

THE LIMITS OF POWER: THE END OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM¹

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*“The United States may still remain the mightiest power the world has ever seen, but the fact is that Americans are no longer masters of their own fate.”*³

I. Introduction

Now beginning its eighth year of war in Afghanistan, sixth year of war in Iraq, and second year of global financial meltdown, the United States is under pressure as never before both at home and abroad. Due largely to the methods it has employed in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), the nation’s reputation is diminished in the international community.⁴ Retired generals fill book shelves and airwaves with critiques of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ In *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, Andrew Bacevich provides a fresh perspective on how all of those problems relate to the American belief that the United States is a nation different from any other.

Bacevich contends that our culture of consumption has perverted the nation’s foreign policy to such an extent that it will be our undoing.⁶ In less than two hundred pages, he makes it clear that both Republicans and Democrats share the blame for the misuse of American power abroad.⁷ Worse, neither party is willing to make the difficult choices necessary to enact the fundamental changes in American policy and lifestyle necessary to prevent our decline.⁸ He begins with the Biblical admonition to “set thine house in order”⁹ before explaining why our house is in disarray and why no one is willing to face that fact.

According to Bacevich, the quest of the United States to assert itself in the international community in the immediate post–World War II era gradually morphed over the course of the Cold War period into a crusade for global hegemony and an attempt to re-make the rest of the world in our image.¹⁰ Depending on the point of view, that crusade has reached either its zenith or nadir in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He states that the common American feeling that we are an exceptional nation, with the ability to bend history to our whims, has led to an increased willingness to use military force to preserve our profligate consumer culture.¹¹

II. Author, Use of Sources, and Organization

As a retired Army officer and current academic historian, Andrew Bacevich is well-qualified to deliver this critique of American foreign policy. Bacevich is a West Point graduate who served in Vietnam and the first Gulf War, earned a Ph.D. in history from Princeton after retiring from active duty, and is now a professor in Boston University’s International Relations Department.¹² He describes his political philosophy as traditional conservatism¹³ to distinguish himself from the neo-

¹ ANDREW J. BACEVICH, *THE LIMITS OF POWER: THE END OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM* (2008).

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³ BACEVICH, *supra* note 1, at 16–17.

⁴ R. Jeffrey Smith, *U.S. Tried to Soften Treaty on Detainees*, WASH. POST, Sept. 8, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/07/AR2009090702225.html>.

⁵ See, e.g., TOMMY FRANKS, *AMERICAN SOLDIER* (2005), RICARDO SANCHEZ, *WISER IN BATTLE: A SOLDIER’S STORY* (2008).

⁶ BACEVICH, *supra* note 1, at 6.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 66.

⁹ 2 *Kings* 20:1.

¹⁰ BACEVICH, *supra* note 1, at 54.

¹¹ *Id.* at 13.

¹² Andrew Bacevich—Curriculum Vitae, <http://www.bu.edu/ir/faculty/CV%27s/bacevich.pdf> (last visited Oct. 1, 2009).

conservatives, whose philosophy couldn't be more different than his own. Bacevich preaches restraint, both military and fiscal, as the bedrock of American values, whereas neo-conservatives use American military force as a diplomatic tool and are willing to engage in deficit spending to pay for it.

Bacevich's education and professional accomplishments don't fully explain the vehemence of his arguments. Even before the text of the book begins, the dedication page brings gravity and resonance to the ideas that follow. This is not only the distillation of nearly ten years of professional study and publication on the author's part; it is also intensely personal. The book is dedicated to the memory of the author's son, First Lieutenant Andrew Bacevich, U.S. Army, who was killed in a bombing near Samarra on 13 May 2007.¹⁴ The elder Bacevich had already authored three books and dozens of op-ed pieces critical of American foreign policy at the time of his son's death.

Despite losing his son in a war which he opposes, the book is not an angry rant. It is a well-reasoned, well-supported description of what is wrong with American foreign policy. The sheer variety of sources the author skillfully weaves together to make his point is impressive. He employs official Government statistics, memoirs, interviews, congressional testimony, and the writings of other academics in impressive fashion. Bacevich's look back at how we went so wrong relies heavily on the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, the influential American theologian and philosopher. He quotes from Niebuhr over a dozen times, far more than any other source. Bacevich holds him up as a modern-day prophet who predicted the factors that would lead to the decline of the United States long before anyone else.¹⁵ Years ago, Niebuhr warned, "what he called 'our dreams of managing history'—born of a peculiar combination of arrogance and narcissism—posed a mortal threat to the United States. Today, we ignore that warning at our peril."¹⁶

III. Current Economic, Political, and Military Crises

Bacevich splits his argument into three sections: the crisis of profligacy, the political crisis, and the military crisis.

