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Andrew Bacevich. *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism.* (New York: Metropolitan Books, August 2008). 224 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8050-8815-1 (\$24.00; hardcover).

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Since the start of the Iraq War in 2003 an increasing number of historians, political scientists and international relations specialists have offered critical assessments of the Iraq War and President George W. Bush's initiative, strategy, and management of the war. Several recent books featured in H-Diplo roundtables, most notably Ian Shapiro's *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror* (2007) and Philip Gordon's *Winning the Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World* (2007) have advocated a return to the containment strategy of the Cold War to deal with terrorists and their connections with fundamentalist Islamic regimes as opposed to President Bush's "War on Terror" and strategy of preemption and unilateralism to advance U.S. hegemony and spread democracy. Other authors such as Tony Smith in *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of American Promise* (2007), Walter Hixson in *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2008), and Joan Hoff, in *A Faustian Foreign Policy: From Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (2008) reject containment as a reliable policy for 21st century challenges. As with Hixson and Hoff, Michael Hunt in *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained & Wiielded Global Dominance* (2007) explores the roots of current American attitudes and policies that shaped the U.S. arrival as hegemon and contributed to current challenges. Hunt suggests the desirability of a retreat to cooperation versus Bush's unilateralism.

Andrew Bacevich discusses many of the same themes and concerns as these authors and directs forceful criticism at American Presidents extending back to JFK, Congressional leaders from both parties, and, more so than most authors, at the American people for their preoccupation with personal freedom and consumption at the expense of service and restraint culminating in an imperial preoccupation with access to and control of Middle Eastern oil. The reviewers note the anger in Bacevich's critique, and its biting tone, identifying the book as "a searing indictment," something of a jeremiad. Bacevich, however, is not a "Johnny come lately" to the debate on contemporary U.S. policy and military strategy. His critique of U.S. exceptionalism and consumption has much contemporary relevance. President-elect Barack Obama would profit by setting aside some foreign policy prescriptions from elite policy advisers on the job market in Washington and reflecting on Bacevich's assessment.

The reviewers do raise some issues with respect to Bacevich's thesis and his development of it:

- 1.) Bacevich's central thesis is that U.S. policy has gone widely astray not as the result of a particular leader but more as a product of a very dysfunctional American system that is based upon problems within American society with deep, historical roots. Bacevich develops the sources of this crisis in three chapters starting with "The Crisis of Profligacy." Noting the early American attraction to accumulation discussed by Alexis De Tocqueville in the 19th century, Bacevich emphasizes an escalation of American acquisitiveness after WWII at the expense of a sense of duty, citizenship, and restraint. The second chapter, "The Political Crisis," focuses on the emergence of the "Imperial Presidency," the "National

Security Ideology,” and congressional and public tolerance of the hijacking of democracy by “Wise Men” who can’t be trusted. (122-123) In the third chapter, “The Military Crisis”, Bacevich emphasizes the limits on U.S. military power, the illusions of U.S. leaders since Ronald Reagan as to the efficacy of military, and the failure to draw the right lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan which Bacevich places in the U.S. tradition of “Small Wars for Empire.”

2.) The reviewers have reservations on various aspects of Bacevich’s thesis. Michael Hunt, for example, would have welcomed more effort by Bacevich to ground his study in relevant historical scholarship on U.S. foreign relations and to consider the implications of literature on nationalism, race, and cultural superiority in shaping U.S. policy since at least 1900. “Simply getting rid of the hacks in Congress or the blinkered foreign policy specialists is not going to do the job” and bring the necessary changes that Bacevich envisions, Hunt suggests. Furthermore, the “global context in which U.S. policy has developed and functioned” should be examined, Hunt notes, to show “how these international threads binding the United States to the rest of the world were woven, what effect they have had, and what might happen were they to fray or break.” (3-4) Matthew Jacobs questions whether Bacevich’s final recommendations really address the seriousness of the crisis that he presents. “How ... does switching to a policy of containing Islamic extremism fundamentally solve the political crisis or the crisis of profligacy,” queries Jacobs, who notes similar problems with Bacevich’s recommendation for the abolition of nuclear weapons. (6)

