



America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History by Andrew J. Bacevich.

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Having appeared in the midst of a presidential election year, *America's War for the Greater Middle East* is a timely and significant book. Retired career military officer Andrew Bacevich (Boston Univ.)¹ has written several books on the links between US military, domestic, and foreign policies.² “America’s War for the Greater Middle East” began in April 1980 with Operation Eagle Claw, a failed mission to free US hostages held in Iran, and eventually expanded beyond the conventional designation of the “Middle East” to include Somalia, Pakistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Bacevich reckons that every president beginning with Jimmy Carter has made serious mistakes in conducting the US war in the Middle East. Carter’s initial error was misinterpreting Soviet reasons for sending troops to Afghanistan in December 1979. He made it clear in his last State of the Union speech (Jan. 1980) that he feared Soviet troops would advance closer to the Persian Gulf and consolidate “a strategic position ... that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil” (27).

Oil. Oil. Oil.

From the outset, America’s War for the Greater Middle East was a war to preserve the American way of life, rooted in a specific understanding of freedom and requiring an abundance of cheap energy.... Oil has always defined the *raison d’être* of the War for the Greater Middle East. Over time, other considerations intruded and complicated the war’s conduct, but oil as a prerequisite of freedom was from day one an abiding consideration. (3)

The “way of life” and “freedom” Americans sought, writes Bacevich, were “shallow and materialistic, ... [their] foundation a bland conformity” (4). He praises a July 1979 speech by President Carter as recalling “Abraham Lincoln at his most profound, Woodrow Wilson at his most prophetic, and Franklin Roosevelt at his most farsighted” (18). In it, Carter warned that

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. (19)

He then proposed a sweeping conservation program meant to lessen the United States’ energy dependence.

Conservatives like Ronald Reagan, George Will, and Irving Kristol, the “godfather of the emergent neoconservative movement” (21), berated Carter for criticizing American consumer culture. More significantly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later that year diverted the attention of the president—

1. He has also taught at the US Military Academy and Johns Hopkins University.

2. *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005), *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2008), *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2010), and *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

and Americans generally—from the issue of conservation. Carter asserted in his final State of the Union speech that “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (28). This “Carter Doctrine” effectively launched the American war for the Greater Middle East that continues to this day.

Carter’s successor, Ronald Reagan, increased US activity in the Greater Middle East. Bacevich estimates that in the 1980s American assistance to mujahedeen rebels opposing Soviet troops in Afghanistan totaled \$4–5 billion. Many of these same rebels, such as the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, later formed organizations like al-Qaeda to attack US military and civilian targets.

During the long conflict between Iran and Iraq (1980–88), Bacevich’s “First Gulf War,” the Reagan administration mainly aided Saddam Hussein’s Iraq against the Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran. But in the Iran-Contra affair, it secretly diverted weapons to Iran. Bacevich asserts that Reagan’s “piece of America’s War for the Greater Middle East was confused, slapdash, and inconsistent” (51).

In 1982, after Israel attacked Lebanon, Reagan sent US Marines to Lebanon as a peacekeeping force. But, in October 1983, a suicide bomber killed 241 of the Marines; the rest left Beirut in early 1984.

The sad fact is that those who sent the Marines into Lebanon had no real idea what they were doing or what they were getting into. For the most part, the resulting failure there served to broadcast American ignorance, ineptitude, and lack of staying power. As for those expectations of dramatizing America’s role as peacemaker, enhancing U.S. credibility in Arab eyes, and demonstrating a capacity to police the region: None of it happened. (76)

The Reagan years also saw the formation of CENTCOM (Central Command), with military responsibility for Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Of the three CENTCOM commanders under Reagan, Bacevich comments that “For Generals [Robert] Kingston, [Charles B.] Crist, or [Norman] Schwarzkopf to incorporate history or religion into their thinking alongside geography or the prospective enemy’s order of battle would have required an enormous leap of creative imagination. At CENTCOM headquarters, such imagination was—and would remain—in short supply” (49). This, he implies, has been a central failing of US foreign policy toward the “Greater Middle East” since 1980.³

Bacevich argues that the success of President George H.W. Bush’s Operation Desert Storm—part of the author’s “Second Gulf War” (1990–91)—“accomplished next to nothing” (134). The US-led coalition’s “war for oil” (133) drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but did nothing to solve the Middle East’s deeper problems: “intractable economic backwardness and political illegitimacy, divisions within Islam compounded by the rise of Arab nationalism, ... the advent of the Iranian Revolution” (134), and the Israeli-Arab conflict. It also left Saddam Hussein in power.

President Bill Clinton “deepened U.S. military involvement in the region... [but] never devised anything remotely approximating an actual strategy” (203). Early in his first term, Clinton maintained the US military presence in a chaotic Somalia that his predecessor had initiated as part of a multinational UN relief effort. But when American troops tried to kill one of the Somalia militia leaders, his followers shot down two American helicopters (the Black Hawk Down incident, 1993). Bacevich, like Sen. John McCain, believes US troops were “killed in a conflict with no clear connection to U.S. national security interests” (156). By the following year, American forces had withdrawn from Somalia.

