H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-6

Andrew Bacevich. ***The Age of Illusions: How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory.*** New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020. ISBN: 9781250175083 (hardcover, $27.00).

5 October 2020 | https://hdiplo.org/to/RT22-6
Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by James Goldgeier, American University

For Andrew Bacevich, the end of the Cold War left America without what it seemed to need most: an enemy. And without that enemy, it overlearned the lessons of the end of the Cold War embodied by capitalism's victory over Communism and sought to spread the American creed throughout the world, leading to a classic case of overstretch.

Bacevich makes effective use of his similar age to President Donald Trump, and the very different trajectories of their lives, including during Vietnam, where Bacevich served in the military. Trump, of course, did not, nor was he out protesting. Bacevich writes, "What can be said with certainty is that on the matter widely considered to be the defining issue of the day, Trump was a no-show," (18) a particularly poignant sentence to read during the global pandemic.

Bacevich argues that whatever criticism emerged regarding Francis Fukuyama's argument that 1989 marked "The End of History," a celebration of the West's political and economic victory over Communism, following its earlier victory over fascism, it provided the fuel for the hubris to follow, which "found expression in expectations of material abundance on an unheralded scale, permanent military supremacy, a vastly enlarged conception of personal freedom, and a belief in presidential wizardry" (60). Bacevich writes that regardless of Fukuyama's own later criticisms of policies undertaken in line with his argument (something that also beset George F. Kennan, the father of Cold War 'containment'), the triumphalist notion embodied by Fukuyama's thesis fed the elite consensus that took America down a misguided path.

Bacevich is unsparing in his critiques of Trump's three predecessors, whom he argues "will likely end up ranked alongside Presidents [John] Tyler, [James] Buchanan, and [Grover] Cleveland rather than in the company of [James] Polk, [Abraham] Lincoln, and [William] McKinley" (91). Given the themes of the book, the exaltation of Polk and McKinley to Lincoln's level is rather strange. Lincoln saved the Union, so there are not many presidents who will ever measure up. It is true that Polk enabled the United States to dramatically increase its territory, but he did so by going to war with Mexico. And certainly McKinley ensured the accession of the United States to the status of a global power, but, given the tenor of the book, it seems odd to compliment the imperial grab of the Philippines, which is the very definition of overstretch (not to mention its brutality).

Part of the challenge in measuring presidents is that we do not know what would have happened in the absence of their actions. While it seems fairly straightforward to argue that not invading Iraq in 2003 would have been a far better path for President George W. Bush to have taken, would a failure by President Bill Clinton to bail out Mexico in 1995 in the midst of its peso crisis (a foreign policy achievement that goes unmentioned) have far worsened the situation in the Western Hemisphere? Wouldn't an inadequate response by President Barack Obama to the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis have led to a much greater calamity at home and abroad (something the author only briefly addresses)? And while American intervention in the Balkans during the 1990s is used as an example of the American lack of restraint, the saving of innumerable lives in Bosnia and Kosovo must be worth something. Given the author's concern with too much American action, it would have been worth reflecting on the inaction during the Rwandan genocide.

Throughout the book, as Emma Ashford writes in her review, the author seeks to connect domestic politics and foreign policy, an interplay that "ultimately altered both." Seeing Trump not as cause but effect leads to the conclusion that the end of the Trump presidency will not mean the end of Trumpism, particularly given the continued rage felt by many Americans toward the elites who benefited from globalization but did little to mitigate the vast inequalities that created such economic imbalances in the United States and elsewhere. Ashford is disappointed by Bacevich's lack of engagement with the academic literature on the post-Cold War period, arguing that such an effort would have strengthened the analysis of the wrong turn the author ascribes to American foreign policy in the presidencies of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, and particularly the

overreach and the need for greater restraint that Ashford herself has discussed elsewhere.[1] She fears that the book's conclusion that the United States will continue to position its foreign policy in response to an enemy will lead not to an effort to combat climate change, as Bacevich hopes, but rather to exaggerate the threat posed by a rising China.

Lloyd Gardner focuses his review on American identity, particularly as expressed by presidents that the United States is a shining City on a Hill, a beacon of hope for the world. It was an image President Ronald Reagan was quite fond of using, and the end of the Cold War suggested that everyone, allies and former adversaries alike, understood its meaning. It seems as though the hubris that accompanied the end of a four-decade long struggle against the threat posed by the Soviet Union would have been hard to avoid, and it gave the United States a sense that it could create a better future through its economic prowess, political wisdom, and military superiority. Picking up on what he calls the "detachment" of the New Liberals like Bill Clinton who pursued free trade without adequate attention to those who would be disadvantaged by the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Gardner suggests that we should have been paying more attention to critics at the time such as presidential candidate Ross Perot and House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, who "signified a roiling undercurrent that would gain force until the New Liberal era came to an end with the election of Donald Trump."

Robert J. Lieber writes that the author's use of personal experiences and detailed cultural references, including the use of films such as "The Best Years of Our Lives" and "The Wizard of Oz" to provide key storylines, sets this book apart from others on the period. While Lieber finds much to praise about the book, he notes that the effort to demonstrate America's failings over the past three decades leaves out key features of other actors in the larger story, such as the desire of Central and Eastern Europeans to escape the trauma of Soviet domination and join Western institutions in ways that have improved the lives of millions across territory that was formerly locked behind the Iron Curtain. And he suggests, "By emphasizing elite responsibility as he does, Bacevich gives little attention to underlying technological change, the digital economy, and social trends that have important causal implications."

Bacevich's book is powerfully written, taking aim at an American elite that he believes erred by trying to dominate the world instead of providing for people at home. He writes eloquently on the "inverse relationship between wealth and likelihood of being killed or wounded in service to the country" (139). Ironically, while "Cold War victory" is in the title of the book, much of the problem Bacevich finds with post-Cold War thinking was a belief that what occurred at the end of the 1980s was America's victory and behaving accordingly, rather than, for example, giving enough credit to Poles, Czechs, Estonians, Ukrainians, and yes, even Russians, for throwing off the Soviet yoke.

