeed in proportion to the degree that we feel compelled to commit to them. A standard trope of Greek tragedy – think here of Oedipus – is that our decisions sometimes lead directly to the outcomes we are trying desperately to avoid.

The tragic view of life is rooted in an understanding that the world is to a significant degree opaque. We have at best a limited ability to control and manipulate it and our best efforts to do so often backfire. We are acted on at least as often as we are responsible agents, and efforts to enhance our agency and power can just as readily reduce them. Tragedy encourages us to confront our limits. It emphasizes human fallibility and vulnerability and the contradictions and ambiguities of agency. It shows us that we not infrequently initiate courses of action without being able to control them or calculate beforehand their consequences. It cautions against assuming that our own conceptions of justice are universally applicable and should be imposed on others. It warns of the dangers of over-confidence and perceived invincibility. It teaches us that wisdom and self-awareness can emerge from adversity and despair.

Tragedy offers a possible antidote to some of the most dangerous conceits of modernity. It can make people humble and cautious, and encourage decisions that pay as much attention to what can go wrong as to what we hope will go right. However, tragic understandings of politics or life will only appeal to people and leaders with courage to face that truth that we are to a large degree at the mercy of our physical and social environments. It is less a substitute for modern ways of addressing problems as a much-needed corrective. As with everything else in life there should be a balance, between self-interest and concern for others, risk taking and risk aversion, optimism and pessimism, overconfidence and lack of confidence, flying by the seat of the pants and acting on the basis of careful analysis and preparation, and focus on the benefits of action versus those of inaction. A tragic perspective also gives people a useful outside vantage point on their behavior and a focus on its longer-term consequences, even if they are ultimately unknowable. It compels us to recognize and accept uncertainty and responsibility in lieu of denying them.

My stories are intended to sensitize people to tragedy and its ethics. I set the scene with an exploration of the post-life of President Richard Nixon. The story asks if leaders should be held responsible to the same ethical code as ordinary people. Do their special responsibilities for the organizations and states they head give them leeway to act in ways that would be reprehensible if used to advance personal interests? My answer is a resounding no, which flies in the face of much conventional wisdom and most realist approaches to foreign policy.

“Nixon in Hell” has a very personal genesis. I remember few occasions in my life when I became seriously depressed. One of them was following the election of Richard Nixon in 1968. I had despised “Tricky Dick” for years and knew full well that he would escalate the war in Vietnam, not end it, and also do his best to slow down civil rights for African-Americans. In the spring of 1968 Henry Kissinger invited me to interview for a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard. We met in in the Fifth Avenue apartment of Nelson Rockefeller, just across from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Rocky” had thrown his hat in the ring for the Republican presidential nomination and Kissinger was his chief foreign policy advisor. The reception room had glorious art on the walls but there was no opportunity to do anything but cast sideways glances at it. Kissinger asked me a few questions about my research and I told him how much I would enjoy a postdoc that would



let me transform my dissertation into a book. Much to my surprise, he explained that the job in question was working for him, not for Harvard. He was likely to become national security advisor and was putting together a staff to take to Washington.

This was something of a bait and switch. I was also convinced that Rockefeller would lose the nomination to Nixon. Not to worry, Kissinger assured me, Rocky would pass him on to Nixon if this happened. The Republicans would almost certainly capture the White House and he would become national security advisor. I told Kissinger that I had read and been impressed by his article on Vietnam policy published a few months earlier in *Foreign Affairs*. In it he made an analogy to France and Algeria. De Gaulle came to power promising to keep Algeria French but once in the Palais de l'Élysée granted the former colony its independence and withdrew French troops. Kissinger suggested that the next President should follow this precedent as De Gaulle and France rose in stature in the aftermath. Kissinger leaned across the coffee table dividing us and said in his thick German accent: "Young man, do not believe everything that you read." He explained that he had written the article with Rockefeller in mind. Now that he would likely be working for Nixon such a policy would not pass muster. His boss would almost certainly escalate the war in the short-term.<sup>1</sup> "Do you feel comfortable with this course of action?" I asked. He smiled. I politely declined his job offer. We parted on friendly terms and when my first book appeared he wrote me a nice note.

My depression was warranted. Nixon and Kissinger prolonged the war, extended it to Cambodia, and then negotiated a truce that led to the very outcome they were trying to avoid. Many thousands of people died as a result. At home they violated the constitution and laws at will. Nixon won re-election but the Watergate scandal led to a series of revelations that compelled him to resign to avoid impeachment.

My depression only lasted a week or so after the election, although my concern remained acute until Nixon was driven from office. Along with millions of other Americans I experienced a great sense of Schadenfreude with each Watergate revelation, resignation, and conviction of former officials, although I was dismayed by Ford's pardon of Nixon and continuing suffering in Indochina.