3.) “The End of American Exceptionalism” suggests that Bacevich agrees with a number of recent authors, such as Walter Hixson, who stresses the pernicious impact of this sense of exceptionalism from the Puritans to George W. Bush. “‘American Exceptionalism’ is like kudzu,” Bacevich notes in his response. “However, diligently historians hack away, they never succeed in killing it. It just keeps coming back....” (1) Unlike other recent critics, Bacevich has little problem with the impact of exceptionalism until the 1960s when it became “increasingly perverse—it prevents us from seeing that adherence to the old expansionist routines ... is actually contrary to our own interests.” (1-2) Throughout most of the study, Bacevich emphasizes that since the founding of the U.S., Americans have devoted far more attention to conquest than promoting freedom, applauded by neoconservatives and President Bush. (19-22) As Jerald Combs notes, Bacevich is not a revisionist as he draws inspiration from Reinhold Niebuhr, who is quoted frequently, and he focuses his critique more on whether or not a policy advances U.S. interests rather than “promoting the common good.” Combs views Bacevich as a “soft or restrained” realist who seeks to limit U.S. objectives to what is achievable with available means rather than unsuccessful pursuits of unobtainable goals with many Cold War examples. (see 178-179) “While revisionists and the political left might support U.S. interventions abroad if they were truly on behalf of progressive forces and hard realists support interventions as necessary to achieve vital if extensive American interests,” Combs suggests, “restrained realists would argue for abstention except in extreme cases that posed a moral threat to the United States.” (2-3) Yet does Bacevich free himself completely from the “American DNA” of exceptionalism when he concludes by recommending as a “basis for sound strategy”, the

elimination of nuclear weapons and an aggressive campaign to “reduce the level of emissions that contribute to global warming”? (178-181)

4.) Iraq is central to Bacevich’s concerns. Starting with President Ronald Reagan’s involvement in the Islamic world from Afghanistan to Iraq, Bacevich finds many examples of U.S. leaders pursuing objectives where the costs exceeded any return in a quest to extend the U.S. empire into new areas such as Central Asia. (44-48) The central focus of this quest, according to Bacevich, revolves about Washington’s effort to bolster American profligacy with oil. President George H.W. Bush’s response in the Gulf War to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 receives a critical assessment from Bacevich with respect to some of the consequences, most notably “a large, permanent, and problematic U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf” that made the U.S. “in the eyes of many Muslims at least, an occupying force.” (54) Neither the question of choices faced by Bush nor consequences of accepting Hussein’s seizure of Kuwait are explored by Bacevich. President Clinton’s policies to deal with Hussein in the aftermath of the U.S.-led coalition victory in February 1991 merit Bacevich’s critical assessment of being “both strategically misguided and morally indefensible,” characterized by bombing, a sanctions regime that hurt the Iraq people far more than Hussein’s regime, and Congressional rhetoric about the removal of Hussein. (55-58) Bacevich considers President Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the apotheosis of the three crises. In the imperial president tradition, Bush pushed for war to control oil resources supporting American profligacy and refused to ask for public sacrifice. Instead, Bush relied on an All-Volunteer Force for the latest war for empire. (57-66, 130-132)

5.) Although it is not his main purpose, Bacevich does challenge some of the current historiography on Presidential leaders, most notably Carter and Reagan. Carter, for example, is given credit for “remarkable foresight” in his response to what Bacevich considers the “true pivot of contemporary American history,” the response of Carter and Reagan to how the crisis of profligacy had eroded American economic dominance. The American people, Bacevich proposes, “could curb their appetites and learn to live within their means or deploy dwindling reserves of U.S. power in hopes of obliging others to accommodate their penchant for conspicuous consumption.” (30-31) Carter’s July 1979 “crisis of confidence” speech pointed to excessive self-indulgence and consumption which extended from the individual to a paralyzed federal government and the President called for Americans to take a different path, “the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values.” (33-35). Reagan, on the other hand, receives credit for helping end the Cold War but is contrasted with Carter as a Pied Piper “telling Americans what most of them wanted to hear” and rejecting any suggestion of sacrifice or denial and reinforcing his rhetoric with unprecedented deficits, increases in national debt, tax cuts, and military spending. The Reagan Revolution, according to Bacevich “was to give the American people what they wanted ... self-gratification, not self denial.” (40)¹

¹ A forthcoming roundtable on John Patrick Diggins’ *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (2007) makes a similar assessment on Reagan. Diggins makes a sustained effort to depict Reagan as a romantic liberal in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson as opposed to a 20th century conservative. He does note Reagan’s connections with consumption and greed in the 1980s.