Ultimately, the greatest service provided by this important book is forcing us to wrestle with what we think about the Cold War, what we think about the post-Cold War, and what we think Donald Trump's victory in 2016 represents.

Participants:

Andrew Bacevich is professor emeritus of history and international relations at Boston University. He currently serves as president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

James Goldgeier is a Robert Bosch Senior Visiting Fellow at the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution and a Professor of International Relations at the School of International Service at American University, where he served as Dean from 2011-17. He has authored or co-authored three books on American foreign policy after the end of the Cold War: Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO (Brookings, 1999); Power and Purpose: U.S.

[1] See, for example, Christopher A. Preble, Emma Ashford and Travis Evans, "Our Foreign Policy Choices: Rethinking America's Global Role," Cato Institute White Paper, 18 July 2016, https://www.cato.org/publications/white-paper/our-foreign-policy-choices-rethinking-americas-global-role.

Policy toward Russia after the Cold War (Brookings, 2003), co-authored with Michael McFaul; America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11 (PublicAffairs, 2008), co-authored with Derek Chollet.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow in Defense and Foreign Policy at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. She holds a PhD in Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia. Her current projects include a book draft on the foreign policy implications of oil production and export, and several articles on the future of U.S. grand strategy after the Trump administration.

Lloyd C. Gardner is Professor Emeritus of History at Rutgers University. A Wisconsin Ph.D., he is the author or editor of more than fifteen books on American foreign policy, including *Safe For Democracy*, *Approaching Vietnam*, and *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam*, and *The War on Leakers*. He has been president of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Affairs, and lives in Newtown, PA, with his wife Nancy.

Robert J. Lieber is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University where he has previously served as Chair of the Government Department and Interim Chair of Psychology. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Wisconsin and Ph.D. at Harvard. He is author or editor of seventeen books on international relations and U.S. foreign policy. His most recent books include, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order*; and *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline*. He is now at work on a book entitled, *The Indispensable Nation: US Foreign Policy in a Turbulent World.*

Review by Emma Ashford, Cato Institute

In *The Age of Illusions*, Andrew Bacevich argues that "ours is a nation which is coming apart at the seams" (186). The book is part foreign policy criticism, part contribution to the culture wars, and part personal reflection on the course of American history over the course of one man's life. It is a well-written and engaging read, chronicling America's post-Cold War struggle to define itself in the absence of an external enemy. What it is not, however, is a work of scholarship. That does not lessen its value as a powerful call for American elites to rethink their approach to policy in multiple areas, but it should be read accordingly.

The foreign policy themes of Bacevich's latest book will come as little surprise to those familiar with his previous work.[1] He excoriates America's post-Cold War foreign policy consensus, making a convincing argument that Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama were merely different flavors of the same liberal internationalist attempt to reshape the world in America's image. After all, each favored globalization and the maintenance of American primacy. Each spoke of the importance of liberty and freedom. And each to some extent burned American prestige and power seeking to achieve these ambitious global goals.

These are not new ideas—certainly not from Bacevich—yet they carry extra weight in the era of President Donald Trump. Reading the book, it is hard to conclude anything other than that the author was largely right about the course of American politics, and that he got there far earlier than most observers. As he describes, many of the movements that define today's Trump-era politics, most notably the populist domestic backlash against globalization and military adventurism overseas, could be seen as early as 1991.

The book's core strength is here, in its attempt to coherently pull together the strands of domestic and foreign policy turmoil in modern America. Too often, foreign policy is disregarded as irrelevant to the conduct of domestic politics, an extension of the old notion that politics stops at the water's edge. Today, that idea is increasingly suspect.[2] Indeed, it is unquestionably so when one considers the notion of liberal internationalism after 1991, which combines a form of muscular U.S. military primacy with commitments to expanding trade and globalization.

The interplay between domestic and foreign policy since 1991 has ultimately altered both: as Heather Hurlburt writes, "…the arrow of cause and effect points both ways. By ushering in a surge of globalization, international economic policies have helped reshape our society domestically over the last two decades. Perceiving international economic policy as the cause of economic and cultural changes they dislike, nationalist forces in our society have pushed back to reshape international economic policy."[3]

Bacevich is thus fundamentally correct when he argues that Donald Trump is less a cause of America's current disfunction than one manifestation of the failures of the post-Cold War period. As he explains, many of Trump's opponents "assume

[1] For just a few of his voluminous scholarly and popular writings, see Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004); Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Andrew Bacevich, *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016).

[2] Robert J. Lieber, "Politics Stops at The Water's Edge? Not Recently," *The Washington Post,* 10 February 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/10/politics-stops-at-the-waters-edge-not-recently/.

[3] Heather Hurlburt, "Security Policy is Economic Policy," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 48 (Spring 2018), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/48/security-policy-is-economic-policy/.

that Trumpism itself will prove to be an epiphenomenon… such expectations betray a fundamental misreading of what the Trump presidency signifies" (185).

Bacevich, however, goes further, adding cultural factors to this mix. His core argument—such as it is—is that in the post-Cold War period, globalized neoliberalism, American hegemony, and freedom in the form of "radical individual autonomy" (152) have formed the core of an overarching 'elite' project to reshape America *and* the world. It is here that the book diverges from many left-leaning criticisms of U.S. foreign policy to offer a distinctly conservative viewpoint, where "the narcissistic turn in the American understanding of liberty that followed the end of history" (149) produced ills ranging from excessive tattooing to the opioid crisis.