As the saying goes, revenge is a dish best served cold. I did not write

“Nixon in Hell” until 2001, several decades after these events. I no longer remember the immediate catalyst for the story but do recall how good it felt, even after all these years, to condemn this violator of human rights and the constitution to the netherworld and imagine how he would react, what he would think, and how he would suffer. I did not have physical punishment in mind, but various offenses to his ego and fragile sense of self. To my surprise, Nixon coped better than I had expected. To the extent I tried to stay true to his character the story escaped my control. Nixon is a villain – there can be no doubt about that – but not an entirely unsympathetic one. There is another bad guy in the piece, but he will remain unnamed as I do not wish to give away the plot. He also gets his comeuppance, which was another source of satisfaction given his complicity in one of the greatest crimes of the twentieth century.

Nixon and his co-villain are representative of a class of people who violate norms and laws in the perceived interests of their institutions. The Catholic church went to great lengths to protect sexual predators among its priesthood, corporations regularly despoil the environment in the name of profits, and countries use violence allegedly in defense of the national interest – which, to be fair, is sometimes justified. Realists praise national leaders for acting this way, and some of the worst offenders – consider Henry Kissinger – are hailed as heroes rather than arrested and tried as war criminals. My story questions this double standard. It is one of two stories that were previously published\*, in this instance at the outset of a book that argues that foreign policies at odds with conventional understandings of ethics are less likely to succeed.<sup>2</sup>

I believe similar arguments can and should be made about institutions and businesses. To some degree this ethical imperative is recognized in the form of hypocrisy. People who violate norms and laws do their best to justify their behavior in terms of them or with reference to some higher good. A good measure of the health of any society is the extent to which such people are scorned and treated as pariahs or criminals. Society is on the decline when their claims are accepted at face value by people too ignorant to know otherwise or willingly complicit because they expect to profit in some way by doing so – as many Republican officials did in publicly supporting Trump’s false claim that the 2020 presidential election had

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\* “Nixon in Hell,” was first published in *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests, and Orders*, Richard Ned Lebow, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 2

been rigged. Society is weaker still when hypocrisy is no longer considered necessary because formerly unacceptable behavior has become increasingly acceptable.

“Surviving Tet,” written in August 2021, continues my engagement with Vietnam. I wrote it in response to the American failure in Afghanistan and shambolic departure from Kabul. Images of these events mixed with those embedded in my memory of the costly and embarrassing evacuation of Saigon in 1975. I had first-hand experience of Vietnam during the War. I traveled around the country giving talks, interviewing people of all kinds, and seeing for myself what was happening on the ground. As you will see, it was not without risk.

Truth is said to be stranger than fiction. I am a firm believer in this cliché and offer “Surviving Tet” as evidence. Everything I relate is true but would lack credibility if presented as a short story. I have accordingly written up the first part as a narrative. I blend fact and fiction in the back half where I put words in the mouths of my interlocutors. They are real people, they have the affiliations I attribute to them, and they behaved just as I describe. All of this happened more than a half-century ago, so I have no recall of their actual words but do remember clearly the gist of what they said and the impressions they made. I have even more vivid impressions of my own and my wife’s responses to Vietnam. Fascination and fear dominated. We were in a foreign country, one best described as semi-occupied, where the clash of cultures was evident in almost every social interaction.

We quickly understood that the dynamics of the conflict in Vietnam bore little relationship to their framing in Washington, D.C. The South Vietnamese army was utterly corrupt and all but worthless, as was government at every level. The U.S. was wasting money and lives, something apparent to many Americans in Vietnam, but back home generals and politicians alike were deluding themselves. So it was in Afghanistan. My narrative cum story highlights this difference and the varied responses of local American political and military officials to what they regarded as a no-win situation.

In *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, I argue that great powers are their own worst enemies and inflict far greater harm on themselves than do foreign actors.<sup>3</sup> Their power makes them arrogant and also less necessary – at least in the short-term – to adjust to unpleasant realities. It also stands in the way of learning from their failures. It is another manifestation-of tragedy,

provoked by hubris. For the ancient Greeks this was a category error; people believed they possessed the power of gods and could predict and control the future at will. Hubris was punished with nemesis, and this has been the recurring fate of great powers who overstep ethical boundaries in pursuit of hegemony.

The American national security elite learned little to nothing from the Indochina disaster and there is no reason to think they will do any better in the aftermath of Afghanistan. As I write, the media and many politicians are playing the blame game, as they did in Vietnam, and about the so-called “loss of China” before that. In part, this is politics, but it is also a kind of conspiracy across the party divide to avoid addressing these failures in a serious way. To do so would call into question America’s self-image and the self-esteem of its citizens. No politicians will go down this road and intellectuals who try are largely ignored.

