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The Lure of Military Society

[*The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*, Andrew J. Bacevich, Oxford University Press, 270 pages]

by *Richard K. Betts*

“Militarism” will sound harsh to many, hysterical to some, but this superb screed makes a depressingly good case. It is not just another shrill polemic, although it is a polemic in the best sense of the word. Eloquent, wry, sober, deftly cutting, with undertones of anger, sadness, and hope, Bacevich writes like Paul Fussell with a political sensibility. Whatever exaggeration of the problem there may be is just the right amount to drive the point home.

For a serious university press book it is also quite a page-turner. Fans of *The American Conservative*'s stance on foreign policy will find themselves nodding and murmuring, “Yes, YES!” as they move through it. For them the experience will recall Orwell's line that the best kind of book is one that tells you something you already knew. Will it be taken seriously, however, or will it even be read, by those who need to be hit between the eyes—the Clintonites, Bushmen, and garden-variety conservatives and liberals who provide the barely questioned consensus on military activism that the book attacks?

Fortunately the answer may be yes. One big reason this book could have the impact it deserves is the author's credentials. He is not only a political conservative but a genuine soldier-scholar: 23 years an Army officer, Princeton Ph.D., Boston University professor, author of several other insightful books from specialized studies of military organization like *The Pentomic Era* to sweeping critiques such as his recent *American Empire*. If written by someone like me (a Democrat whose abbreviated service never took him farther than Fort Benning, Georgia), *The New American Militarism* would drop like a stone, dismissed as expectable academic leftism or reactionary *realpolitik*. On this charged topic, few will brush off Bacevich's authority.

“Today as never before in their history,” the book relentlessly argues, “Americans are enthralled with military power.” They naïvely exaggerate its effectiveness, overlook its horror, romanticize the military profession, and accept the normalization of war as an instrument of policy. There is no single culprit in this shift, certainly not just the Bush administration and its neocons, although they get their fair share of blame. The march to militarism has been a bipartisan project into which various elites, popular culture, and religious movements have shepherded society and government institutions with scarcely a thought.

To a degree unprecedented but now taken for granted, the purpose of the armed forces has shifted from defending American territory to projecting power abroad. Clear superiority over potential enemies is assumed to be insufficient; only worldwide supremacy is deemed adequate. (Bacevich might have added that only in America would we see a difference between national security—the business of the Defense Department, carried on far from our shores—and homeland security, requiring another new department to protect the country itself.)

In popular consciousness, the 20th-century image of war as “barbarism, brutality, ugliness,” which “after 1914, only fascists dared to challenge,” the image of the modern battlefield as a slaughterhouse, has been replaced by a 21st-century high-tech image of war as clean—“surgical,

frictionless, postmodern”—in which the heroes of the hit film “Top Gun” “never missed a meal and got sweaty only when they felt like it.” Among the laments that one suspects hits close to home for Bacevich is the fact that since “the demise of the ancient American tradition of the citizen-soldier,” war is no longer “participatory.” With military service having come to be a matter of personal choice rather than obligation, an attitude exemplified in the personal histories of Dick Cheney and Bill Clinton, Americans experience war only “vicariously.”

The analysis behind all this proves solidly, sadly convincing. I find little with which to quarrel and only a bit over which to quibble—and the quibbles supplement the book’s argument more than challenge it.

One big question that Bacevich answers very well but incompletely is where this militarist shift came from. His chapters chronicle the confluence of social, political, and intellectual developments driving toward the embrace of force, tracing the evolution of domestic politics and popular culture, national-security strategy from the Cold War to Sept. 11, oil addiction and entanglement in the Persian Gulf, the crisis-mongering and Churchill mania of the neocons, the migration of evangelicals from anti-political pacifism to worldly crusades, the failure of the military officer corps to secure the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, the technological panaceas purveyed by defense intellectuals, and more.

Bacevich sees all this as a recent, dramatic change, a perversion of tradition driven indirectly by reaction to Vietnam and the turmoil of the 1960s. He does note that the new mentality has deeper roots, particularly in Wilsonianism. One might trace the origins back even farther, however, at least to the jingoism of 1898 and our first imperial adventure in the Philippines, if not to the vogue of Manifest Destiny. Today’s myths that Bacevich finds so appalling have culminated and converged in the 21st century, but in many ways they are old myths. They come to the surface periodically and recede in the face of rude awakenings about the limits of what force can do to remake the world in our image.