Unfortunately, the book is also at its weakest when it is at its most polemical. Consider Bacevich's take on the modern American economy: "…the United States remained what it had been: a nation in which the needs of corporate capitalism take precedence over the common good" (123). He presents little-to-no supporting evidence for such statements, which are perhaps more suited to a politicized tv show than to academic debate. In other places, some of the facts he presents are problematic: a lengthy passage on poverty and military recruiting fits well with the common wisdom, but is contradicted by recent studies that show military recruits are increasingly driven by factors other than financial need.[4] The author's assertion that Trump voters were driven by "financial impotence [that] was to turn into political outrage" (139) is likewise misleading. It may be a common trope in the media, but again, various studies have shown that Trump's supporters are far more affluent than many assume.[5]

These examples are merely indicators of a broader problem with the book: its failure to engage with the academic literature. In theory, the book speaks to topics as wide-ranging as grand strategy, American exceptionalism, and populist electoral politics. Yet the author chooses not to engage with the voluminous body of academic work on these and other topics. The book is analytically and theoretically poorer for this choice.

Too often, Bacevich's arguments are buttressed with extraneous points that do not really jive with existing scholarship. His contention, for example, that a major goal of the post-Cold War consensus was presidential supremacy—and the implication that the quasi-monarchical role played by modern presidents is unique—elides decades of work on the development of the imperial presidency, both during and after the Cold War.[6] As Robert Jervis has noted elsewhere, the unexamined description of America's foreign policy establishment as a homogenous 'Blob'—another sin in which Bacevich's book indulges—undermines the foreign policy arguments of today's foreign policy critics; analytically imprecise work leaves them vulnerable to claims that "they may have misdiagnosed the source of the problem."[7]

The value of Bacevich's book, however, is not in its contribution to the scholarly literature, but rather its role as a work of literary and popular history. The book makes a persuasive and easy-to-follow argument that something went terribly wrong

[4] Ronald Krebs and Robert Ralston, "Patriotism or Paychecks: Who Believes What About Why Soldiers Serve?" *Armed Forces and Society* (April 2020), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X20917166.

[5] Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class," *Washington Post,* June 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/; Thomas Ogorzalek, Luisa Godinez Puig, and Spencer Piston, "White Trump Voters are Richer Than They Appear," *Washington Post*, 12 November 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/13/white-trump-voters-are-richer-than-they-appear/.

[6] See i.e., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

[7] Robert Jervis, "Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology," *Security Studies* 29:2 (2020), at 8, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1761440.

with American politics in the post-Cold War period. It eloquently elucidates the conservative case against the post-Cold War consensus, including not only the evils of globalization and militarism so often heard from the left, but also societal changes that many younger Americans have welcomed. The phenomenon Bacevich refers to as 'radicalized individual autonomy' is portrayed here as many conservatives now see it: as a growing permissiveness in American society, or as—as one writer put it in the *New York Times*—that "our civilization has entered into decadence."[8]

The framing builds on this notion. The author makes a point of framing American history against the lives of two men in their seventies - himself and Donald Trump—whose lives covered the whole post-WWII period. In many ways, this framing offers us two pictures of America: one an upright, honorable man who dedicated his life first to protecting his fellow citizens, and then to scholarship; the other a materialistic, reality TV host, always looking for the next chance to enrich himself. That both are fundamentally American lives merely reinforces the book's central question.

Ultimately, the book's contribution lies in that question: "Without the Cold War, what's the point of being an American?"[9] Undoubtedly, some further engagement with the existing literature on American exceptionalism would have substantially benefitted the text. But the arc of history described by Bacevich reflects American exceptionalism in its most basic form: a country which sees itself as a teleological champion, always in search of its next crusading mission, whether that is westward expansion and manifest destiny, or the maintenance of the 'liberal international order' against Soviet hegemony. Indeed, for a manuscript which is so critical of the notion of America as an exceptional actor in foreign policy, the book is notable in its failure to accord other countries much agency in its narrative.

For Bacevich, the post-Cold War consensus was elites' attempt to answer this core question, as they sought to fill the void left by the Soviet collapse by reshaping the world in America's image. Many—myself included—might disagree with him that economic liberalization and social change were all bad. After all, economic liberalization lifted billions out of poverty, and social change helped to consign unjust policies like 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' to the ash heap of history. Yet he is right that globalization in particular had unforeseen—if not unexpected—impacts on the lives of Americans in the United States; elites should have anticipated this and mitigated the impacts far better than they did. And on foreign policy, he is correct in his assessment: since 1991, America has squandered an impressive amount of power and influence on largely unproductive global crusades.

In many ways, it is unfortunate that the biggest concern posed by the book is the very persuasiveness of its argument. Bacevich himself makes the point that what is needed in today's fractious America is "…not to impose a new consensus, but to allow serious debate" (199). He suggests that if any such consensus is to form, the most obvious answer to the question—a new crusade for America—will be climate change. Yet the book also makes a convincing claim that if Americans are to be united in purpose, and overcome today's inequality and strife, they need an 'other' against which to pit their collective energy. This suggests that the most likely answer to Bacevich's question is not the impersonal and invisible forces of climate change, but the all-too-visible challenge posed by a rising China. That's a possibility that should worry all of us.

[8] Ross Douthat, "The Age of Decadence," *The New York Times*, 7 February 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/western-society-decadence.html.

[9] John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 367. Cited in Bacevich, 1.

Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University, Emeritus

Years ago, a visiting British historian sat musing about American idiosyncrasies in our living room as we enjoyed a nightcap. He had been driving around in several states, he said, and one thing that really struck him was Americans' penchant for identifying who you were by bumper sticker(s). You were a Christian, your daughter/son was an honor student, and you had gone to "X" university. There were many others, as well, proclaiming loyalty to a professional sports team, a visit to Disneyland, or that the car had climbed Mt. Washington. You do not see as many these days, but his comment has stuck with me.

