

The Limits of Power
Andrew Bacevich
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Reviewed by Fouad Pervez

America's Problematic Expansionist Foreign Policy

Andrew Bacevich's latest book, *The Limits of Power*, provides a novel critique of post-World War II American foreign policy. Bacevich argues that three crises, all of our own making, have combined to create the difficulties America faces today: economic, political, and military. Instead of adopting a realist viewpoint, Bacevich states that we have instead opted for hubris, and this threatens our national security.

The economic crises of the 1970s left America with a choice: curb our consumption or deploy power to force others to oblige our appetites. President Carter failed to convince Americans to scale back consumption, and Reagan ushered in an even more decadent era of "more" when he won the presidency. American consumption required deployment of power, either through coercive diplomacy or a heightened military presence, to ensure access to resources, particularly oil. This sent both government spending and the U.S. deficit skyrocketing. Over time, consumption required increased American troop levels in the Middle East to ensure oil security, which ultimately played a part in that region's increased instability.

Most striking to Bacevich is the notion that the U.S. government has urged its citizenry to consume without any sacrifice. In order to sustain its consumption, America must use military power, yet we are often asked to do nothing in return— in fact, the Global War on Terror (GWOT), a major military escalation, occurred concomitantly with tax cuts. Bacevich sees this pursuit of both guns *and* butter as indefensible.

The second major crisis is political. Instead of national security based on checks and balances, power post-World War II became increasingly consolidated in what Bacevich dubs the "imperial presidency." The national security apparatus has become an oligarchy run by political elites who maintain the status-quo of American global primacy, and those who criticize this vision are attacked.

Despite America's superpower status, Bacevich shows that post-WWII foreign policy was centered on paranoia. Paul Nitze was one architect of this fear, which he carried forward in National Security Council Report #68 (NSC 68). This report, which Nitze heavily influenced, shaped U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War and is still influential today. NSC 68 exaggerates the Soviet threat, and Nitze, the master of fear, used it to militarize permanently U.S. foreign policy.

Bacevich sees Paul Wolfowitz as Nitze's heir. Wolfowitz militarized the Pax Americana and used the 9/11 attacks to unleash the U.S. military. The 2003 invasion of Iraq can be seen as the culmination of these efforts, as it illustrates America's going to war with almost no restrictions.

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Given the abysmal results of the militarization of foreign policy, its historic lack of opposition troubles Bacevich. The national security power elite consistently misinterprets reality, inflates threats, and tries to evade public scrutiny. As Allison's (1971) organizational culture model would predict, the national security apparatus advances its own interests, whether or not those interests are best for America. Bacevich supports this with the example of the Bay of Pigs. The Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed the operation primarily because they counted on its failing and leading to the conventional invasion of Cuba, which was their preferred strategy; they thought the failure would force President Kennedy to back the invasion he strongly opposed. Similarly, the Bush administration stacked the apparatus with mediocre but pliant individuals to create minimal internal opposition and conflict. This ensured the apparatus was completely on board with the administration, rather than being an independent institution. Those who were critical, like General Shinseki, were dismissed.

Finally, Bacevich notes the military crisis. Over time, U.S. military strategy has increasingly focused on complete dominance in order to satisfy national over-consumption. Bacevich finds this military overstretch to be seriously flawed. For one, armed force does not solve all problems, as the GWOT has illustrated. With expanded goals and stagnant numbers, a soldier is asked to be both "cop and social worker" (135). In addition, Bacevich sees a problem with professional soldiers. Americans may be willing to support aggressive foreign policy, but very few actually enlist in the military. This has resulted in the rise of private military contractors, which has heightened the disconnect between the citizenry and the military, and negatively impacts Americans' notion of civic duty. It also partly explains the lack of opposition to the new vision of U.S. foreign policy.

Like the political leaders who were not punished for their over-reaching, militarized solutions, military leaders make mistakes for which they are rarely held accountable. Bacevich highlights major errors made in the Persian Gulf War, the fighting in Somalia, and the conflict in Kosovo. Despite America's focus on military solutions, there is often no real strategy. Generals in Iraq, particularly Gen. Tommy Franks, failed to incorporate political context, regional power dynamics, or regional history into their plans. Yet major internal critiques did not address these issues. This is something both the political and military crises have in common: when major mistakes are made, only minor modifications are proposed. Reform always enhances the national security apparatus, never scales it back.

In this book, Bacevich connects multiple issues to American aggression abroad. He directly or indirectly addresses several well-researched topics, including the security dilemma, military overstretch, organizational culture, domestic coalitions, and imperialism. He incorporates these in a strong argument that warns about the nature of U.S. foreign policy. As a historian, he does well not to make this a polemic against the Bush administration, but instead rightfully notes the historical roots of these problems. This is sobering account should be read carefully by those who believe President Obama can transform U.S. foreign policy. A transformation requires addressing all three crises Bacevich points out, and it is unclear whether this is something Obama can, or even wants, to do.

As a result of the three crises he enumerates, Bacevich sees America moving on a dangerous path by pursuing a heavily militarized foreign policy, while not addressing our three self-made crises that threaten the long-term security of our nation. For Bacevich, the key is to live within our means. If we do not do that, we will necessarily go abroad for monsters to destroy.

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