“Nixon in Hell” and “Surviving Tet” also speak to my political agenda, as do most of my stories. I have been a professor for fifty-four years and for the first few decades most of my research focused on conflict management and prevention. I worked at City College of New York, Johns Hopkins, Cornell, the Naval and National War Colleges, and was scholar-in-residence in the Central Intelligence Agency during the Carter administration. In these positions I did my best to analyze and document the dangers of deterrence and of the American quest for hegemony. My research was ignored by the policy community because it was so different from, and so contrary to, the conventional wisdom. I got tired of banging my head against the wall and shifted my research agenda to the underlying political and psychological assumptions on which American national security policy was based. Both kinds of research resonated with, and won plaudits from, some segments of the scholarly community. I have now turned to fiction in the hope of reaching a wider audience.

“Foo Fighters” refers to the lights observed by pilots on American bombing missions over Germany late in World War II. Fighters would go after them only to have them turn at sharp angles and disappear at fantastic speeds. The army air force wondered if they were secret German weapons but could find no evidence for it once Germany was occupied. Only a few years later Americans began seeing flying saucers and tracking them on radars. One of the more popular postwar conspiracy theories concerns the alleged

crash of an alien spaceship near Roswell, New Mexico, and the recovery by the air force of aliens or alien corpses. A close family member – former vice president of a leading software company -- swears that he was told by IBM engineers that they reverse engineered their 360 computer based on the computer in this alien ship. It seems inconceivable that a civilization capable of interstellar travel would be using a computer more primitive than those in your automobile and one, moreover, that relied on vacuum tubes! This tale illustrates how conspiracies play fast and loose, not only with fact, but with common sense. This does not stop them from spreading and people who hear them coming up with “evidence” in support.

Troubled by conspiracies, especially political ones, I wrote a novel – soon, I hope, to see the light of day. *Uninhibited Flying Objects* is a spoof on conspiracy theories. It slyly and humorously demonstrates the improbability of “deep state” conspiracies, their difficulty in execution, and the near-impossibility of being kept secret. “Foo Fighters” was originally its opening chapter. Readers convinced me to start with a later chapter so I pulled it from the book. I think it works well as a short story as it effectively questions key assumptions of conspiracy theories. The most outrageous one is that governments could coordinate vast efforts of some kind and keep them from the public eye. Governments, even authoritarian ones, are like sieves because officials at every level have all kinds of incentives to leak information. Tony, my hero, recognizes this truth and witnesses concerted and ultimately unsuccessful efforts by the air force – all historically true – to keep the unexplained phenomenon of Foo Fighters under wraps.

Conspiracies and hypocrisy are related. Those who indulge in hypocrisy and seek wealth or power by questionable means often support conspiracy theories to direct attention from themselves or to justify their behavior. The German right and Hitler famously propagated the *Dolchstoß* [stab in the back] lie that the German army was never defeated by the allies in 1918 but undermined by Jews and socialists. Present-day American Republicans continue this tradition. *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow observes that Republican politics have become oppositional politics.<sup>4</sup> They deny the science, attack the media, and spread conspiracy theories about scientists, the medical profession, and government. They wage war on facts as they stand in the way of their programs, especially their claims that tax cuts for the rich trickle down and benefit the poor. Donald Trump invented and spread the lie that Barrack Obama was born in Africa and really a Muslim.

Wikipedia offers a long list of other conspiracy theories promulgated by Trump and notes his support of diverse conspiracy theorists.<sup>5</sup> Trump's hangers-on and would-be successors follow his example.

"Foo Fighters" also questions the ethics of carpet bombings of cities and their wanton destruction of housing, public buildings, and non-combatant lives.<sup>6</sup> The Germans pioneered aerial attacks on civilian populations; Guernica and Rotterdam were among the first population centers to suffer this kind of destruction. German attacks on London were offered as justification of allied attacks on German cities and the allies paid the Germans back many-fold. Their raids reached their deadly peak in the two-day fire-bombing of Dresden in February of 1945, killing perhaps 25,000 people and creating between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees.<sup>7</sup> The fire-bombing of Tokyo and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were more destructive still. Tony, the hero of my story, is an uneducated fellow but no fool. He is not happy about killing civilians but has no choice. He has to do what is told, and comes to develop pride in his unit and solidarity with his crew and unit. He does his best to deal with this dissonance, in large part by trying to finish his tour of duty, return home, and put it all behind him. We are sympathetic with Tony, and he helps us understand how so many decent people in war-time do horrible things.

"Physician, Heal Thyself" is the first of my contemporary stories. Its theme is the ubiquity of passwords and the difficulty of remembering them, especially when they must be changed on a regular basis. My tale is disturbing for what it reveals about the social nature of illness and deviance. Most of us who are compelled to remember multiple, ever-changing passwords, struggle with this task and try to minimize the challenge by keeping crib sheets, using the same password at multiple sites, and passwords that are easy to remember. All of these moves are made at the expense of security, and can be self-defeating. My characters in the hospital ward have rebelled against the unreasonable demands that are being made on them. I am on their side. My university library demands not only a password, but a code sent to a special device just to scan the catalog. Why shouldn't anybody be able to do this without a password?