One interpretation he offered was the quest for identity, for uniqueness. Europeans, he suggested, knew who they were. We may doubt that, especially in this post-Brexit era, but his point about Americans forever seeking their identity seems well taken. The search began, argues Andrew Bacevich in his forceful new book *The Age of Illusions,* at the very beginning with John Winthrop's vision of a City Upon a Hill. It has been reiterated time and time again, most famously, perhaps, by President Ronald Reagan. In his election eve address on November 3, 1980, Reagan spoke eloquently about the City on a Hill, and elaborated on the metaphor in his farewell address, on January 11, 1989: "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still." [1]

And still more: "As I walk off into the city streets, a final word to the men and women of *the Reagan revolution*, the men and women across America who for 8 years did the work that *brought America back*. *My friends: We did it* "[2] Americans, it seems, have always talked about revolution and conversely at the same time bringing America back from the edge of—what? I would add that Reagan was not the first president to talk about the City Upon the Hill. President-elect John F. Kennedy also cited Winthrop's words as a clear admonition to his fellow citizens about complacency and the danger of losing the City. Kennedy was about to launch the New Frontier (another lasting metaphor in American self-identification and the quest for uniqueness), with its warning about the consequences of falling behind. The New Frontier was Kennedy's Make America Great Again (MAGA) summons to voters—the trumpet sound atop the tower to warn the city of invaders from below.

Kennedy then filled his inaugural address with a mix of missile gap rhetoric left over from the campaign and promises of openness to negotiations to join the fight against the common enemies of mankind. "I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arabella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. 'We must always consider,' he said 'that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.'" It ended with these final words "here on earth God's work must truly be our own." [3]

In a few months, Bacevich could have added, CIA specialist Col. Edward Lansdale took on an assignment from the oval for overthrowing Fidel Castro with implications of divine origins, Operation Mongoose. Lansdale proposed firing star shells

[1] Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation," 11 January 1989, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation.

[2] Italics added.

[3] You can find a handy citation for this speech and others I discuss below at Wikipedia, "City On a Hill."

into the sky from an American submarine in Havana harbor, testified a veteran aide, to convince Cubans the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and that "Christ was against Castro."[4]

Reagan pronounced *"We did it"* a few months before the fall of the Evil Empire, his Harry Potter-like term and image for what turned out to be the last days of Russia's superpower pretensions. He said these words as the Soviet Union was still reeling from the Chernobyl disaster, and only a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union itself that left only one superpower in the world. The City Upon a Hill had indeed triumphed. Yes, *We* did it. What metaphor now best described the times? A sometime State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, launched "The End of History," an article in the conservative journal, *National Interest,* that quickly became the go-to phrase for the punditry. As Bacevich explains, "It did so not because the 'end of history' conveyed demonstrable truths but because the implications embedded in that phrase were so eminently serviceable" (43). It was a unifying credo in exactly the same way, he argues, that Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Rudyard Kipling had supplied the words that justified and rationalized American imperialism a century earlier—when the United States acquired (or rescued) territories from a failing Spanish empire in the Caribbean and Pacific. [5]

Bacevich argues that despite its doubters, Fukuyama's "End of History" claimed this place because American elites found it useful. Fukuyama argued that with Fascism and Communism swept away, there was only the West (an idea as much as a place or collection of nations) to lead the world in this post-historical era. It was clear, therefore, that Americans stood at the end of 'old' history, poised to lead the world into this post-Cold War era. What once stood in the way, the old enemy was gone, and the Reagan Revolution had left the City Upon a hill in good hands. "We did it. We weren't just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger, we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands. All in all, not bad, not bad at all." [6]

For those looking for historical parallels to this sense of relief and celebration of new possibilities, perhaps the post-Cold War Era most resembles the post-Napoleonic Era. After the Congress of Vienna restored order to Europe, Great Britain would soon lead the way in promoting its version of globalism, abandoning its mercantilist Corn Laws and embracing free trade. And then in a state of clear intentions it thereby paved the way to the Victorian ascendancy when the pink areas on the globe touched one another in an embrace that lasted a century. Liberal leaders in Great Britain, Richard Cobden and John Bright preached the gospel of free trade, as spreading peace with the products the world needed. Yet the reality of building empires is that they are created by force and coercion, and maintained by navies and foreign legions under a variety of titles. These tools were once essential to push down the doors of countries in need of opium such as China, as American corporations and President Trump today argue about the need of Raytheon 'Patriots' missiles for Saudi Arabia.

Cobden saw the contradictions, but was firm in his belief that free trade promoted universal peace. "And it is because I want to see Free Trade, in its noblest and most humane aspect, have full scope in this world, that I wish to absolve myself from all responsibility for the miseries caused by violence *and* aggression, and too often perpetrated under the plea of benefiting

[4] Max Boot, "Operation Mongoose: The Story of America' s Efforts to Overthrow Castro and how they helped seal America's fate in Vietnam," *The Atlantic,* 5 January 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/operation-mongoose/549737. Lansdale would deny he ever said such a thing, but Boot found a document that at least partially confirms the story, centering on Lansdale's desire to use supposed Christian superstitions as he had in fighting Huk rebels in the Philippines in the previous decade.

[5] For a revisionist sort of interpretation of how important those acquisitions were as marker of the rapidly changing "strains imposed by the challenge of creating a national industrial state," see, Anthony G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), chap. 8, "Acquiring an Unexceptional Empire," 336-382.

[6] Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation,"

trade." In this speech in Wrexham, Wales to the Peace Society on November 14, 1850, he added, "as a Free-trader, I oppose every attempt to enforce a trade with other countries by violence or coercion."[7]

American "New" Liberals, the principal subject of *The Age of Illusions,* suffer similar pangs of guilt about supplying weapons so that client states can fight wars in Yemen, but their qualified opposition does not rise to the challenge of looking at the contradiction full on. As Bacevich suggests, the main aim of New Liberals is to absolve themselves by enlarging the franchise (in all ways, not just voting rights), while staying clear of past arguments engendered by the New Deal and then again in the Great Society. The tragedy of Vietnam cut short a necessary debate about fundamentals. As early as Kennedy's pioneers on the New Frontier, however, the nation's leaders and fellow traveling pundits had begun asserting that technology had replaced ideology. But that belief was also cut short by Vietnam, when technology in war-making and nation-building was tried and failed in what was once America's "Longest War." The 1960s thus ended as a failed opportunity in both domestic and foreign policy. There remains an imagined history centering on the tempting idea of an alternative history in which Kennedy lives and there is no Vietnam War, no civil unrest that cannot be resolved, and steady progress on liberty for all.

