



Andrew J. Bacevich. *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 226 pages, plus notes.

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Andrew Bacevich's new book combines a concise survey of changes in the American military, American politics, and American foreign policy over the last thirty years with some deeply felt suggestions for change. The author spent the first half of his adult life in the US Army, and the book is most detailed on developments relating to the military, and especially to relations between military and civilian leaders and the increasing gulf, as he sees it, between civilian society and our military forces. It is also very stimulating, however, regarding more general cultural and political trends. Like his last book, *American Empire*, this one shows a profound discomfort with the hegemonic tendencies of American foreign policy and military strategy-tendencies which have grown, not abated, since the end of the Cold War. Unlike *American Empire*, *The New American Militarism* ends with a list of specific proposals for change-most of them institutional. It is both a useful summary of various aspects of recent history and a provocative critique of militarism, neoconservatism, and the influence of Christian apocalyptic thought, but it still tells us just a bit more about the author's concerns about our current course-concerns which I share-than about exactly how he would like to correct it.

The theme of the book is the United States's increasing belief in, idealization of, and reliance upon the American military to solve all our problems, and it explores how this has come about. Like many officers of his generation, Bacevich credits the post-Vietnam military leadership, led by Creighton Abrams, with checking civilian tendencies to involve American forces in dangerous adventures. That role, of which he thoroughly approves, began to ebb during the 1990s and now has evidently been abandoned. Bacevich then traces, angrily and effectively, the growth of neoconservatism, showing especially how a younger generation of neoconservatives shifted their doctrine's basic principle from vigilant resistance to evil to an aggressive crusade against it wherever it arises after the Soviet Union collapsed. In the eyes of Norman Podhoretz and Bill Kristol, such a crusade is critical not only to our strategic position, but to the moral nature of the United States itself, and President Bush has evidently embraced this vision as well. "In America's future," he summarizes ironically, "loomed the prospect of one, two, many Iraqs, and the future at long last appeared bright." Bacevich is deeply disturbed by the implications of our current national security strategy, which asserts the right to overthrow any regime we deem hostile and dangerous, and which has not gotten enough analysis in public life or in the press.

Turning from intellectuals to politicians, Bacevich deals succinctly with Ronald Reagan's rehabilitation of the military spirit (and of the purported "noble cause" of Vietnam), and argues that subsequent Presidents, including Bill Clinton, have climbed on the bandwagon. Here as in *American Empire*, I do not see Clinton exactly the same way. While it is true that he did nothing to alter the rhetorical direction of American foreign policy and went along with legislation like the Helms-Burton Act and the resolution calling for Saddam's overthrow, in practice he was a genuine multilateralist who showed no lust for a new great war. That meant, however, that he erected no obstacles to a return to a more militant course after he left. Nor does any leading Democrat today challenge the basic premises of our foreign

policy-that supporting our troops is the first priority, and that military power, properly applied, will solve all the problems we face. Interestingly enough, the only President for whom Bacevich expresses clear admiration in this book is Jimmy Carter, and he focuses on Carter's "malaise" speech of 1979. While acknowledging that the speech was politically disastrous, Bacevich reminds us that it was one of the few times in recent history that a President both focused on one of our major national problems-our dependence on foreign oil-and did not suggest that our military would provide the solution. That approach, however, was short-lived, and just six months later the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led Carter to take the first step down the road that has led to Kabul and Baghdad by proclaiming that the United States would defend the Persian Gulf by force if necessary. By 2003, of course, we had concluded that "defense" was not enough.

A subsequent chapter describes the role of Christian Evangelicalism and its alliance with the militant wing of the GOP, an alliance stemming largely from the Religious Right's view of the state of Israel as the harbinger of the last judgment. (In a welcome reminder, Bacevich mentions (p. 124) that despite Christ's own pacifism, "Christians historically have slaughtered their fellow men, to include their fellow Christians, in breathtakingly large numbers.") And then, he shows how all this political and religious enthusiasm for warfare has moved forward together with new approaches to fighting wars, specifically the emphasis on precision-guided munitions, smaller ground forces and fewer casualties that originated, in his view, with Albert Wohlstetter and has been promoted within the Pentagon by the venerable Andrew Marshall. All these changes, the book clearly implies, reflect reactions, in different spheres, to the catastrophe of Vietnam. Reagan rehabilitated the military morally, the all-volunteer force freed the population at large from much of its fear of foreign wars, the neoconservatives found new dragons that had to be slain, Evangelicals found a moral basis for further struggles, and military theorists found cheaper, cleaner ways to fight. Only late in the book, however, does he turn to the question of what the new wars are about.