Those in charge of security have strong incentives to require passwords for everything as it increases their responsibilities. So do the ubiquitous consultants who advise businesses and institutions on their security

requirements. They have a strong financial interest in securitizing everything in sight. I am not suggesting that security is unimportant. Hackers have made many millions by bringing businesses to their knees. Their break-ins have also compromised the personal data of millions of people. Only some of these problems are attributable to bad passwords. Despite repeated warnings people still choose passwords that are easily guessed, like those that feature their names or dates of birth, or are readily conned into giving their passwords to others. Most serious break ins are due to security barriers that are inadequate, out-of-date, or easily penetrated by hackers. The imposition of passwords on sites where security is unnecessary, the proliferation of multi-step log-in procedures, and the requirement to have eight, ten, or more numbers and symbols in passwords does little to address these problems. It actually encourages people to behave irresponsibly, making it easier for hackers.

I can't remember how many times I have received "Error Message 404" or its equivalent. These are nonsensical codes used "to explain" whatever problem has occurred. They remind me of airlines attempting to justify flight delays. They make announcements in airports blaming them on weather, air traffic control problems, some other airliner not pulling away from its gate – anything that will deflect responsibility from themselves. One suspects these announcements are programmed by a random excuse generator. So it is in my story, where an airline attempts to pin the blame unfairly on one of their more responsible and capable employees.

The proliferation of passwords and the struggle with them is a quintessential problem of modernity. It is part and parcel of the bureaucratization of life. Fin de siècle German sociologist Max Weber identified bureaucracy as the dominant institutional feature of modernity. He regarded it as enabling but crippling. It made large organizations and governments possible. But in the name of efficiency, it imposed rules that were not only stifling to human creativity but treating people as categories and numbers reduced them to objects. Rules, moreover, must be simple to be understood and are likely to be enforced in a heavy-handed way. They limit the authority and independence of individuals. In the face of changed circumstances the rules no longer make sense and end up a barrier to efficiency. Weber feared that ordinary citizens, would live in "a steel-hardened cage" of serfdom. He also worried that bureaucracy threatened to reorient people's loyalties by narrowing their horizons to those of their institution. In the

absence of deeper ethical commitments, bureaucracy would impose its own values on people. The *Kultur Mensch* [man of culture] would give way to the *Fach Mensch* [occupational specialist]. For the latter, the only ethical yardstick would be the interests and power of the organization. Quoting Nietzsche, Weber predicted “the ‘last men’ would be “specialists without spirit [and] sensualists without heart.”<sup>8</sup>

Weber attributed the downside of bureaucracy to the very rationality that made it so powerful and effective. For better and worse, it treated people alike and did its best to deprive them of their individuality. Franz Kafka also considered bureaucracy a defining feature of the modern age, but evaluated its consequences with an even more jaundiced eye. He emphasized bureaucracy’s pathology, which he attributed to its lack of transparency and freedom from democratic oversight. For Weber, bureaucracy performs tasks in accordance with the law and directives from higher political authority. For Kafka, it is a law unto itself. It seeks to preserve and extend its power and buttress the authority and self-esteem of its officials. Bureaucracy succeeds in part by becoming opaque in its procedures and making its officials inaccessible to the public. Even those who work in the bureaucracy may understand little more than their assigned tasks and corner of the organization.<sup>9</sup> Password mania is a manifestation of this process. Passwords are designed to benefit the organization more than they are to serve and protect us and are imposed and managed in a way to make them increasingly self-defeating. It is another example of how many benefits of modernity were undercut by the procedures that accompany them.

“Physician, Heal Thyself” speaks to “Foo Fighters.” Tony and his flight crew were mere numbers to army air force brass. Their accomplishments are measured in tons of ordnance dropped, not in targets destroyed. Crews were dispensable, in part because they were plentiful. With the help of statisticians, the army air force figured out how many missions they would have to fly before being rotated home. The army air force did their best to strike a fine balance between their goal of dropping bombs and ability to replace expected losses. They also had to maintain minimal morale to ensure that crew would go in the air and make serious efforts to hit their designated targets.

The principal reason losses were high is that the army air force flew during



the day in contrast to the safer night-time missions flown by the British. They also went deeper into Germany, and this before they had effective fighter escorts with disposable fuel tanks. They flew these costlier missions primarily for organizational reasons; they were anxious to show how effective they were in destroying targets and thereby gain independence from the army and become a separate branch of the armed forces. Night-time bombing was notoriously inaccurate, and the generals relied on their new Norden bombsight – which could only function in daylight -- and heavily armed B-17s to achieve their goal. Bombing remained notoriously unreliable and attacks against heavily defended industrial sites were too costly to continue. The generals switched to city busting with the goal of killing people and destroying German morale. Neither strategy worked – the postwar bombing survey suggested that “strategic” bombing damaged oil and industrial production but strengthened civilian resolve -- but the army air force chose metrics that gave the appearance of success.<sup>10</sup> The lives of B-17 crews were put at risk or wasted for very little purpose.