But the Vietnam War did end with a dramatic change at home that relieved political leaders from all points of view: the military draft was over! Almost at once, American leaders could forget the real lessons of Vietnam. This was accomplished in several ways, by embracing what was for some the "better" war hypothesis about why the war was lost.[8] But at the end of the Cold War, Bacevich writes, Vietnam had lost its power as a cautionary tale. The Vietnam War had shaken faith in America's military ability and willingness to go the course—or seemed to. But President Richard Nixon ended the draft, gambling that there were better, less politically divisive, ways to raise and maintain an army. Ending the draft also empowered the New Liberal era by making war almost invisible.

At the end of the Cold War, Bacevich writes, Vietnam had become irrelevant. "In that regard, Francis Fukuyama served as an inadvertent John the Baptist, making straight the way for various messiahs purporting to illustrate the new order that the triumph of secularized liberal democratic capitalism was bringing into view" (61.)

All the old rules set down at the outset of the Cold War so soon after World War II now came into question. But that was not the real story. Detachment was the real story. In that new order the avatar of New Liberalism was Bill Clinton and his most important project was securing the passage of NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Act). Besides that, however, Bacevich argues that Clinton left an "indelible" mark in that his acts in the small Balkan wars, "routinized the use of force, thereby furthering the militarization of American global leadership" (101). The NAFTA project signaled trouble ahead at home, however, and the rise of an old insurgency from the days of the Populist rebellion with its unlikely allies. Outsider H. Ross Perot participated in three of the 1992 presidential debates, warning that the proposed NAFTA treaty would mean jobs lost, and setbacks in terms of establishing international standards for worker protections and climate questions. Perot's candidacy was put down as a quixotic, 'only in America,' novelty. But he gained millions of votes for his opposition to NAFTA and his questioning of Washington's "growing appetite for military interventions abroad" was shared by other sparkplugs to set off a counter to New Liberalism in dissidents like Patrick Buchanan (55).

And the military became an escape valve, as the good jobs went overseas in the service of American corporations.

Bacevich could have added to this argument about NAFTA by putting into the mix the rebellious views of a central figure, House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, who also flirted with a run to the presidency at various times. Gephardt opposed NAFTA on practically the same basis as Perot's arguments about lost jobs and the environment, adding in for good measure

[7] Liberty Fund, "Richard Cobden on how free trade would unite mankind in the bonds of peace (1850)," Online Library of Liberty, https://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/603.

[8] On this myth, see, Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

lost revenue from tariffs. Gephardt said that he stood ready to support the president on most issues and to be by his side on health care and education reform. "On this issue, as it stands, however, I must part company." A Clinton aide dismissed Gephardt's Lutheran-style apostasy, shrugging it off as, "It signifies one vote from Missouri is against you."[9]

It turned out, however, that Perot and Gephardt were the real prophets, not Fukuyama, and that their dissents signified a roiling undercurrent that would gain force until the New Liberal era came to an end with the election of Donald Trump. Those who hoped that politics would somehow return to 'normal' misread the meaning of Trump's election, misplacing cause for effect. Those who said it was a fluke caused by stay-at homes and the Electoral College, and envisioned the return to something called normal after he left office, indulged the sheerest fantasy.

Bacevich frames his essay around the disintegration of national purpose from the time of the post-war film *The Best Years of Our Lives,* which follows three veterans of the Second World War and their difficulties in adjusting to civilian life. In part their successful adjustment was possible because World War II was the last uncomplicated (on the surface at least) war. Korea was a maddening experience from start to finish, one where the heroes of *The Best Years of Our Lives* could become Manchurian candidates. It was a war, one might add, that President Harry Truman knew he could not allow Congress to debate declaring. Some newsman suggested at a press conference that it might be called a police action. Truman seized on that inner metaphor in the world of Henry Luce's "American Century," and so it has been ever since, down to Operation Iraqi Freedom, which still going on nearly twenty years later. The draft is gone, and George H.W. Bush was both the last president with a connection to World War II and the last president to have seen combat before the arrival of two deferment presidents, then one who came after the draft had ended, and now by a third deferment president—bad heel, it seems.

What started by enlarging the franchise has become a grueling sense of detachment. The protagonists of *The Best Years of Our Lives* were the last generation to have Blue Star and Gold Star pendants in windows. Military service became a safety valve like the frontier had supposedly served to drain off the real and perceived discontents of a society where class divisions were starting to handicap all those seeking to climb up that hill where the city was. As Greg Grandin has shown in a book that one may read as a companion piece, American expansion, or the post-Civil War 'Winning of the West,' employed and re-integrated southerners into the nation's work.[10] Later, after Vietnam and the end of the draft, the military became an escape hatch both for blacks and also for whites in districts (traditionally Democratic) who would vote for Donald Trump. Among them were coal miners' sons and daughters who were still waiting for the campaign promises to come true.

Once in a while, the rest of the country had to pay attention, for example to what happened at Abu Ghraib in 2004. "Outside of neoconservative circles," the inculcation of a rallying cry about an "Axis of Evil" never gained traction. As Bacevich puts it, "By the time the Abu Ghraib scandal broke in April 2004, exposing the torture and abuse to which Iraqi detainees were being subjected, [that cry] lost all remaining credibility" (187). Long before Trump was elected, the forces that would put him in office were showing their teeth, and those forces will not be tamed by removing him from office: "As the several crusades of the previous century fade into the past, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern what binds twenty-first century Americans together as a people" (187).

Alas, the City Upon a Hill, Bacevich writes, was not what it had once seemed. Instead of Winthrop's prediction, it was more like L. Frank Baum's Emerald City in the Land of Oz where expectations of material abundance and vastly enlarged conceptions of personal freedom existed only "in a belief in presidential wizardry, if not exhibited by the incumbent, then expected of his successor" (60). What held that conviction together was "technopoly," a worship of technology, and the deification of technique. At one point Bacevich spends time listing America's "distinctions" as a world leader. Among them

[9] Gilbert A. Lewthwaite, "Gephardt Declares against NAFTA, Democrat Cites Threat to U.S. Jobs," *Baltimore Sun,* 22 September 1993, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1993-09-22-1993265014-story.html.

