If you ever worry that America is being run by a bumbling mass of venal nincompoops, or fret that American society is slouching toward self-destruction, Andrew Bacevich’s collected essays will provide ample fodder for your fears. On Shedding an Obsolete Past: Bidding Farewell to the American Century is not a work of scholarship, but rather a compilation of learned opinions. Bacevich peppers his pieces with a sprinkle of sarcasm and a dash of venomous invective, pulling no punches, barbs, or jibes as he excoriates the United States’ institutions, most notably its military, media, and political elites. Unfortunately, he has no shortage of material, and not just regarding President Donald Trump, a “bozo of such monumental proportions as to tax the abilities of our most talented satirists” (129). Bacevich himself might qualify for membership in that club of humorists. When discussing the efforts to impeach the former president, he quips that replacing Trump with Vice President Mike Pence is “the equivalent of excoriating Groucho for Harpo” (304). But Trump is just the lowest hanging fruit. The author reaches much deeper.

Bacevich’s primary concern is with the eight-decade-old paradigm of America as the “indispensable nation,” a notion he views as dangerously obsolete. As he sees it, a self-reproducing cadre of foreign policy gurus, sometimes called “the Blob,” has convinced itself that US military dominance and overseas meddling are requirements of a stable world order, one that largely benefits the US. Although this notion does nothing to aid average Americans, it preserves the status of the establishment.

Targeting the US military directly, he spotlights the debacles from Vietnam to Afghanistan and most of the conflicts in between. He is not wrong to point out what sentient observers already know: those wars did not go especially well. But his conclusion seems to be that if the United States would only withdraw its forces to its own shores, the world would be a far better place. The argument would be strengthened by a serious

effort to imagine what the world without an American military presence might look like. Do South Koreans really want American forces to exit the peninsula? Would most like to be left to fend for themselves against North Korea and an increasingly aggressive China? Would Japan or the Philippines prefer the United States’ absence in the region? If anything, those countries seem exceedingly anxious to maintain or enhance US commitments as a check on their threatening, sometimes hostile neighbors. Would Ukrainians appreciate a retrenched America or a dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)? Russian President Vladimir Putin would, of course, be thrilled with either outcome. Would an America that turned inward really leave behind a safer, better world? It is unclear from Bacevich’s writings exactly how global security would be strengthened if America withdrew. But he is undeniably correct that since 1950 its wars have not gone as hoped.

It is not hard to find fault with the blunders of Iraq or Afghanistan, two wars that the author says still haunt him, and for good reason. They were tragic in every sense. Following Thomas Ricks’s argument in The Generals, Bacevich condemns the failure to remove military leaders who fail. The generals, he insists, have forgotten how to win, and winning no longer seems the measure of success. He sees part of the problem in a new American militarism. As with Rosa Brooks in How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything, Bacevich laments an overreliance on military force to solve all problems. He further faults the media for not asking the hard questions about US engagements abroad.

And yet, one cannot help wondering about the other side of the story. Has US involvement solely been a source for ill? In his review of the post–World War II era, Bacevich makes no mention, at least in these pages, of the extraordinary humanitarian efforts after World War II, in which average Americans voluntarily ate less in order to free up grain for shipment to starving Europeans. The country’s actions during the food crisis of 1946–1947 saved millions of lives. Then came the Berlin Airlift, a year-long, entirely peaceful operation that rescued West Berlin from Soviet control. There may still be a handful of Germans alive today who recall the American “candy bombers,” pilots who dropped packets of sweets to children as they flew in millions of tons of food, medicine, and coal. What about the Korean War? True, it ended in a stalemate, but it also solidified South Korea’s freedom. Had America not intervened, the entire peninsula would today look like the North, ruled by a ruthless despot, and the rest of the world would not have Samsung, Hyundai, Squid Game, or Parasite, not to mention the boy band BTS. A world without K-Pop would surely be less joyful.

