
BOOK REVIEW

Geoffrey P. MacDonald

The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism.

by Andrew J. Bacevich

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.

Andrew Bacevich is angry. He has tirelessly criticized a war that has raged on longer than World War II. As a self-proclaimed conservative and Vietnam veteran, his anti-Iraq War activism is uniquely cogent. On the campus of Boston University, where he teaches International Relations, Bacevich is a folk hero, lending his unimpeachable credentials to the left-leaning inclinations of his students. But his activism has not stopped the war. It didn't stop his son, Army First Lieutenant Andrew Bacevich, Jr., from being deployed to Iraq. And it didn't stop 27-year-old Andrew from being killed-in-action in May of 2007. Andrew Bacevich is angry. As he well should be.

The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism is written at the nexus of Bacevich's conservative principles and his untempered rage at the Bush Administration's reckless militancy. Dedicated to the memory of his son, this iconoclastic text leaves few unscathed: Congress is occupied by "narcissistic hacks;" Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright is "obtuse;" and Bacevich approvingly quotes General Tommy Franks' description of former Bush defense aide Douglas Feith as "the stupidest fucking guy on the planet." Even Ronald Reagan – sacred cow of the modern conservative movement – is termed the "prophet of profligacy." At a slim 180 pages, *The Limits of Power* is a provocative and lucid call for a return to conservatism in American foreign policy.

Bacevich identifies three major crises plaguing the United States: greed, political incompetence, and military inefficacy. These cancerous

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elements of American society are reinforced by two unsustainable instincts: sanctimonious morality abroad and self-gratification at home. Dating to John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill" speech in 1630, which proclaimed the pious virtue of America's inchoate colonial project, the rhetoric of U.S. foreign and domestic policy has been imbued with a self-righteous moralism known as American Exceptionalism, writes Bacevich.

Bacevich believes American Exceptionalism both obfuscates the opportunism that has typified the success of U.S. statesmen and ignores the blunders of past American idealism. From Reagan's arming of the nascent Taliban in Afghanistan and the Iran-Contra Affair to Bill Clinton's haphazard bombing campaign in Bosnia, American action abroad has been often marked by corruption, inefficiency, and dramatic blowback. When America has succeeded, argues Bacevich, it has been through shrewd manipulation of international politics, not an adherence to moralistic ideology.

Domestically, Bacevich sees a destructive concentration of power in the executive branch. The President of the United States, regardless of party, is "pope, pop star, scold, scapegoat, crisis manager, commander in chief, agenda setter, moral philosopher, interpreter of the nation's charisma, object of veneration, and the butt of jokes," Bacevich writes. This "president-emperor" is surrounded by an expansive and ideologically driven national security apparatus, which believes that the *telos* of global freedom is guided by a providential United States. Where American policy has advanced authoritarianism – such as U.S. support for Middle East dictators – American Exceptionalism has provided the moral gloss to ostensibly immoral policy.

Bacevich further contends American Exceptionalism has allowed Americans to believe they can consume without limitation. Post-World War II America saw global economic dominance combine with voracious domestic consumption. The material appetite of an exploding American population required military force to protect U.S. access to global markets. The high cost of these foreign commitments put the United States increasingly in debt, as Americans blindly consumed the scraps of their own nation's economic strength. But the rhetoric that politicians had used to justify expansionist foreign policy had permeated domestic policy: the American way of life was unique, they said; conservation was unnecessary.

Bacevich blames both this domestic gluttony and foreign overreach for the military's current deterioration. American Exceptionalism presents the U.S. armed forces as intrinsically righteous and all-powerful, but when enmeshed in complicated counter-insurgency and reconstruction

efforts, the military has failed to attain the unrealistic results demanded by crusading civilian leaders. Rather than revamp the military structure, pour more troops into conflict zones, or alter military decision-making, Bacevich asserts the United States should devise a conservative foreign policy that understands the limits of its own power, particularly in the Middle East.

Though Bacevich's account of America's ailments is convincing, his recommendations are conspicuously limited given the ferocity of his critique. In the final 12-page chapter, Bacevich quickly outlines four main suggestions for reforming American foreign policy: an emphasis on energy independence and climate change; a return to containment in the Middle East instead of nation-building; and abolishing nuclear weapons. If rigorously pursued, these recommendations would indeed constitute a dramatic shift in U.S. foreign policy. But Bacevich doesn't postulate an alternative to the present Exceptionalist philosophy that informs American action abroad. Should the United States maintain an *ad hoc* foreign policy that pursues a narrowly defined "national interest" while ignoring oppression in other countries? If the national security apparatus is in fact swollen and impotent, should the hapless Department of Homeland Security be eliminated? Bacevich doesn't say.

Published before the 2008 election, President Barack Obama has paradoxically pursued the book's conservative vision. His advocacy of nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from Iraq, and environmental protection is coherent with Bacevich's main recommendations. The 2009 Iranian election fallout exemplified this reversal of traditional partisan positions most clearly. Republicans attacked Obama on liberal internationalist grounds: why wasn't the United States intervening on behalf of Iranian democrats, they asked? Where was American moral clarity? Meanwhile, Obama espoused conservative circumspection: meddling in Iranian domestic politics would violate its sovereignty and delegitimize the democracy movement, he argued.

This conservative transformation of Democratic foreign policy was spurred by the Republican embrace of neoconservatism after 9/11. Neoconservatism's militant liberalism repulsed erstwhile advocates of democratization in the Democratic Party. The most effective critique thus left to Democrats was traditionally conservative: the Iraq War was destabilizing the Middle East, threatening American oil interests, and entangling the American military in an expensive and futile nation-building project; in short, Saddam Hussein should have been left in power. Bacevich promotes

such self-interested strategizing in *The Limits of Power*. But should liberals? In their attempt to seize foreign policy credibility from the Republican Party, Democrats now advocate a brand of *realpolitik* bereft of formerly liberal principles. While Bacevich would argue this best protects U.S. interests, it also renders apocryphal any commitment America claims to democracy and human rights.

Obama has been unable to implement a comprehensively progressive international agenda because none exists. Liberal vertigo in foreign policy has shifted the spectrum of debate rightward: conservatives now compete with neoconservatives for ideological influence. Though Bacevich's reframing of conservative foreign policy is thin, the potency of *The Limits of Power* lies in the uniquely tragic circumstances of its author. Bacevich gave his son to the war he hated. With this book, he forcefully implores us to recognize the folly in believing war can be mastered. Fond of quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, Bacevich relies on the theologian's insight that the "false security to which all men are tempted is the security of power."