[10] Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

next to one another, 650,000 abortions despite the widespread availability of contraceptives, while "the U.S. arsenal in private hands was larger than that of the next twenty-five countries combined" (147).

Few of those who believe that Trump's removal involved more than an appendectomy to make the body politic whole again really understand the meaning of those statistics and others about childhood abuse, eating disorders, drug use, and suicide. "Virtually none were willing to grant the possibility that Trump filled a legitimate need, that his historical function whether assigned by Fate, Providence, or a God with a wicked sense of humor, was to make it impossible to ignore any longer the anomalies and incongruities to which the post-Cold War period had given rise." (152). If one looked for omens, there was the destruction by fire of the spire on Notre Dame in Paris, on April 15, 2019. But more important to Americans was the fate of Boeing. On October 29, 2018, there was the first of two 737-Max crashes, killing 189, and then on March 10, 2019, killing 157. It was said fixing the problem would take until 2020.

What intervened instead was the pandemic of 2020. Whether Trump is re-elected or not the nation will finally have to reckon with the vacant streets left over from the City on a Hill or the Emerald City. A moderate Democrat from Virginia, Mark Warner, predicts, "This virus will have a more direct effect than 9-11, a more direct effect than the financial crisis of 2008, a more direct effect than the fall of the Berlin Wall." Indeed, "It will probably rival some of the changes that took place after the end of World War II."[11] Even as the nation grappled with the meaning of the pandemic for the future of American politics, a second earthquake occurred with the murder of George Floyd and the aftermath that shook the foundations of assumptions about American uniqueness as the last best hope of mankind.

So there we are, truly at the end of the Post-Cold War Era. For Americans to shirk the responsibility of changing destinations from the City on a Hell or the Emerald City, writes Bacevich on the last page, "will almost surely pave the way for more Trumps—or someone worse—to come." (202). The last of the New Liberals, Barack Obama delivered a speech on the City Upon the Hill as he was deciding to run for president in 2006. He told a college audience in Massachusetts, "As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. And the world watched, waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed."[12] It had not been easy, Obama conceded, and it was still imperfect, but that was the goal. The questions Bacevich raises here provide a forum for addressing how to define what has to be done, and whether to shore up the old walls, or build something new from the metaphor.

[11] Editorial, "Pandemic puts Warner in Spotlight," *Roanoke Times,* 30 April 2020.

[12] Barack Obama, "University of Massachusetts at Boston Commencement Address," 2 June 2006, obamaspeeches.com, http://obamaspeeches.com/074-University-of-Massachusetts-at-Boston-Commencement-Address-Obama-Speech.htm.

Review by Robert J. Lieber, Georgetown University

Andrew Bacevich has written an unusual book, one which is sweeping in its ambition. Much of the work puts forward an angry and passionate denunciation of America's post-Cold War global role. The book also focuses on American society, where Bacevich finds the country "coming apart at the seams" (186). Yet, he seems to contradict himself, observing that despite the first three years of the presidency of Donald Trump, "the basic fabric of American life emerged largely intact" (193). Bacevich includes a wide array of cultural, cinematic, literary, and sociological references. His central argument is that, with the end of the Cold War, in an era of unprecedented U.S. ascendency, an "intoxicated elite" led the United States on a disastrous course (4). This new consensus consisted of four elements. The first is globalized neoliberalism, with unconstrained corporate capitalism operating on a global scale. Second is global leadership or hegemony, or "more simply still . . . empire" (4), with America's military might enabling it to enforce globalization. Later in the book, this is referred to as militarized global hegemony. Third is freedom, increasingly understood as personal autonomy stripped of its traditional moral prohibitions and constraints. The fourth element of this consensus is presidential supremacy, with quasi-monarchical prerogatives for the leader of the country, far beyond powers delineated in the Constitution and with the occupant of the White House as the "supreme leader" (4-5, 199).

The work itself offers a blistering polemic, but one which nonetheless provides an absorbing read as well as a few keen insights. Two features differentiate this work from a plethora of other treatments of post-Cold War America. One is the repeated and even disarming accounts by the author of his personal values and experiences. The other is the rich set of cultural references to which Bacevich repeatedly returns. He describes his personal journey, growing up in a traditional middle class family in the Midwest, then embarking on a military career, attending West Point, serving as an officer including as commander in 1990 of an infantry regiment protecting the Fulda Gap in Cold War Germany, and then deployment to the Persian Gulf shortly after Operation Desert Storm had liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. There, tasked with establishing a presence on the border between Kuwait and Iraq, he "proceeded to botch" the job, describing "a horrific motor pool fire [that] caused serious casualties and extensive damage for which I was quite properly held responsible" (46). His military career ended, a transition that confirmed his increasing sense of having chosen the wrong profession. He embarked on a new career, earning a doctorate and becoming a professor, author and public intellectual. Bacevich describes his political disillusions, having voted twice each for Presidents Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. And he situates himself politically, as "a middle-aged academic of conservative bent," who gains publicity as a conservative but with a "fan base" on the left too (102, 115).

Bacevich invokes historical, literary, and cultural figures from John Winthrop through Oliver Stone, ranging across Frederick Jackson Turner, Alfred Thayer Mahon, Rudyard Kipling, John Updike, Frank Fukuyama, Barbara Ehrenreich, and others. But the reference point to which he returns again and again is the 1946 William Wyler film, "The Best Years of Our Lives." The movie features three World War II veterans (Fred, Al, and Homer) returning to "Boone City" and facing obstacles as they seek to resume their civilian lives. Boone City is soon contrasted with the aspirational "Emerald City" of Frank Baum's "Wizard of Oz," with America having gotten lost on the road from one to the other and unable to reach consensus about either destination.