In *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz framed this tendency as a traditional oscillation in foreign policy: the classical liberal absolutism that underlies American exceptionalism drives Americans either to transform the world or withdraw from it. Consistent with this insight, Frank Klingberg’s research in the 1950s traced a regular cycle of extroversion and introversion in U.S. policy. Americans often come to idealize the role of force for making the world right and then stand down not when we succeed—as in the Cold War—but when elective adventures give us a bloody nose.

What is new is less the militarist myths than the lack of counterweights to hold them in check. Americans became accustomed to permanent mobilization in the course of half a century of war, hot and cold, against fascism and communism. Over the full span of U.S. history, having huge armed forces has been an episodic, decidedly temporary event, but for today’s Americans under the age of 70 this situation is all they have ever known. During the Cold War, this massive power was kept in bounds by the counter-power of the Soviet Union. Although bloody sparring in Korea and Vietnam was thought to be the price of avoiding the defeat of the West by salami tactics, it was simply not an option to do for Hungary or Czechoslovakia what Bush the Younger did for Iraq. In the world before the 21st century, Americans had to remain sober and restrained because the costs of indulging the romantic view of war were obvious.

In the unipolar world there is no longer anything to hold the United States in check but our own good sense. How can we get back from militarist myths to prudence? Bacevich has laudable prescriptions, for example to heed the founders, revitalize the separation of powers, view force as a last resort, move to a strategy of defense and self-sufficiency, and revive the venerable concept of the citizen-soldier. But how do we make such sensible changes happen?

Consider the ideal of the citizen-soldier. Restoring the draft is out of the question. The problem is

not just that there is no support for it in its old form. That form was not great either, since it was selective service, not universal. By the time of Vietnam, most of the children of the elite—those who lead opinion and make policy—were escaping conscription. (Ask all the chickenhawks who rose to prominence in the last two administrations.) And political reality today means that any draft would have to include women. Try selling that to American voters. Bacevich is a realist and recognizes that a draft is not in the cards, but he hopes that incentives like a souped-up G.I. bill will induce more of a cross-section of society to enlist. Or he wants to reconnect the officer corps to society by abolishing the military academies as four-year programs and turning them into short finishing schools for ROTC graduates. Try selling that to the U.S. Congress. The goals are good, but the means to get to them seem like weak reeds.

What about reorienting strategy to defense rather than intervention? That switch requires overcoming a strong permissive consensus, precisely the popular attitude that Bacevich shows so well is the problem. There are challengers to this consensus, but they are an odd assortment of minorities from across the political spectrum: libertarian conservatives of the Cato Institute, communitarian conservatives, leftists like Ralph Nader, protesters against globalization, and a few cranky academic realists (like me). This motley crew is small, and it is hard to imagine welding them into a unified movement since they disagree on everything but foreign policy.

What might turn the minority coalition favoring restraint into a majority? Of course we have to try, but the odds are low that debate and logic will do it. Two developments would. One is simple failure in a costly adventure against a third-rate opponent. The other is the rise of another superpower to impose constraint.

The disaster in Iraq has a long way to go before it threatens to rival the experience of Vietnam, and while unhappy about the war, Americans remain permissive—not just because of the honorable principle that if we broke it we have to fix it but because Bush successfully conflated counterinsurgency in Iraq with the global War on Terror. A debacle in Iraq might force retrenchment as after Vietnam, but remember how remarkably short that retrenchment of the 1970s was. Moreover, Bacevich reminds us that it was reaction to that debacle that fueled the resurgence of feistiness and global ambition in the Reagan era. As for a new bipolarity, there is also a long way to go before we may get to that alternative, whether it comes in the form of a genuinely unified and anti-American Europe or a full-grown China.

Neither of these developments is something that Americans could want in good conscience. As frustrating, exasperating, and tragically unnecessary in its costs as the current hubris is, today's misguided policy reflects a degree of peace and security preferable to the Cold War. If my pessimism is valid, we may be doomed to live with a problem that is bad but manageable. Let's hope, however, that Bacevich's more optimistic view of the potential for change is more accurate. If we could get a president and Congress who would read his book and take it to heart, we would be a long way toward recovery.

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