6.) What are the “lessons” for Bacevich in the three crisis areas? The current economic crisis reinforces Bacevich’s assessment that profligacy has led to dependency “on imported goods, on imported oil, and on credit” with the White House and National Security state benefiting from this dependency with “status, power, and prerogatives” such as Pentagon budgets and bases around the globe and weapons contracts. (173) The lesson is to have a realistic appreciation of limits with respect to personal consumption, the pursuit of democracy abroad, and what is unpredictable in the nature of war and the limited utility of force. Although Bacevich is not optimistic that Obama will lead in this direction or that Americans won’t return to gas guzzling vehicles when gas goes below \$2 a gallon, he does warn us of some probable consequences.

Participants:

Andrew J. Bacevich is Professor of International Relations and History at Boston University, retired from the U.S. Army with the rank of colonel. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he received his Ph.D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University. Professor Bacevich’s previous books include *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (2002); *The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire* (2003); and *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005). His essays and reviews have appeared in a wide variety of scholarly and general interest publications including *The Wilson Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Nation*, *The American Conservative*, and *The New Republic*.

Jerald A. Combs (PhD UCLA 1964) is Professor of History Emeritus at San Francisco State University where he retired after serving nine years as chair of the History Department and two years as Dean of Undergraduate Studies. He is the author of *The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers* (University of Calif. Press, 1970); *American Diplomatic History: Two Centuries of Changing Interpretations* (University of California Press, 1983); and *The History of American Foreign Policy* (3d ed., M.E. Sharpe, 2008). His latest publication is “A Missed Chance for Peace? Opportunities for Détente in Europe,” in *The Cold War after Stalin’s Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* edited by Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

Walter L. Hixson is Professor of History at the University of Akron. Hixson received a Ph.D. from the University of Colorado in 1986. His books include *Murder, Culture, and Injustice: Four Sensational Cases in American History* (2000); *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (1997); *Charles A. Lindbergh, Lone Eagle* (Longman, 3rd ed., 2006); *Witness to Disintegration: Provincial Life in the Last Year of the USSR* (1993); *George F. Kennan, Cold War Iconoclast* (1989.) which received the Bernath Prize, Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. Among his recent articles and review essays are “Empire As a Way of Life,” forthcoming in *Diplomatic History*; “Leffler Takes a Linguistic Turn,” *Diplomatic History*, (June 2005): 419-421; and “The Vindication of ‘X’? Reassessing Kennan After the Cold War,” *The Historian*, 59 (Summer 1997): 849-58. His latest book, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2008) was featured in an H-Diplo roundtable in June.

Michael H. Hunt is the Everett H. Emerson Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and also the Stanley Kaplan Visiting Professor of American Foreign Policy at Williams College. His publications include *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 1987), which will appear in 2009 with a new afterword. He is now actively at work on a history of American wars in eastern Asia (with Steven Levine) and a Vietnam War reader.

Matthew F. Jacobs is Assistant Professor of U.S. and International History at the University of Florida. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in the history of U.S. foreign relations, U.S.-Middle East relations, twentieth century international politics, and modern U.S. history. His work has been published in *Diplomatic History*, and he is currently completing a book manuscript entitled *Imagining the Middle East*.

Andrew J. Bacevich has written a searing indictment of George W. Bush and the neoconservative policy that has brought us not only Iraq but a permanent state of war on terror, the Bush doctrine of preemption and preventive war, an expanded executive authority that included unprecedented powers of detention and interrogation, and a catastrophic spending deficit that the government has tried to disguise by putting war expenses off-budget.

Bacevich refuses, however, to limit his indictment to the Bush administration. He surveys past American foreign policy and argues that Bush has merely accelerated an existing policy of expansionism and imperialism that has led the United States to fight a perpetual war for big business and big empire. He cites C. Wright Mills to condemn the American power elite. Moreover, he insists that America's hyper-interventionist policy has not been a product of foreign conditions or threats but instead has stemmed from deeply dysfunctional domestic causes.

Such views would not be surprising among those on the political left and revisionist historians. But Bacevich is a self-avowed man of the right, a retired Army lieutenant-colonel and conservative Catholic who defined his principles in Pat Buchanan's *The American Conservative* as including beliefs in limited government, a reluctance to discard or tamper with traditional social arrangements, a respect for the market, and a deep suspicion of utopian promises. One might have thought that such views would lead Bacevich to support Ron Paul in the Republican run for the presidency, or the Libertarians after Paul's defeat in the primary, but it has taken him all the way to the Barack Obama camp.¹

The congruence of the criticisms of present U.S. foreign policy from both the right and left is reminiscent of the same congruence that occurred among the dissenting historians of World War I and World War II, when disillusioned liberals like Harry Elmer Barnes and Charles Beard allied with right-wingers such as Charles Tansill.² Reading Barnes, Beard, and Tansill on the World Wars, it is almost impossible to tell which is left and which is right from the texts. Only by consulting their biographies and other books that detail their domestic policies can one tell the difference.