Post-Cold War presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama are the targets of Bacevich's reproach for their embrace of the dominant foreign policy ethos or—in Obama's case—the failure to effectively break from it. Many of these criticisms cover familiar ground: Clinton for his embrace of globalization and illusions about trade with China, and Bush for military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the critiques are often one-sided and lacking in context. For example, Bacevich is withering about a so-called "peace dividend," conceding only that "in the early 1990s, the military budget did modestly decline" (66). But his footnote provides evidence of a far steeper reduction, with official figures for defense spending in constant dollars documenting a decrease from $587 billion in 1988 to $418 billion in 2001 (fn 11 at 208). A quick calculation by this reviewer finds a significant drop of 30.5%. Added to which, the U.S. Army in the same

period was downsized by 37.8 %.[1] These cutbacks delivered far more than Bacevich's "modest decline," and they contributed to making possible the federal budget surplus achieved by the Clinton administration in fiscal years 1998-2001.

There is a larger problem too, in that Bacevich focuses so intently on finding fault with the United States that other actors are almost absent from the story. For example, he treats with sarcasm overstatements by U.S. officials making the case for America and the West during the Cold War. True, the struggle was sometimes painted in Manichean terms, but Bacevich seems unconcerned with the compared-to-what question. He largely ignores Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's imposition of Soviet rule over Eastern Europe, Soviet repression, and the overwhelming desire of Czechs, Poles, East Germans, and others to be freed from Soviet domination. For example, Bacevich refers to the Berlin Wall as a "made to order prop" for Cold Warriors without taking into account its ugly reality (33). He deprecates the importance of the U.S. military in leading to the end of the Cold War and Soviet collapse. True, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev merits great historical credit for his decisions, but nowhere is there any indication of how deterrence, defense, and the arms race led the Soviets into a bind from which they could not prevail. As evidence, consider Gorbachev's own words to the Soviet Politburo on October 4, 1986, "Our goal is to prevent the next round of the arms race. If we do not accomplish it, the threat to us will only grow. We will be pulled into another round of the arms race and we will lose it because we are already at the limit of our capabilities…If the new round begins, the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable."[2]

The lack of nuance and the resort to polemical language can be found in numerous examples: "intoxicated elites," "delusional" post-Cold War premises, the end of the Cold War bringing "undeserved moral clarity" (4, 5, 37). Other instances include 1991 Operation Desert Storm, which is derided as a victory over a "ragtag Iraqi army," though that army had previously prevailed over the forces of a much larger Iran in a grueling eight-year war (70). In addition, there are snide dismissals of political figures. Ohio Republican governor John Kasich is described as possessing "the charisma of a dozing mud turtle," and Texas senator Ted Cruz "ran as the self-designated heir of Jesus Christ" (161, 164).

Bacevich directs his critique at the post-Cold War era, but he is no less skeptical about the post-World War II era. He criticizes the materialism and traditional values of post-1945 America, with its sixteen million returning soldiers and intense focus on seeking a return to prosperity after the long years of Depression and War. In doing so, he invokes the standards of today's (elite) wokeness to condemn post-World War II America for its conceptions of freedom that neglected race, gender, and sexuality, as well as for largely ignoring issues such as the environment, diversity, inclusiveness, and multiculturalism (15). He condemns America of the 1950s through the 1980s as a time when the "power elite flourished, pseudo-events proliferated, and the narcissistic inclinations of American culture deepened" (17). He does concede that progress occurred on the nuclear arms race, civil rights, free speech, and sexual norms, but downplays these by complaining that essential elements of the postwar bargain remained intact (17).

Bacevich decries increasing inequality in America and unequal treatment based on race, gender, and sexuality. He acknowledges transformation in social attitudes and law and is also direct about his values as still a religious "believer" and as an "aging white heterosexual male approaching a half-century of monogamous, marriage and with one foot still stuck in Boone City" (80,130). His sweeping condemnation of elites touches on points that have become tropes in current politically-correct literature concerning meritocracy; entrenched privileged white male heterosexual coastal elites; institutions (the Ivy League, the Kennedy School at Harvard, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the Council on Foreign Relations, Silicon Valley, the NRA); and "mega-donors like the Koch brothers" (90). However, Bacevich seriously overstates the degree of ideological conformity among these elites. Despite his protestations, there have often been fierce debates over domestic and foreign policies. Here, Bacevich's arguments reflect the outlook of the recently established

[1] In that period, the size of the U.S. Army dropped from 771,847 in 1988 to 480,801 in 2001. Source: David Coleman, U.S. Military Personnel 1954-2014, data for U.S. Army, accessed 17 May 2020, https://historyinpieces.com/research/us-military-personnel-1954-2014.

[2] Quoted in Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25:3 (Winter 2000/01): 5-53, here 29.

Quincy Institute of which he is now President. The Institute itself, with deep pocketed funders ranging from George Soros to Charles Koch (both of them members of the very elite that Bacevich is preoccupied with denouncing), is devoted to a sweeping critique of foreign policy elites and a definitive retreat from America's world role.

As a relentless critic, Bacevich does proffer a number of insights that will discomfort some readers who would otherwise welcome his approach. For example, he credits Richard Nixon not only for the opening to China, but for a significant program of domestic reform that bears comparison with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. These initiatives included ending military conscription, creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Health and Safety Agency, the Clean Air and Endangered Species Acts, the war on cancer, affirmative action, expansion of Social Security, and increased funding for Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps. Bacevich complains, however, that "Nixonian reformism preluded more radical reforms and thereby served essentially conservative ends" (20).

Another insight concerns the phenomenon of Donald Trump. Bacevich describes him as the "least qualified" of presidential candidates in 2016, with a disregard for truth" and a skilled demagogue comparable to the late Huey Long, but he identifies Trump not as the cause but the effect ("a particularly repulsive symptom") of America's affliction, i.e., its elite consensus (151-2). He writes that after Trump's election, "the *New York Times, Washington Post*, CNN, and MSNBC numbered among the many institutions . . . that suffered a nervous breakdown from which they did not wish to recover as long as Donald Trump remained in office" (182). He has no use for the Trump Derangement Syndrome (200) and comments ironically about exaggerated condemnations of Trump as a kind of "secular Antichrist" bringing fascism to the White House (180, 184).