The air force played the same game in Vietnam and the army relied on so-called “body counts” – how many Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers they killed. As these numbers went up, they inspired confidence in the Pentagon and Defense Department. They were, of course, greatly exaggerated, and no measure of what was in essence a largely political struggle for influence.<sup>11</sup> As those on the ground in “Surviving Tet” recognized, their metrics blinded Washington to the uncomfortable truth that they were losing the war. Some argue for the more nefarious possibility that the generals knew this and stuck with their metrics as a form of denial or simply as a means of looking good in the eyes of the Johnson and then Nixon administrations.

“Foo Fighters” also has personal connections. Our row house in Rego Park, Queens was only a few miles from LaGuardia Airport. I was fascinated by airplanes and my father would use some of his precious gasoline ration to drive me to LaGuardia, which had become an important transit point for planes being sent to the European Theater of Operations. The pilots were women and the planes were whatever was scheduled to cross the Atlantic. P-47 Thunderbolt and P-51 Mustang fighters and B-17 and B-24 bombers passed through. The airport was constantly expanding with temporary buildings of all kinds adjacent to its original Art Deco terminal and hangars. Parking was chaotic, with changing roadways, signs, and

parking areas. One Saturday, my cousin Steve joined us. My mother Ruth was a nervous and annoying back seat driver. She warned Dad not to turn where he was heading. He insisted that the dirt track led to a parking area, and for once Mom was right. We went around a hangar and discovered ourselves on an active taxi-way. Coming slowly toward us was a bomber and I shouted out that it was a B-24. This was not the question foremost in the mind of either parent. Dad had by now come to a halt, as did the bomber. The engines were feathered, a side door opened, and a woman in flight overalls and a leather helmet stuck out her head and shouted at the top of her lungs: "What the fuck are you doing here?" Steve and I learned our first four-letter word.

I knew the War was serious business. People were being killed. The Nazis were evil and had to be defeated. Following my parents and most Americans – and I felt very American by 1945 -- I had a black-and-white view of the War. We were the good guys, they – Germans, Japanese, and Italians – were the bad guys. Our bombers were the best, our crews the bravest and we would prevail. I devoured the news about Hiroshima and Nagasaki with pleasure, again taking my cue from grownups that these bombings would end the War and save American lives. The seeds of more critical inquiry were nevertheless sown. Our block had a high percentage of immigrants: Jews, non-Jewish Germans who were anti-Nazi, and anti-fascist Italians. They were all nice people and their kids were my friends. My solidarity with them clashed with efforts to demonize Axis peoples, especially Germans and Japanese. I remember wondering what it would be like to have Japanese neighbors and friends. Would they be any different?

My initial disillusionment with government was also war-related. Everyone on the "Home Front" was encouraged to recycle. I had a little red wagon with rubber wheels. I joined the other kids on the block to collect fats, tin cans, other kinds of meal, and newspapers, all for use in war production. One of my friend's dads took everything we gathered to a collection point. Sometime after the War I learned that people were so good about recycling that the government was overwhelmed and simply dumped much of what they received. So much for my effort to help win the War. I now used my wagon to carry around my collection of toy planes. The pride of my collection was wooden model B-17 that dad and I had assembled and that he carefully painted.

By the late 1940s I was devouring books about the War and especially the role of aircraft. I read about the fire-bombings of German and Japanese cities and, thanks to John Hersey, about the destruction wrought by the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We may have been the good guys but we did not always behave like them. To be sure, there were difficult trade-offs to be made between ethics and military advantage, but my reading indicated that these trade-offs were never framed as such. Almost everywhere, leaders did what they thought was advantageous – and all the more so if other people or peoples paid the price. As often as not, what they thought advantageous was not. The bombing of Germany and the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are cases in point. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are more recent examples. Nothing much has changed.

“Gregor Samsa’s Sister” was, of course, inspired by Kafka’s famous “Metamorphosis.” It lends itself to multiple interpretations. If one focuses on the reaction of Gregor Samsa’s family to his becoming a giant insect it can be read as an extreme version of families confronted with problematic and embarrassing children because of their physical or mental handicaps or unacceptable behavior. We have all read about people giving away such children, putting them in institutions, or even hiding them in attics and cellars. The story can also be read from Gregor’s perspective and his struggle to understand his new body and minimize the embarrassment and discomfort he has caused his family. Either approach sheds light on the problem of modernity and the constraining, if not dehumanizing, bourgeois values and life-style to which it has given rise.

I chose to tell the story from the perspective of Gregor’s sister Greta. She is a talented and nubile young woman who is upwardly mobile and deeply attached to her family, especially her brother. Gregor’s transformation has major consequences for her as it does for her family. If word gets out that her brother has become a giant insect Greta is at risk of losing her job, her suitor, and the musical career to which she aspires. She has hard choices to make as her interests and those of her brother and family appear to clash. My story is about her shifting commitment from her brother to herself. She is initially protective of him, but less so, Kafka suggests, as the crisis deepens. It is a universal tale about how hormones and ambition drive people and then offer justifications for what they have done.

