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# SEDUCED BY WAR

## Andrew J. Bacevich On How The U.S. Came To Put Too Much Faith In Military Power

DAVID BARSAMIAN

**A**ndrew J. Bacevich is not someone you'd expect to be a critic of America's love affair with the military. A Vietnam War veteran and self-described "cultural conservative," he served for twenty years in the U.S. Army and has been a contributor to the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review*. But Bacevich has long been concerned about U.S. reliance on military might to address international problems. His latest book, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford University Press), examines the troubling rise of pro-military sentiment since the 1960s and how it's gotten the country where it is today: stuck in a disastrous war with no end in sight.

Born in 1947 in Normal, Illinois, Bacevich attended West Point, obtained his PhD in history from Princeton University, and retired from the army in 1992 with the rank of colonel. During the nineties, he began to part ways with the conservatives coming to power in Washington, D.C.: "neocons" who saw, in the U.S.'s status as the sole remaining superpower, an opportunity to reshape global politics by force. But Bacevich finds the Democrats at fault as well and decries what he sees as a corrupt political system where "expediency rules and principles are expendable . . . as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have amply demonstrated." In his view, when it comes to foreign policy, U.S. "professions of concern for freedom, democracy, and human rights serve as little more than window dressing."

Bacevich is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. His previous book is titled *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard University Press), and his articles appear regularly in journals and newspapers. In *The New American Militarism* he writes: "In former times American policymakers treated (or at least pretended to treat) the use of force as evidence that diplomacy had failed. In our own time they have concluded

(in the words of Vice President Dick Cheney) that force 'makes your diplomacy more effective going forward, dealing with other problems.' Policymakers have increasingly come to see coercion as a sort of all-purpose tool."

I talked with Bacevich in his office at Boston University on a hot afternoon in August 2006. He spoke without hesitation about the "new American militarism," and his answers were crisp and precise. Three months later, when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld resigned after the midterm elections, I contacted Bacevich again to get his take on the events. He called Rumsfeld "the worst secretary of defense since Robert McNamara" (Presidents John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon B. Johnson's secretary during the Vietnam War). Bacevich hoped that Rumsfeld's departure would help restore accountability for high-ranking government officials, but it "does not change the facts on the ground in Iraq. The options available today are the same as they were a week ago — and none of these options hold much promise of a happy ending to this misadventure."

**Barsamian:** You say in the preface to your latest book that you situate yourself "culturally on the Right" and "view the remedies proffered by mainstream liberalism with skepticism."

**Bacevich:** I agree with liberals on some social-justice issues, but I'm skeptical of the Left's tendency to look to government to bring about positive change. I think that centralized political authority, even when that authority's intentions are good, gives rise to negative consequences, if only because politicians are concerned primarily about their own interests.

**Barsamian:** But you've also become disenchanted with mainstream conservatism today?

**Bacevich:** That's right. My brand of conservatism says you pay as you go. It says you balance the budget. It says that

if you want to embark upon a war, then you should pay for the war yourself, rather than passing on the cost to your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I view the rhetoric about “traditional values” coming from today’s Republican Party as mere posturing. And I view the foreign policy of this administration — which aims, in essence, to remake the entire world in America’s image — as being the antithesis of conservatism. Its goals are wildly unrealistic and are costing us dearly. By almost any measure, the war in Iraq has been disastrously unsuccessful.

**Barsamian:** Republicans today talk less about “traditional values” and more about “supporting our troops.”

**Bacevich:** Supporting the troops is a good thing. But support ought to entail something more than gestures like decals stuck on the rear bumper of your car.

**Barsamian:** What is the “new American militarism” you refer to in your book’s title?

**Bacevich:** It’s a reversal of the attitudes about military power that came out of the 1960s and the Vietnam War. People on the Left, I think, view the sixties as an opening up of American society and an expansion of our freedoms. And the decade was that in many ways. But people on the Right recall the 1960s as a time when the U.S. lost its way. In many respects the Right has been working for the last forty years to reverse the effects of the 1960s and go back to an earlier time. Restoring American military might became central to the Right’s agenda, because they believed Vietnam had made us appear weak in the face of godless communism. They also believed that Americans who served in the military represented the last bastion of traditional virtue. The rest of us, as a result of the 1960s, had become selfish, hedonistic materialists, obsessed with sex and glitter and superficial matters. Soldiers, on the other hand, still clung to the old values: love of country, self-sacrifice, devotion to a cause larger than oneself. So support for the military became part of the culture of the Right and remains a part of it today.

Then the Cold War ended, and right on its heels came the 1990–91 Gulf War — so close on its heels, in fact, that the two events seemed to merge, giving rise to misleading ideas about military power and the sense of triumphalism that was so prominent in the U.S. during the 1990s.