3. See my review of David Bromwich’s *Moral Imagination: Essays* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2014), *History News Network* (25 Aug 2014) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1701.htm, where I quote both Bromwich and Wendell Berry on the lack of imagination in US foreign policy. I have also dealt with this subject in “What the Present Chaos in Iraq Should Teach Us: It’s Time for a New U.S. Foreign Policy,” *History News Network* (6 Jul 2014)— www.miwsr.com/rd/1702.htm.

Meanwhile, the former Yugoslavia was riven by ethnic conflicts as new states emerged. American forces intervened in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) to support Muslims under attack by Serbia's Slobodan Milošević. They made thousands of bombing sorties as part of a larger NATO effort that prevented Serbian dominance in Bosnia and Kosovo. But, Bacevich writes, "military action on behalf of persecuted Muslims in these instances was not going to earn gratitude elsewhere in the Islamic world." Thus, today some Bosnians and Kosovars are part of the "anti-American, anti-Western jihad" (200) in Syria and Iraq.

Bacevich is most critical of Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, for invading Iraq in 2003 and thus beginning the "Third Gulf War" (2003-11).

In reality, the Bush administration invaded Iraq in order to validate three precedent-setting and mutually reinforcing propositions. First, the United States was intent on establishing the efficacy of preventive war. Second, it was going to assert the prerogative, permitted to no other country, of removing regimes that Washington deemed odious. And finally, it was seeking to reverse the practice of exempting the Islamic world from neoliberal standards, demonstrating that what Condoleezza Rice called "the paradigm of progress"—democracy, limited government, market economics, and respect for human (and especially women's) rights—was as applicable to the Greater Middle East as to the rest of the world. Here in concrete and specific terms was a strategy to "change the way they live." (240)

Bacevich stresses that George W. Bush and other presidents naïvely thought other people must share American values and attitudes. But, as he says about Afghans, "the divide separating 'us' from 'them' is a chasm" (311).

The author puts the financial cost of George W. Bush's Iraq war to US taxpayers at \$7 billion a month by the end of the 2004, a major factor in the almost trillion-dollar annual budget deficit of Bush's final year in office.

Although President Barack Obama criticized the Iraq war started by Bush and withdrew US combat troops, Bacevich judges that "Even as it sought to convey the impression of striking out boldly in new directions, the Obama administration's chief contribution to the War for the Greater Middle East was to enlarge it" (320).

Bacevich calls his book "A Military History" and he does mix in with his political analysis battlefield descriptions and discussion of strategic and tactical military matters. For example, regarding the lack of "unity of command" in Somalia in 1993, he writes that "circumstances require unity of command, with absolute clarity about who is in charge," but "such clarity was nowhere to be found" (153). In 2003, the top general in Iraq, Ricardo Sanchez, and Paul Bremer, the top US civilian administrator of Iraq, "despised one another. Civil-military tensions undercut unity of effort" (257). Bacevich also compares Middle East military situations to analogues in the US Civil War, Korea, and Vietnam.

Bacevich criticizes many civilian politicians, officials, and pundits, as well as generals. He castigates George W. Bush and three of his fellow architects of the Iraq invasion: Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz—"Their achievements proved negligible, their blunders monumental and enduring" (218).

Concerning US involvement in the Balkans, he writes of the bellicosity, political ignorance, and "tone-deaf self-confidence" (183) of Secretary of State Madeline Albright and, especially, Gen. Wesley Clark. Generals Schwarzkopf and David Petraeus come in for hard knocks as well. The former "had a volcanic temper, which ... he made little effort to keep in check. And ... he was quick to take offense at any perceived slight" (120). About the latter, he cites another general's comment that "Petraeus was a charter member of the 'AAA Club,' consisting of 'Aides, Adjutants, and Assholes' who collectively constituted a 'careerist self-promotion society that hung out near military throne rooms.' [He] dis-

played a knack for ingratiating himself with anyone who might someday be of use, not only senior officers but also politicians, academics, and especially journalists” (282).

Bacevich also indicts “the U.S. national security establishment” (363) for “a deeply pernicious collective naiveté” (363). Like senators William Fulbright⁴ and Robert Byrd,⁵ he observes that US foreign policy has often reflected a hubristic “absence of self-awareness that has become an American signature [and a] nearly insurmountable barrier to serious critical analysis” (365).

Overall, Bacevich recommends more humility regarding US values and virtues and a better understanding of the complexity of the “Greater Middle East” and its history. As in his *The Limits of Power*, he warns readers of the dangers of believing the United States is an exceptional country with a right and duty to spread its “way of life” to other parts of the globe. This messianic complex obscures such greater threats to US security as climate change.

“Perpetuating the War for the Greater Middle East is not enhancing American freedom, abundance, and security. If anything, it is having the opposite effect. One day the American people may awaken to this reality. Then and only then will the war end. When this awakening will occur is impossible to say. For now, sadly, Americans remain deep in slumber” (370). These words, written before the recent presidential election, still retain all their relevance and urgency. The human and financial costs of disregarding them are too great to ignore.

4. In *The Arrogance of Power* (NY: Random House, 1966).

5. In a Senate speech (19 Mar. 2003)— www.miwsr.com/rd/1703.htm.