As for Vietnam, no sensible person could argue that the war was anything less than a disaster. And yet, millions of South Vietnamese wanted American intervention to save them from a life under Communism. During the great migration of 1954–1955, when the population was allowed to choose where it wanted to live,

---

4 Sheila Niyoshi Jager, Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).
some 100,000 people moved north, but nearly a million fled south. They quite literally voted with their feet. And when the war ended in defeat, hundreds of thousands scrambled to reach America, knowing exactly the fate that awaited them under Communist control. Vietnam was never in the United States’ direct national interest, but sometimes other factors can make intervention worth the risk. The blunder of American involvement obscures this difficult truth. Does it justify the years of carnage and destruction? Surely not. But it reminds us that America’s wars, their mismanagement notwithstanding, are not quite as one-dimensional as the author’s analysis suggests.

Today there are millions of Ukrainians and Taiwanese who shudder at the thought of America abandoning them in a moment of need. It was the administration of President Joe Biden (which Bacevich critiques for its obsolete establishment thinking) that mobilized democratic nations to support Kyiv, and it is the US which provides the bulk of defensive weapons to Taipei. These peoples might not find the idea of American indispensability quite so obsolete.

Bacevich is at his best when he asks us to question long-held assumptions surrounding national security. One need not agree with his conclusions to find value in the act of questioning. He charges that the media never tackles the big issues, focusing instead on serving up the latest portion of suffering. He writes that “journalism remains superficial, voyeuristic, and governed by the attention span of a two-year-old” (216), and later adds that “Rather than clearing the air, [the media] befog it further” (216).

Just a few of the many subjects that the media ignore and which he implores us to reconsider include the following questions: if the US military is funded at extremely high levels, why does it keep losing wars and is the money being well-spent? Should the president have the power to order assassinations of suspected terrorists abroad without any due process to establish guilt, especially if the president could never issue such an order within the US? Why should the US continue alliances with countries that do not share its core values? (Here he specifically references Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.) If America has the right to keep military bases around the world, why shouldn’t China? Why are Americans seemingly more concerned about terrorist attacks against Europeans than those in other parts of the world? Can the ongoing expansion of Israeli settlers really enhance the likelihood of a two-state solution?

Again, we need not agree with Bacevich’s conclusions to benefit from revisiting policy assumptions. By rethinking existing norms, we might come to more thoughtful approaches to national security. Small thinking, he asserts, has bedeviled success in war. Drawing comparisons between Vietnam and today, he muses that during Vietnam, the establishment never asked the most crucial questions: Why was the US there? Was the war even winnable? Were there no alternatives to the present failing formula? Regarding contemporary Middle East conflicts, he wonders why the establishment never posed comparable questions: was the war in Afghanistan winnable? Did it make any sense? What would it cost and how long would it last? Were there no alternatives to the quagmire?

---


Bacevich calls out for big-picture thinking on domestic politics as well. How, he asks, did America manage to produce in 2016 two polarizing and deeply disliked nominees for president as Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump? The answer, he declares, is the corrupting influence of money in campaigns, identity politics, and the transformation of politics into entertainment. The list is no doubt longer, but these three causes belong in the discussion. He offers ten first steps to reversing the United States’ steady national demise, from abolishing the Electoral College, to rolling back gerrymandering, limiting the impact of corporate money on elections, and treating climate change as a national security priority. Though one can differ on the precise prescription, it would be hard to argue against his claim that “the status quo appears increasingly untenable,” and that “incremental change will not suffice” (282).

Whether one agrees with his opinions or not, by highlighting the issues that often go unquestioned, Bacevich forces us to think through conventional wisdom. That is a goal to which all scholars should aspire.

Zachary Shore is Professor of History at the Naval Postgraduate School, Senior Fellow at UC Berkeley’s Institute of European Studies, and a National Security Visiting Fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution. He is the author of six books, including This Is Not Who We Are: America’s Struggle Between Vengeance and Virtue (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Grad School Essentials: A Crash Course in Scholarly Skills (University of California Press, 2016); A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival’s Mind (Oxford University Press, 2014); Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions (Bloomsbury, 2008); Breeding Bin Ladens: America, Islam, and the Future of Europe (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and What Hitler Knew: The Battle for Information in Nazi Foreign Policy (Oxford University Press, 2003). The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent those of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.