Bacevich first examines the crisis of profligacy, which he describes as the source of all of other problems. In his eyes, freedom, as practiced today by most Americans, means having something more to buy. "The ethic of self gratification has firmly entrenched itself as the defining feature of the American way of life."¹⁷ For the first half of the twentieth century, expansion and abundance were good for most Americans. In the immediate post-World War II era, the United States reached its exports peak. It was a net creditor to nations around the world, and, for the first time, the international monetary system was based on the dollar, not the British pound sterling.¹⁸

Prior to 1950, the United States had already begun to import foreign oil. This would prove to be "the canary in the economic mineshaft. Yet for two decades, no one paid it much attention."¹⁹ That economic canary nearly expired during the oil crisis of the 1970s, which prompted President Carter to deliver the infamous "malaise" speech urging Americans to curb their dependence on foreign oil and accept short term sacrifices to achieve that goal.²⁰ Instead of heeding the warning, the country elected Ronald Reagan, who "added to America's civic religion two crucial beliefs: credit has no limits, and the bills will never come due."²¹

Over the next three presidencies, only Bill Clinton managed to occasionally balance the budget. Increased oil use accompanied the idea that the United States could secure its interests using military might in the Persian Gulf and our

¹³ Amy Goodman, Conservative Historian Andrew Bacevich Warns Against Obama's Escalation of War in Afghanistan and Intensifying Use of Air Power in Region, available at http://www.democracynow.org/2009/5/11/conservative_historian_andrew_bacevich_warns_against.

¹⁴ Brian MacQuarrie, *Son of Professor Opposed to War Is Killed in Iraq*, BOSTON GLOBE, May 15, 2007, available at http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/05/15/son_of_professor_opposed_to_war_is_killed_in_iraq/.

¹⁵ BACEVICH, *supra* note 1, at 12.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 16.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 24.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 28.

²⁰ *Id.* at 35.

²¹ *Id.* at 34.

interests in the area. September 11th provided the opportunity to finally invade Iraq and spread democracy.²² Had Iraq not come apart at the seams, the consequences of American profligacy might have stayed hidden awhile longer.²³

The second crisis Bacevich describes is the political crisis. No one has stated more succinctly the view of American exceptionalism and empire than Donald Rumsfeld shortly after September 11th: “We have a choice either to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way that they live, and we chose the latter.”²⁴ Since the birth of the nation, politicians have claimed that the United States has a special role as moral guidepost for the rest of the world. The concept goes back at least as far as John Winthrop’s “City on a Hill” sermon.²⁵ Politicians of both parties allowed the public to believe that, while asking less and less of them. “The horrors of September 11th notwithstanding, most Americans subscribed to a limited-liability version of patriotism, one that emphasized the display of bumper stickers in preference to shouldering a rucksack.”²⁶ According to Bacevich, Washington, especially Congress, has been unable to manage its own affairs; consequently, over the past half century, Congress has continually ceded ever greater power to the Executive Branch, allowing what he refers to as the “imperial presidency” to develop.²⁷

Additionally, since 1940, a series of “national security emergencies, real and imagined” have allowed the Executive Branch to build a national security apparatus so vast and unwieldy, presidents prefer to circumvent it with their own advisors.²⁸ According to Bacevich, those advisors, or “wise men,” have a terrible track record. If Niebuhr is his prophet, then Paul Nitze is his bogeyman, responsible for hyping threats to national security in order to perpetuate a militarized mindset, which started in the early 1950s.²⁹ Although the United States acts as if it gets a fresh start every four to eight years, when a new president arrives in the White House, little actually changes. In Bacevich’s estimation, Democrats and Republicans differ, not in actual foreign policy philosophy, but by the degree to which they are willing to wield military might to accomplish the nation’s goals. Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld both dangerously underestimated the consequences of the use of force and ceded responsibility for the aftermath to their military commanders.³⁰ According to Bacevich, “a Pentagon file clerk who misplaces a classified document faces stiffer penalties than a defense secretary whose arrogant recklessness consumes thousands of lives.”³¹

Finally, Bacevich addresses the military crisis. He is concerned that the nation and its armed forces will learn the wrong lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan. “Reconfigure the armed services to fight ‘small wars’; empower the generals; reconnect soldiering to citizenship—on the surface, each of these has a certain appeal.”³² However, in Bacevich’s opinion, those are the wrong lessons to learn. Rather than fighting small wars of empire, the United States should pursue a non-imperial foreign policy.³³ Bacevich is especially critical of the generals and admirals who have conducted Americans’ small wars since the end of the Cold War. He singles out numerous commanders for their military failures in Iraq and Kuwait, Kosovo, and Iraq again. In his eyes, no senior officer in the past fifteen years has done anything more than mediocre work even though granted remarkable strategic autonomy by the Commander in Chief.³⁴ “A great army is one that accomplishes its mission,”³⁵ and, according to Bacevich, poor generalship coupled with bad foreign policy has left the U.S. Army unable to do so. Our civilian

²² *Id.* at 62.