Greta Samsa's dilemma is a fictional version of the kind of tragic choices that people and policymakers regularly confront. Greta is somewhat more self-aware than many political leaders but still tries to finesse any choice and then to deny she is making one when she does. She and her family have good defenses, no doubt in part because they support one another in their decision to abandon Gregor. As Kafka tells us, they go off at the end of the story for a picnic in the countryside.

The least unsettling part of Kafka's tale may be Gregor's transformation into an insect. It is such an unlikely, really impossible, event that we are not afraid of something similar happening to us. How our family responds to us is another matter. Healthy people generally come from healthy families where people stand by one another through thick and thin. The Samsas do not pass this test. Fear, economic, career, and love interests undermine family solidarity and reveal how shallow it is. This is even more true of social structures not based on blood ties. Kafka suggests that in the end we are alone in a generally cruel world. It is also a world filled with irony because a large part of what destroys the Samsas as a family is the search by individuals for belonging.

Kafka's tale and mine encourage readers to consider the counterfactual: what would have happened if the Samsas had responded differently to Gregor? He would presumably have survived his transformation, although lost his job and the income on which the family was dependent. An innovative father or sister might have made some arrangement with a university or museum of natural history to use him as an object of study and receive some payment in return. They might not unreasonably have hoped that one day he would wake up his old self. Either way they would have kept him alive and managed to communicate with him as Kafka has Gregor retain his full mental capacities. At worst, he would have spent the remainder of his life in the apartment and have been treated as a member of the family.

Greta's fears of the social consequences to herself and her family of public knowledge of Gregor's condition are not unreasonable. They might well have been shunned by neighbors and it is certainly possible that Greta's beau would have looked elsewhere for female companionship. Nobody in the family seems to have thought the matter through and to have made any considered choices. Rather, they respond emotionally, and the

predominant emotion for all of them is fear. For the parents the fear is literal and visceral fright when confronted with a large and “ugly” insect. For Greta it is fear in the Aristotelian sense; she imagines all kinds of future negative consequences for herself if word about her brother’s condition becomes public. There is no evidence in Kafka’s story, or mine, of careful risk assessment by the Samsa family. Their fright and fears propel them to act, in non-reflexive ways by the parents and in a calculating way by Greta. Both routes lead them to betray their son or brother.

“Rough Waters” is another tragic tale, and one with the usual mix of sympathetic and unsympathetic figures. The catalyst was the almost daily stories we read about the plight of political and economic refugees from Africa and the Middle East. There are enough drownings that the dangers of crossing the Mediterranean have become normalized in our minds. I attempt to create empathy by imaging a world in which we – or people very much like us – are the refugees. Aristotle thought the defining feature of tragedy was its *peripeteia* (reversal). This usually takes the form of a dramatic change in a hero’s circumstances, the classic example being the fate of Oedipus. The tension of tragedy is enhanced by the audience’s recognition that a reversal is about to occur well before the hero comes to this realization. Henry, Charlotte, and their daughters set out on their journey in high hopes of escaping the growing horrors of England and making a new life for themselves in Sub-Saharan Africa. We know that their flight will prove more perilous than they do, which creates tension that is not resolved until close to the end of the tale.

There is a more fundamental and dramatic *peripeteia* that drives the plot line. This is the gradual freezing of northern Europe brought about by climate change. It produces a dramatic reversal in living conditions in Europe and Africa, encouraging a reverse migration. This may seem far-fetched to some readers, but many scientists think this world is around the corner. The Gulf Stream has already slowed to a crawl and is in danger of stopping. If it does, the glaciers will return to northern Europe in short order. Henry and Charlotte are stand-ins for all of us and the reversal of fate the story describes is ours. Tragic heroes recognize what is in store for them too late to do anything about it. This is true of Henry and Charlotte, but not of humanity in general. There is still time to slow or stop climate change, but not much time, and dramatic action is required. It will not happen unless people demand changes from their governments, who otherwise

will continue to do the bidding of corporations intent on making short-term profits at the expense of our well-being, if not the lives of our children and grandchildren.

Friends who read an early draft of this story liked it, but some suggested Henry and Charlotte were insufficiently anxious about their migration given the perils faced by refugees. I had deliberately refrained from imparting any real sense of terror or helplessness to them. They are Westerners, wealthy and educated in comparison to most African asylum seekers. They have a false sense of confidence and try to treat their adventure as something of a holiday.

