



2006.07.01

Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 270. ISBN 0195173384.

Review by Robert M. Citino, Eastern Michigan University (rcitino@emich.edu)

Andy Bacevich is a bulldog, a thinker who goes his own way confidently and fearlessly, and who probably angers as many readers as he convinces. He is also, for my money, the most interesting military scholar on the scene today: a Vietnam veteran, a hard-nosed commander of U.S. armored forces in the Fulda Gap in the 1980s, and a self-professed conservative who has emerged as a bitter critic of contemporary U.S. military policy. His last book, *American Empire* (2002), took on a number of the most treasured clichés in U.S. foreign policy. While the vast majority of Americans see their country as a force for good in the world, one that is slow to anger and always acts benignly, Bacevich painted us as an empire, the heir to ancient Rome and nineteenth-century Britain, with a foreign policy based far more on strategic considerations than on principles like democracy or human rights. Recognizing that fact may be painful to our self-image, he argued, but it was the only way to bring rational analysis to bear on our current international problems. Slogans and clichés about America's good intentions—useful for domestic consumption—make it difficult, if not impossible, to understand “why they hate us.” In fact, Bacevich argued, the reason they hate us is quite simple: most people in the world reject the notion of perpetual American dominance.

*The New American Militarism* has the same virtues as *American Empire*: a clearly stated thesis, excellent and forceful writing, and an author unafraid to wade into some very troubled waters. In recent years, he argues, Americans have fallen prey to “misleading and dangerous conceptions of war, soldiers, and military institutions.” They have come to support increasing levels of military intervention abroad in support of an impossibly open-ended mission: to remake the entire world in America's liberal and democratic image. They have become, in one of his many memorable turns of phrase, “Wilsonians under arms,” and this improbable marriage of militarism and utopian vision has become the distinguishing feature of our foreign policy.

While partisans on the left tend to blame the current administration for the problem, Bacevich digs much deeper. There is a huge coalition of interests and elites who have given birth to and sustained the new militarism, he argues. It started within the officer corps, which came out of Vietnam determined to revive and reform an army broken by long years of guerrilla war. In the following fifteen years, commanders purified the force of its malcontents, armed it with new high-tech weaponry, and supplied it with a new warfighting doctrine called AirLand Battle. Ostensibly designed to defend NATO against a Soviet attack (an eventuality that Bacevich finds very unlikely), AirLand Battle was in fact a way for the army to get back to the honorable business of planning big-battalion engagements and away from politics and political war altogether.

Behind all these reforms was not a desire to wage war more effectively, but to avoid fu-

ture campaigns even remotely similar to Vietnam, indeed, to avoid war altogether if possible. The prophet of military reform, General Creighton Abrams, made this point explicitly with his Total Force Doctrine, which made it nearly impossible for future administrations to go to war without calling up the reserves. It was an idea designed not only to avoid future Vietnams, but to tilt the balance in civil-military relations away from elected civilians and toward uniformed officers. Other moves followed: the Weinberger Doctrine of 1984, which told civilian leaders what sort of wars they could and could not fight, and the Powell Doctrine of 1991, which told them that they could not start a war at all unless they already had an exit strategy in place, a patent absurdity. In the wake of the nearly bloodless victory in Operation Desert Storm, the “two MRC doctrine” was put in place: the notion that the U.S. had to be ready to fight two “major regional contingencies”—large-scale conventional wars, in other words—anywhere in the world at once. With no real threats on the horizon, it was a way for the military to keep funding as high, or higher, than it had been when we faced off with the Soviets. Despite the rhetoric, there never really was a “peace dividend” from our victory in the Cold War.

Unfortunately for the military, Desert Storm proved to be a two-edged sword. In the following years, the army relived the experiences of the German *Wehrmacht* and the Israeli Defense Force. Its dominance on the operational level made it more and more attractive to civilian leaders seeking to solve all sorts of foreign policy problems: persecution of the Kurds, breakdown of civil society in Somalia, and finally a war on terrorism that may be unwinnable by conventional military means. Such intractable problems take decades to solve through politics and diplomacy; now it seemed they might disappear within days through just the right application of military force and advanced weaponry. The officer corps found that it was no longer master in its own house, but subject to an unending list of demands and deployments ordered by an increasingly militant cadre of civilian officials. One tends to think of George W. Bush in this context, but of course it was Bill Clinton who led the way, sending U.S. troops into Haiti and the Balkans and hurling cruise missiles like Zeus on all and sundry during his eight years in office.

At least four other interest groups have contributed to the new militarism, and Bacevich gives each one its due. Neo-conservatives literally see no limits or constraints on the U.S. use of force. While some Americans supported the Iraq War and others opposed it, only the neocons rhapsodized about it. In fact, “finishing the job” begun in 1991 and toppling Saddam Hussein had long been an obsession with them. Likewise, popular culture in the 1980s began to exhibit a pro-military tilt that was quite unusual for left-leaning Hollywood. Films like *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, and *Top Gun* gave the American public a new vision of war and soldiers: neat, clean, sexy, and even fun. Evangelical Protestants played a key role. Still viewing America as John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill,” they were imbued with a number of bedrock ideas that had the force of dogma. They were anti-Communist, profoundly pro-Israel, and strongly anti-Islamic. They can thus be counted on to support hikes in military spending and to back almost any war fought by a Republican administration. Finally, there is the huge establishment of civilian analysts grouped in think-tanks like RAND. Albert Wohlstetter, for example, was the guru of “precision munitions,” weapons that promised ever higher levels of military effectiveness with smaller and smaller force levels. Andrew Marshall is another name relatively unknown to

the general public. He was the one who sold the concepts of “the revolution in military affairs” (RMA) and “information warfare” to the Department of Defense. Others made their own contributions, coining irresistible catch-phrases like “full spectrum dominance,” “virtual war,” and, of course, “shock and awe.” All of them helped to make military force seem more and more desirable as a first option.

What, then, is to be done? Bacevich ends *The New American Militarism* with no less than ten specific recommendations. His most trenchant one is for a reconnection of the army with the nation that it defends, a revival of the “citizen soldier” concept. With the army now an all-volunteer force that tends to see itself as superior to a materialist and corrupt society, and with few if any of the policymaking elite sending their sons and daughters off to war, he sees little to distinguish contemporary U.S. forces from past armies of empire. Increasingly, it has become an imperial constabulary, divorced from U.S. civilian society, but “armed with just the right touch when it comes to meting out fear, violence, and money to pacify those classified in former days as wogs.”

There are no doubt many who will read *The New American Militarism* and shout “Amen!” Equal numbers may wail and gnash their teeth. Some, unhappily, may even call Bacevich a traitor for refusing to “back the troops” in Iraq. One suspects, however, that his point in writing a book like this is precisely to elicit strong reaction, stir things up, and stimulate informed conversation. To be sure, there are numerous arguable points in this book. Such works always run the danger of being outdated by the time they hit the shelf. To give the most obvious example, Bacevich thinks that the current war in Iraq is a bad idea, a leap into pre-emptive war making that carries with it far more dangers than benefits. He may well be right, but then again, he may well be wrong. Elections have been held in Iraq that may well mark the birth of a new era of democracy in the Middle East. Time will tell. In the meantime, read this stimulating book. Agree with it, argue with it, but engage yourself with the issues it raises. In the dangerous twenty-first century, issues of foreign policy and war are too important to be left to the political parties.