Admirers of President Ronald Reagan say it was Reagan’s military buildup and staunchness that persuaded the Soviets — in particular, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev — to give up their contest with the U.S. But, in my view, military power was at best a secondary factor in bringing the Cold War to an end. What won the Cold War — if it’s even fair to talk about “winning” the Cold War — were the fundamental contradictions of Marxism-Leninism, which had been accumulating over the decades. By the 1980s those contradictions had become so great that the Soviet system could no longer persist.

We Americans never had a chance to argue which of these



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two views was correct, because the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990 intervened. The Gulf War ensued, and by most accounts was decisively resolved through the use of American military power. So, in an odd way, the Gulf War settled the argument about how the Cold War had ended: our swift victory seemed to prove the effectiveness of American military power as a means of resolving international disputes. People began to believe — and this was as true on the mainstream Left as it was on the Right — that military power was the answer to whatever conflict we might face.

In retrospect we can see that the Gulf War wasn’t the triumph it seemed to be at the time. In a tactical sense, we succeeded in ejecting Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait, and we

did it with great speed and remarkably modest casualties on our side. But in the long run all we really did was wade deeper into a political morass that we don’t understand. After the war, the decision was made to maintain U.S. bases in Saudi Arabia. And, because we didn’t remove Saddam Hussein from power, we ended up with a policy of military containment that had us imposing sanctions on Iraq — with horrific results for the Iraqi people — and bombing the country on a weekly, if not daily, basis, beginning in 1998. So we went tripping blindly down the path to September 11, 2001. The Gulf War was a pivotal event leading to this mess we call the “global war on terror.”

**Barsamian:** How should we deal with the terrorist threat, if not by a “war on terror”?

**Bacevich:** We should view violent Islamic radicals as an international criminal conspiracy. We should make common cause with other nations in destroying this conspiracy, using methods similar to those used against the Mafia.

**Barsamian:** Vice President Dick Cheney was the elder George Bush’s defense secretary at the time of the Gulf War. When Cheney was asked why the American army didn’t march on Baghdad after the Iraqi army had been routed, he said it was because we would have been seen as occupiers, and the Iraqi people would have resisted us. A decade or so later he apparently changed his mind.

**Bacevich:** I think Cheney and others in the elder Bush’s administration genuinely believed in 1991 that Saddam Hussein would not survive defeat. They expected that some of his generals would bump him off. Quite frankly, it wasn’t an unreasonable expectation at that time, but it turned out to be wrong. Saddam outwitted them, creating a problem for which there was — and is — no easy solution.

Why, in 2002, did Cheney change his mind and decide that driving on to Baghdad was not only a good idea but an imperative? I think that, first of all, he had fallen prey to the new American militarism. He’d become convinced our military capacity was so great that we were truly unstoppable. He believed we would not only win, but that the swiftness with which we would achieve victory would overawe the Iraqis and create new conditions in the country, eventually leading to a



**WE HAVE IMBIBED FOR DECADES THIS NOTION THAT THE U.S. IS LEADING A MARCH TOWARD FREEDOM, THAT HISTORY HAS A DIRECTION AND A PURPOSE, AND THAT WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO SEE IT THROUGH TO THE END, WHEN ALL COUNTRIES WILL BE FREE.**

Western-style democracy.

These and other fantasies haven't come to pass, because Cheney and the rest of the president's advisors overestimated our power. They were also guilty of misreading military history, which has taught us time and time again that the enemy always has options; some adversaries are just quicker than others to figure out what their options are. The leaders of the Arab world took several decades to realize they were not suited for Western-style war, with tanks, bombers, heavy artillery, and so on. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, tried to build a great mechanized army that could defeat Israel, but that strategy produced one defeat after another. I think Saddam Hussein was probably the last Arab leader to realize that tanks and fighter-bombers weren't the way to go.

We now have a generation of Arab leaders — and perhaps Muslim leaders in general — who are choosing military methods and techniques that play to the strengths of their people and their societies. They don't need fighter-bombers;

they don't want tanks. As the resistance in Iraq continues to demonstrate on a daily basis, they have developed a strategy that we don't know how to defeat. And any statesman with half a brain should know that if you can't defeat your enemies militarily, then you need to rethink the war option.

**Barsamian:** So why can't the Democrats voice a coherent critique of the war?

**Bacevich:** Part of the problem is the extent to which politicians on both sides are wedded to what I call the "narrative of the American century." It goes like this: Beginning with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. finally broke away from its isolationist roots and recognized its responsibility as a world leader. From that day forward, according to the narrative, the U.S. has been engaged in a great campaign to spread freedom around the world. We did it to great effect in World War II. We did it again, albeit over a longer period and with some missteps, in the Cold War. And since September 11, 2001, we have recommitted ourselves to this campaign. Just as we brought freedom to Europe and East Asia and the old Soviet bloc, we are now engaged in an effort to bring freedom to the Muslim world.

Critics on the Left are quite right to mock President Bush when he expresses these sorts of sentiments, but I would urge them to go back and look at President Bill Clinton's version of American history. He tells basically the same story.

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