



Bacevich, A. J. (2005). *The new American militarism: How Americans are seduced by war*. New York: Oxford University Press.

In a broad review of the American use of military force Andrew J. Bacevich, a former U.S. Army Colonel and Professor of International Relations at Boston University, provides the reader with an insightful analysis of the use (and misuse) of military force in American history. This is a conservative critique of US foreign policy. Grounded by critical the philosophical review of Woodrow Wilson’s American “exceptionalism”; the belief that the American experience is exceptional and America’s role in the world is destined to create a world order that reflects our “image” (committed to democracy and free enterprise); Bacevich articulates the unique relationship that American leadership, the military/ defense professionals, and the American public have forged to support a mythic belief in the efficiency of American military power.

The author notes that as American involvement in the world has expanded since the end of World War II, the military has, in turn, evolved from hastily drafted and trained citizen soldiers to an all volunteer force. With the end of the Cold War this force has become increasingly isolated from the country it serves. The American military has professionalized itself to such an extent that it has formulated its own unique doctrine, educational institutions and organizational relationships with likeminded stakeholders (politicians, contractors, etc.) in supporting its ability to project power globally.

Bacevich believes that the society the military defends has wandered away from traditional moral beliefs to become mesmerized by the self gratification of unfettered consumption. For many Americans the ability to consume, regardless of the consequences to ourselves and the world we co-exist in has manifested itself in our seemingly insatiable need for oil. Greed and a concomitant desire to control resources in highly unstable parts of the world has led American leadership, through successive presidencies, to view military force as the best tool to employ when seeking to enforce our will on others.

The author believes that recent American foreign policy has been held in thrall to a group of conservative political theorists (neo-conservatives) whose primary beliefs are grounded in a stance that sees American military power as the “indispensable foundation” (p. 74) on which American relations with other nations is premised. These individuals have built their philosophy around the belief that the world is in a state of permanent

crises, never ending war. Survival in such a world is dependent on strength... military dominance at a level that transcends the ability of any other power to challenge us.

This reliance on military power to impose hegemony is supported by American media through the glorification of the warrior, and by American politicians who extol the values of the warrior ethic as paramount in a world of challenged personal morals. The military itself reinforces all aspects of this mental model by uplifting the profession through unique, isolated educational environments (West Point, Annapolis) and basing itself in apart from the society it serves.

Bacevich is deeply disturbed by how misused the military has been when employed by our civilian leadership, the vast majority whom have never served. He sees this overreliance on military power and the leadership's misplaced ideological preference to needlessly, even haphazardly, apply force has led to a situation that can be best remedied by revisiting values that have grounded our Republic since its beginning. He advocates a very pragmatic foreign policy that is based on the following principles:

1. *Heed the intentions of the Founders* (p. 208). Nowhere in the Constitution is there direction to commit or even encourage the United States to employ force to remake the world in its own image. Military power for this country exists to defend it and our individual liberty. It was never conceived as a means to impose our concepts of liberty on a global scale upon others outside our borders.
2. *There is a need to revitalize the concept of separation of powers* (p. 210). American militarism has been facilitated by the abdication of Congress to impose itself on the Presidency. The "abrogation of responsibility" by Congress has allowed one man (or woman) to commit this country to ill conceived wars of imposition [my words] that have made the United States a world pariah. This cannot be allowed to continue. Congress must reassert itself and bring us to the constitutional balance envisioned by the Founders.
3. *View force as a last resort* (p. 211). The Bush doctrine of "preventive war" must cease to exist. A new more traditional policy should be reconstituted that has three elements:
 - a. The United States, like all nations, reserves the right to defend itself.
 - b. We will not tolerate a "proximate threat" to itself or its citizens.
 - c. The United States, acting in conjunction with likeminded nations, will "respond with appropriate military force to wholesale violations of human rights that...threat[en] international peace and comity" (p. 211).

These principles are tempered by the appreciation the utility of force is only as good as the support it receives from the American people.

4. *Enhance U.S. strategic self-sufficiency* (p. 212). We have become part of a global world. A world that is overly dependent on foreign oil and gas. That dependence

has made it strategically imperative that we wean ourselves away from energy resources in unstable parts of the world. American leadership must be focused on energy independence, regardless of personal cost.

5. *Organize U.S. forces explicitly for national defense* (p.213). Presently, the United States is organized around the offence. By creating a military that can be deployed anywhere in the world, at any time, to any extent we tend to preordain that our political leadership will use it in this way. The defense establishment should be reconfigured and downsized so that our allies take on more of their own defense. Europeans need to take over manning and commanding NATO, the Japanese and South Koreans must become more responsible for themselves. The author believes that by withdrawing from extensive overseas commitments we “restore...American freedom of action.
6. *Devise an appropriate gauge for determining the level of U.S. defense spending* (p. 214). Right now there is no limit to what militarists in this country deem as correct. Bacevich suggests that we should spend no more than the total budgets of the world top ten (10) military powers combined. Doing so would “reap substantial savings” (p. 215).
7. *Enhance alternative instruments of statecraft* (p. 215). The neo-conservatives have emasculated the State Department. They have proven that their penchant to over rely on the use of military force has been disastrous when an alternative dialogue with those who oppose us is a more rational choice. The author recommends shifting government spending away from unneeded military spending into reinvesting in our diplomatic services so that we have the intellectual tools to conceive of well thought out political alternatives to the use of force.
8. *Revive the moribund concept of citizen-soldier* (p. 217). The all volunteer force coupled to hard economic times has created an American “foreign legion” of professional soldiers willing to do the unquestioned bidding of the “commander-in-chief”. An imperial America has also created an elite officer class who has been educated and nurtured apart from the society as a whole. Reacting to the debacle of internal immorality fostered by the Vietnam War, this officer cadre has sought to isolate itself from the ineptitude of the society at large. The author contends that in a Republic the people must have a military that represents the people themselves. Isolation must no longer be tolerated. Service to country by all its citizens must become common again.
9. *Reexamine...the role of the National Guard and reserve components* (p. 220). Bacevich believes deeply that part-time soldiers tie the American military to the American people. We must revitalize the role of reservists around the mission of protecting North America. This refocused mission will force the politicians to think twice before they employ the reserve components in ill-planned overseas missions.

10. *Reconcile the American military profession to American Society* (p. 221). As noted earlier, from its earliest days the officer corps of the American military has sought to separate itself from society at large. Ensclosed in elite institutions (West Point, Annapolis) and educated at its own graduate schools (Naval War College, Army War College) the American officer has sought legitimacy for her/his profession at the same level of other professions (law, medicine, etc.). The knightly ethics of duty, honor, country must be revisited and tied to the democratic values that nurtured them. Bacevich advocates that all officers receive collegiate educations at public/private institutions. A civilian education will ground these individuals into the society they live in. This influx of citizen soldiers should be supported by the whole of American society because each constituency would help reinvigorate the other.

In conclusion, Bacevich presents a cogent and pragmatic argument for Americans to move away from the unfettered use of military force into a more nuanced and realistic view of an alternative future in which force becomes the option of last resort. Granted, the last few years has been a moving target for our leadership but American foreign policy and strategic thinking must be re-focused on nuanced professionalism coupled with seminal, well articulated core values that have driven our Democracy from the founding. As a veteran and educator disseminating views about the limits of power and the affect of hubris on our leadership makes reading this book a highly recommended activity.

Note: an interview and more information on Bacevich can be found on Bill Moyers Journal at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/08152008/profile.html>