²³ *Id.* at 63.

²⁴ Donald Rumsfeld, Sec’y of Def., Dep’t. of Def., Address to the Men and Women of Whiteman Air Force Base (Oct. 19, 2001).

²⁵ Rev. John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, City on a Hill Sermon (circa 1630).

²⁶ BACEVICH, *supra* note 1, at 63.

²⁷ *Id.* at 69.

²⁸ *Id.* at 78, 101.

²⁹ *Id.* at 107–08.

³⁰ *Id.* at 120, 128.

³¹ *Id.* at 88.

³² *Id.* at 141.

³³ *Id.* at 143.

³⁴ *Id.* at 147.

³⁵ *Id.* at 124.

leaders have failed to understand that the use of force is a gamble, both in lives and outcomes.³⁶ The author urges all citizens to insist on a more modest foreign policy in line with our actual military capabilities.³⁷ That requires reigning in the imperial presidency and truly supporting our troops by relieving them of the burden of imperial ambitions.³⁸

IV. Critiques

Although it is difficult to criticize the book's underlying themes and the reasoning behind them, the book is not without flaws. For all of his tearing down, Bacevich does little building up. His recommendations for changing the system are limited at best. Even within the limits of his terse and focused prose, he provides barely more than a to-do list for the country. He suggests Americans should live within their means, which would entail ending the nation's dependence on foreign oil;³⁹ however, he offers no plan for ending that dependence. His silence on alternatives to oil dependence is especially glaring given his proposal to fix the system by focusing on arresting or reversing climate change.⁴⁰ Since fossil fuel emissions are a fundamental cause of climate change, Bacevich should explain how cleaning up the environment would benefit national security. Instead, he makes the usual suggestions that we stop ordering our allies around,⁴¹ start negotiating with them in the common interest,⁴² and contain Islamic extremism through cultural and educational exchanges.⁴³ Bacevich contends that the United States should also work toward the eradication of nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, he devotes less than ten pages to these suggestions and fails to explain how to accomplish any of them.

Meanwhile, the American abundance he discusses so frequently has clearly eluded many citizens, especially African Americans and Native Americans. Although he mentions the movement to increase certain freedoms during the 1950s and 1960s,⁴⁵ Bacevich pays short shrift to the country's oppression of both groups. He attempts to find a causal link between increased power projection overseas in the 1950s to the civil rights and feminism movements of the 1960s and 1970s,⁴⁶ but his arguments are poorly reasoned and weakly supported. Spending less than two pages of discussion and using a throwaway reference to General Curtis LeMay's relationship to Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* does the argument no favors.

Additionally, Bacevich's argument that both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be ended quickly appears to contradict other observations in the book. For example, he states the American withdrawal from Somalia after the "Blackhawk Down" incident emboldened al Qaeda and led to the September 11th attacks,⁴⁷ yet he concludes a speedy withdrawal from both Iraq and Afghanistan is necessary, despite ongoing insurgencies in both countries. He advocates withdrawal with no accompanying analysis and without examining the possible consequences of doing so.

³⁶ *Id.* at 156–57.

³⁷ *Id.* at 169.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 174–75.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 180.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 175.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.* at 176.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 178–79.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 26–27.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 27.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 148–49.

V. Conclusion

Bacevich is certain the American system is bankrupt and that the only people footing the bills are members of the armed forces. He predicted that a possible outcome of American profligacy would be an “economic collapse comparable in magnitude to the Great Depression.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, he was right. The book’s updated afterward gives a brief sketch of the economic upheaval of 2008 and the author’s opinions about what caused it. He manages not to say “I told you so” but clearly believes that the current recession is evidence that he is right about American profligate spending habits.

First and foremost, this book is a critique of the American lifestyle and the foreign policy strategy needed to maintain the nation’s fundamental dependence on foreign oil and cheap consumer products. What is freedom? Who should pay for it? Is the price ever too high? These are uncomfortable questions that few on the national stage seem willing to ask. Before voting to deploy troops in harm’s way, all politicians and the citizens who voted for them should read this book and ask themselves those questions. Voters who consider themselves informed must be able to recognize the long term price, in blood and treasure, of military action and deficit spending. Those voters must be willing to make the personal sacrifices they have been willing to push off on members of the military and their families. They must also be willing to pay the monetary price they have been deferring to their children and grandchildren. That responsibility should not be pushed off on others; it should rest with each citizen if there is to be any hope for change.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 65.