The answer, he feels, is oil. Faced with political threats to American hegemony in the Middle East, the United States beginning in the 1980s began a long and escalating series of military involvements in the region, culminating in the march to Baghdad. (Bacevich, like virtually every Administration critic, supports the war against Afghanistan, but not, clearly, the war against Saddam Hussein.) Now the neoconservatives are trumpeting this extension of our empire as "World War IV" -- even though, as Bacevich says (p. 191) it is clearly a regional conflict that is really confined to just one part of one continent, an area that our foreign policy elite has decided we must control. Bacevich spends relatively little time on the other source of our involvement in the Middle East, the unwavering support of the neoconservatives for Israel and for any expansion of Israeli territory that Israeli leaders find necessary. That, I think, rather than oil, was probably the original impetus for the emergence of neoconservatism in the late 1960s, as Judith Klinghoffer showed in her book on the subject, but at this point it is probably impossible to disaggregate the two influences anyway.

And what is to be done? With respect to political objectives, even Bacevich has been swept along by events. There is no alternative, he says, to continuing our struggle with Osama Bin Laden for the future of the Middle East. However, his recommendations would inevitably mean that the United States would have to give up its obsession with controlling political and military events around the globe. In general, he wants a more defensive orientation for American foreign policy, a revived Congressional role to restrain executive adventures, a major reduction in our dependence upon foreign oil, and a withdrawal of foreign troops from nations that, in his view, no longer need them, including the European Union,

Korea, and Japan. He also wants a drastic reduction in the military budget, to bring it more in line with what other countries spend. In a sense, these proposals seem to reflect Bacevich's nostalgia for the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a chastened military leadership checked its civilian superiors. Rather than propose specifically to re-orient America's objectives, he would prefer to leave civilians with fewer options.

As a contemporary of Bacevich's whose life has also been divided between civilian academia and working for the Department of Defense--and who shares his interest in Charles A. Beard, who received more attention in his last book than in this one -- I would have preferred to see an alternative view of what the American place in the world might be, but as a historian I must agree that anything that might restrain over-ambitious civilians must generally be welcomed. The simple temptation of power remains perhaps the biggest danger to the peaceful and productive life of the human species.

His more specific recommendations involve the military. He does not call for a renewed draft, but proposes creatively that any young American signing up for the military receive a free college education. That undoubtedly would broaden the military's social base and free hundreds of thousands of talented young people of major educational debt burdens, but in today's fiscal climate it seems quite unlikely. And in an equally radical step, he proposes that the officer corps receive its education exclusively in civilian institutions, spending just one year at a service academy after graduation before commissioning. To one who has spent the last fifteen years in the military educational system that seems like a very interesting idea as well, but, I am afraid, equally unlikely of adoption.

While regretting that Bacevich could not offer new goals or more likely solutions to our current problems, I certainly cannot claim that I can do better. The author and I are virtually the same age, both of us served (in my case, only briefly and safely) in the Vietnam-era military, and both of us apparently have been questioning the scope of the United States' role in the world ever since. But in the wake of the end of the Cold War, when, as we agree, the United States essentially gave up the chance to return to a much narrower view of its world responsibilities, I have had to conclude that we have simply succumbed, like so many other nations of the past, to the temptations of superior power, and that nothing but a new series of setbacks is likely to make us reverse course. Neoconservatism, militant Evangelical religion, and our crusade for democracy are simply the contemporary manifestations of something much older and more intractable. For the time being, only our relatively restricted military capabilities will check what we can do, and only after we clearly have failed to achieve some of the extraordinary goals we have now set ourselves will we be forced to accept something less. But in the meantime, it is reassuring, in a small way, to see that we still produce dissenters, like Bacevich, who refuse to be swept along in the flow.

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