Psychologists tell us that people find it difficult to make decisions that involve important trade-offs, as becoming a refugee certainly does. People try to postpone such decisions, which is why it takes something extraordinary to convince them to leave their homes and countries for an uncertain future. If they screw up their courage and commit themselves to a course of action that they recognize involves significant risks they are likely to “spread the alternatives.” They convince themselves that what initially appeared to be something like a 51 to 49 percent one is now a 90-10 choice. They become correspondingly insensitive to information and warnings that suggest their venture may prove fruitless or disastrous.<sup>12</sup> I imagine that many Syrian, Libyan, and other African refugees invoked psychological defenses of this kind to cope with the anxiety aroused by leaving home. The key here is the belief that the existing course of action – staying put – is unacceptable. People often find it easier to imagine the horrors that await them at home than they do those they may encounter on the road. The former can be more vivid to them, especially if horrible things have happened to friends or neighbors. Psychologists find that vividness is central to decisions of this kind.<sup>13</sup>

I have a great appreciation for the kinds of decisions refugees make, and the difficult choices they confront between known dangers at home and unknown ones on the road. My original family was rounded up in France in July of 1942 and for many years I thought I was the only survivor. I was hidden in a village, smuggled over the Pyrenees into Spain, crossed the U-boat infested Atlantic, entered the US as an illegal immigrant, was sent to an orphanage, adopted by a loving American family, and made a citizen by a sympathetic judge when my adoption became legal. The odds of my

survival and good fortune were not high and every day I think about those who did not have my string of extraordinary breaks. It is in our power to do something about refugees. Small, hardly noticed, sacrifices by many people can have huge positive consequences for those at risk. The refugees in my story are compelled to search for a new life, and accept the risks involved by climate change. Here too, small sacrifices or minor good deeds can have profoundly beneficial effects in averting a looming and perhaps planet-wide disaster.

To make these sacrifices – and to feel good about making them – we have to get outside ourselves, or as Rousseau would suggest, inside ourselves, to discover our basic humanity. Either way, we must take a step back from our daily concerns, roles, and short-term interests to recognize how our fate – and that of our planet – is inextricably connected with others. This kind of reflection must be supplemented by empathy for others and the emotional satisfaction that develops from helping them. Reason and emotion combined can connect us with others, lead to more selfless behavior, and make us feel better about ourselves.

“Looking East” offers another variant of this dilemma. Lubec, Maine is a deeply divided town where traditional solidarity has been eroded by COVID and its politicization by Donald Trump and his Republican supporters. I dramatize this conflict in the escalating struggle between a MAGA hat wearing Trumpite who dismisses the virus as an invention of the Democrats and a liberal physician who is struggling to cope with a rising number of infections and the refusal of some – among them our protagonist – to wear masks, social distance, or get vaccinated.

Given its political divisions I thought Lubec the perfect setting for a Romeo and Juliet type tale where two young lovers – the daughter and son of the Trump supporter and the doctor -- confront hostility from their warring families. Karl Marx observed that when history repeats itself it is often a tragedy the first time around and a farce the second. Our young couple, who read Shakespeare’s play in school contemplate a similar plot but in the expectation of a happier ending. They struggle – as I did – to come up with a scenario that is not too dangerous but also promises to compel their parents to put their conflict aside. Everything they and I could think up verged on the farcical, so the plot moved elsewhere.

The other problem was with my Trump supporter. He embodies all the evils

of the far-right and has the kind of authoritarian personality that makes him a bad husband and father. This is a credible portrayal of many of Trump's most vocal supporters but also made him too cardboard a character for my liking. So I decided to give Ron some nuance and the bastard changed before my eyes. He felt guilty about slapping his daughter when he learned that she was dating the son of his nemesis and that some peeping tom had posted on-line photos of them making out on the beach. His apology took the wind out of my plot. I got even by giving him COVID, which he deserved for not wearing a mask, getting vaccinated, and for going to the Sturgis, SD motorcycle rally, which, as predicted, was a super spreader. I struggled to portray him as having some admirable qualities but not doing any kind of incredible about-face. I leave it for readers to decide if I squared this circle successfully. Is it possible to be a Trump supporting, science denying, democrat-hating, conspiracy theorist and still have some kind of positive relationship with your family and respect for the independence of your wife and children?

"A Night at the Opera" is the other story that was previously published", although it appears here in revised form. It is an outgrowth of my research on counterfactuals -- "what ifs" in everyday English. Counterfactuals are, or should be, of great interest to social scientists interested in causation. If we posit that "X" caused "Y" we are also saying, other things being equal, in the absence of "X" there would be no "Y." To make a credible causal claim we must test this counterfactual case. Causation is, of course, never so simple, especially in the social world where events have multiple causes, and it is impossible to isolate hypothesized causes as we can sometimes do in the bench sciences.

When I wrote this story, I was tilting at the irrational belief held by many historians and social scientists that the past was "overdetermined" – that is more or less had to happen as it did – but that the future is wide open.<sup>14</sup> Past and future are, of course, logical equivalents, with the future becoming the past in due course – and more rapidly so at my age. The events seen as most determined by most people are those closest to the present. The further back we go, the more contingent they appear. People will see the COVID pandemic and the 9.11 attacks more difficult to have forestalled than, say

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\*\* Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), ch. 7.



World War I or Lincoln's assassination regardless of the merit of the case. They will be more resistant to counterfactuals that unmake recent events than those that undo more distant events. However, the more vivid we make our counterfactuals the more credible they become to those exposed to them. Vividness in this context means making the story come alive by adding details that make it easier for readers to put themselves into the tale.