In writing this book, Bacevich has set out an unrelenting – and repetitive – critique of America's character at home and abroad. By emphasizing elite responsibility as he does, Bacevich gives little attention to underlying technological change, the digital economy, and social trends that have important causal implications. In his conclusion Bacevich finally does invoke broader causes in arguing that the Post-Cold War era has brought America's eclipse. He argues, first, that the era of Western primacy has now ended, especially with the rise of China as a global superpower and that ideas about the inherent superiority of Western civilization have become politically and morally unacceptable. Second, he points to the dystopian effects of technology. Third, he cites climate change as pushing the earth to the brink of exhaustion (195).

Up to this point, Bacevich has devoted scant attention to alternatives to the elite consensus, and for the most part, the ideas he does suggest remain underspecified. However, in the last few pages of the book, he attempts to offer a way out of America's predicament. He cites John Updike's protagonist, Rabbit Angstrom's question, "What exactly, then, is the point of being an American?" (196). Bacevich offers an answer by harking back to previous eras of progressive reform after calamities (the Civil War, the abuses of late nineteenth-century industrialization, the Great Depression, and World War II), writing that, "In each instance, a morally grounded cause laid the basis for a new consensus with transformative implications" (200). His hope is that climate change may become that cause.

Response by Andrew Bacevich, Boston University, Emeritus

I thank the editors of H-Diplo for organizing this discussion of my little book. In retrospect, I wonder if *Age of Illusions* is actually a suitable subject for a roundtable such as this. H-Diplo is a scholarly undertaking. As two of the reviewers note, my book is not a work of scholarship. Nor did I ever intend it to be. I conceived of it as a provocation. I hoped that it would draw attention to specific question: How in the course of a mere quarter-century did the United States go from assumed-to-be-perpetual global supremacy to internal division, disarray, and—I hesitate to use the term—decline

I expect that the community of scholars—to which I no longer claim active membership—will be wrestling with this question for some time to come. My aim in this book is merely to offer a preliminary answer, one that challenges the widespread media tendency to see President Donald Trump as the root of all present-day evils and afflictions.

So it is more than fair to take me to task, as Emma Ashford does, for my failure "to engage with the academic literature." Others will likely disagree, but it is my view that "the academic literature" is insufficiently responsive to the urgency of our present moment. *Age of Illusions* appeared in January 2020. As my book suggests, I judged the nation already in less than good health. Since then, the United States has experienced a pandemic, yet another major economic calamity, and a mass movement demanding a reckoning with its collective tradition of racism—with the president of the United States and his administration manifesting a grotesque failure to address any of the three effectively. As I write this in mid-July, my book is either a) already overtaken by events, or b) prescient. I leave it to readers to decide which judgment applies.

In the course of her critique, Ashford makes several good points to which I probably should respond with "Ouch—guilty as charged." But let me push back a bit on a couple.

Ashford objects to my citing the existence of a 'homogenous Blob,' i.e., a foreign policy establishment given to groupthink. (Robert Lieber registers a similar complaint). I do not recall using the term homogeneous and my point is not that every member of that establishment agrees on every issue. I have no doubt that there is value in mapping the differences within the ranks of that establishment. Yet there is also value, in my estimation, in pointing out areas where virtual unanimity exists: designing U.S. forces for power projection rather than defense; maintaining hundreds of foreign bases; committing the United States to defend countries that are perfectly capable of defending themselves; intervening abroad with greater frequency than any other major power; spending hundreds and hundreds of billion dollars annually on 'defense' with remarkable little interest in what all those expenditures actually produce in terms of outcomes. Blobbers argue about lesser matters; they appear oblivious to the big ones.

Are military recruits "increasingly driven by factors other than financial need," as Ashford says, citing recent research? I have no doubt that a mix of factors determines an individual's willingness to service. But I would also be willing to make this bet: If the Defense Department stops offering generous recruiting and reenlistment bonuses, the so-called All-Volunteer Force (AVF) will collapse within a year. Remove financial incentives and kiss the AVF goodbye.

As for Ashford's closing comments about China eclipsing climate change on the U.S. foreign policy agenda—"a possibility that should worry all of us"—I very much share her concern. Indeed, the Blob is already tilting in that direction. With Ashford, I am not persuaded that a Cold War with China tops the list of what the United States needs to focus on just now.

Robert Lieber more-or-less accurately describes my book, although I wish he would characterize my writing style as vivid or pungent rather than sarcastic. But I suppose that all comes down to matters of taste. (Am I the only one who finds most academic writing fusty and humorless? Must it be that way?)

But Lieber errs occasionally. He writes that the Iraqi army defeated Iran in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. That claim is wrong. And I do not invoke "the standards of today's (elite) wokeness to condemn post-World War II America." I merely point out what the prevailing postwar conception of freedom included and what it left out, something that is worth noting

given the arguments about the parameters of freedom that lay just ahead. Lieber also writes that the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft (QI), of which I am a co-founder, advocates "a definitive retreat from America's world role." This is Blob-speak: that the QI proposes a foreign policy centered on diplomacy rather than the use or threatened use of military power becomes tantamount to "retreat." I invite readers of H-Diplo to visit QI's website and determine for themselves if the characterization fits.

Lieber argues for an 'American Era' that is centered on U.S. global primacy backed by an abundance of military power. He and I have different approaches to the topic of American power. In his 2012 book, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline,* Lieber writes that I advocate "something close to outright isolationism, regardless of the consequences."[1] In fact my own view, reflected in *Age of Illusions,* is that if a post-Cold War 'American era' existed—which itself is a debatable proposition—it proved short-lived, at least in part because elites given to rhapsodizing about power and willpower and strategy blew it. By the way, their errors in judgment played a small, but not insignificant part in facilitating the rise of Donald Trump.

As for Lloyd Gardner's eloquent and generous comments, all I can say is 'Thank you.' Of course, he and I are on the same side of the barricades.

[1] Robert Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120.