A former colleague and I conducted an experiment in which we "unpacked" alternative endings to the Cuban missile crisis. We told the same story about a different outcome three times but on each occasion added more detail. The first scenario gave three other possible outcomes for the crisis. The second added three reasons for each of these outcomes. The final scenario added irrelevant details such as the weather and names of ships. Detail made each account more vivid and more credible to the historians, international relations scholars, and policymakers in our sample.

In a follow-on experiment I tried to get vividness to work in reverse, that is to make a counterfactual scenario less plausible. I devised what I called a "long-shot" counterfactual to prevent World War I. Such counterfactuals involve multiple, minimal rewrites of history at some temporal distance from the event they are intended to mutate. They generally require a longer and elaborate chain of logic linking them to the event in question. They also need enabling counterfactuals to sustain their chain of logic. Although people see events as more contingent the further back from them in time one asks, I hypothesized that long-shot counterfactuals should be judged less credible than their close-call counterparts because of their longer chain of logic and greater number of enabling counterfactuals. I further surmised that their plausibility will be affected negatively by their vividness, an attribute that is otherwise assumed to enhance the plausibility of counterfactuals. The experimental results confirm this proposition.

"A Night at the Opera" was the instrument for my experiment. It is a short story set in a counterfactual world where there was no First World War nor anything like it. My heroine imagines how different this world might have been if Mozart had died at 35, the age of her partner. She constructs a chain of logic leading from the great Austrian composer's premature death to a conflagration in 1914. The argument rests on the political effects of Romanticism and how it would have flourished if Mozart had died young. This account is followed by a blistering critique from an imaginary reviewer

for a journal to whom the story has been submitted. The critic uses standard social science arguments to show why our world could not possibly exist! A short, third part of the story is an angry rejoinder by my heroine.

The three-part tale is, of course, tongue in cheek. It is intended to be amusing, but also to raise seriously the prospect that small, seemingly insignificant developments in domains far removed from international relations might nevertheless have profound political consequences. This flies in the face of common sense in two ways: we don't expect music or poetry to shape politics, and we think big developments must have big causes. In my experiment I asked a control group of historians, international relations scholars, and policymakers to assess the contingency of World War I or anything like it in the second decade of the twentieth century. The experimental group was asked the same question – but only after reading the first part of the story, where the heroine in effect untracks World War I by means of Mozart's longevity. The international relations scholars and historians in the experimental group evaluated the contingency of World War I significantly lower than the control group.

The variation in this and related experiments supports the general understanding in the psychological literature that causation should be understood as a distinctly perceptual category.<sup>15</sup> It also indicates that historians, international relations scholars, and people in the policy world combine an interesting mix of political sophistication and cognitive naiveté. They have no difficulty recognizing the implications of counterfactuals and are strongly motivated to accept or reject them on the basis of their world views. Participants can nevertheless be encouraged by means of counterfactual priming to acknowledge more contingency than they otherwise would. "Psychologic" has the potential to render their judgments logically incoherent. This is most evident in the case of long-shot counterfactuals, which can reduce overall judgments of contingency by historians and international relations scholars despite surveys across cases that indicate that they judge events and outcomes increasingly contingent the further back in time from an event they are asked to make these assessments. These contradictions between beliefs and assessments might be reconciled with reference to the effects of vividness on estimates of contingency, but this in turn raises further questions about the ways in which scholars make assessments of historical contingency.

My experiments dramatize the tension between “psycho-logic” and the laws of statistical inference, which guide the imaginary critique. Psychology describes the various cognitive and motivational biases that make estimates of probability and attributions of responsibility different from the expectations of so-called rational models. Biases and heuristics of all kinds can and have been described and documented by standard psychological studies and case studies of political decision making. Understanding biases intellectually and “feeling” them emotionally are not the same thing. The latter, I contend, is essential if we are to free ourselves from their grip. It is equally important to understand the conservative bias of the laws of statistical inference to avoid becoming their unwitting prisoner. Psychology, which makes us more receptive to contingency by reason of the vividness of its narratives, is one way of preventing this.

My story has relevance to fiction more generally. Good stories are vivid stories. We empathize with their characters and the circumstances they confront – or are repelled by them. We respond emotionally, not just reflexively. Our vicarious experience of others’ suffering, as Aristotle maintained in the case of tragedy, can have profound consequences for how we understand ourselves and the world. For this reason, novels like Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), and Harriet Becher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and George Orwell’s *1984* (1948) have had profound social or political influence. Fiction that people take for fact, as with conspiracy theories, can also have profound real-world consequences. Entering fictional worlds can thus have divergent effects, and this is where reflection and caution come into play. But reflection is also a double-edged sword. It is beneficial when it makes us question dubious claims but not when our pre-conceptions imprison us. Literature performs a service not only when it connects us with other people but opens our minds to their perspectives.

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