Bacevich's account of past and present U.S. foreign policy, however, differs in critical ways from the revisionist school of diplomatic history that grew out of the Cold War. First, his guide to American foreign policy and imperialism is not Lenin with his Theory of

¹ Andrew J. Bacevich, "The Right Choice? The Conservative Case for Barack Obama," *The American Conservative* (March 24, 2008) <http://www.amconmag.com>

² Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt*, 2d rev. ed. (New York, 1927). Barnes, ed., *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: A Critical Examination of the Foreign Policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Its Aftermath* (Caldwell, ID, 1953). Charles A. Beard, *The Devil Theory of War* (New York, 1936). Beard, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941* (New Haven, 1948). Charles Callan Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Boston, 1938). Tansill, *Back Door to War: The Roosevelt Foreign Policy, 1933-1941* (Chicago, 1952)

Imperialism, William Appleman Williams with his Open Door Imperialism, or Walter Hixson with his idea of an American imperialism born of a racist and genocidal culture. It is instead that icon of Realism, Reinhold Niebuhr. Bacevich cites Niebuhr as warning that America's dreams of managing history, "born of a peculiar combination of arrogance and narcissism, posed a potentially mortal threat to the United States."³ He attributes to Niebuhr a worldview of realism and humility infused with a deeply felt Christian sensibility.

The realism of Niebuhr and Bacevich shares with the revisionist school a belief that American foreign policy has always been expansionist and that this expansionism, even in its earliest intra-continental phase, was one that proceeded by any means necessary. Thus, according to Bacevich, it "relied on diplomacy, hard bargaining, bluster, chicanery, intimidation, or naked coercion. We infiltrated land belonging to our neighbors and then brazenly proclaimed it our own. We harassed, filibustered, and, when the situation called for it, launched full-scale invasions. We engaged in ethnic cleansing."⁴ Despite the cant of politicians and patriots that the United States had embarked on a mission of liberation, the United States has never sacrificed greatly to liberate others "absent an overriding perception that the nation had large security or economic interests at stake."⁵

On the other hand, Bacevich does not condemn this expansionist tradition as roundly as the revisionists. "The record of U.S. foreign relations from the earliest colonial encounters with Native Americans to the end of the Cold War is neither uniquely high-minded nor uniquely hypocritical and exploitive. . . . As a rising power, the United States adhered to the iron laws of international politics, which allow little space for altruism" America's expansionist achievements derived not from a common devotion to a liberating tradition but from boldness unburdened by excessive scruples."⁶

There is a similar distinction between realists like Bacevich and Niebuhr and the revisionists regarding America's overseas interventionism and imperialism. Bacevich does criticize America's power elite as oblivious to social justice and human rights and he gives credit to the Left for expanding freedom and equal access in the United States while arguing that the contributions of modern conservatism to "ensuring that every American should get a fair shake . . . has been essentially nil."⁷ But his critique of American imperialism is primarily that it went against America's own interests. He calls the taking of the Philippines a "strategic gaffe" but says little about the suffering of the Filipinos.⁸ He argues that America's present penetration of Russia's sphere in Central Asia is wrongheaded not because it is somehow unjust but because it will cost the United States far more than it will return, in contrast to U.S. expansion into the Caribbean, which at least

³ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21, 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26, 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

paid dividends.⁹ He argues that self-interest rather than “do-goodism” must provide the impetus for American action. “The idea is not to save the world but to provide for the well-being of the American people. That others might credit the United States with promoting the common good . . . ranks at best as a secondary, although by no means trivial, potential benefit.”¹⁰

While Bacevich is thus clearly a realist, he is certainly of the soft or restrained variety. If the primary dictum of realism is to balance national goals with the power available to achieve them, realists can either try to increase the country’s power to match its ambitions or limit its goals to those achievable with the power existing. Bacevich excoriates the hard realists who sought to expand power to achieve overambitious goals after World War II. For instance, he denounces Paul Nitze, who in composing NSC-68 discarded prudent realism in facing the Soviet Union for what Bacevich calls “extreme agitation laced with paranoia, delusions of grandeur, and a cavalier disregard for the empirical truth.”¹¹ In that same spirit he condemns Truman’s decision to go north of the 38th parallel in Korea, Kennedy’s campaign against Cuba in 1960, Nixon’s illegal bombing of Laos and Cambodia, Carter’s Doctrine for the Persian Gulf, and Clinton’s interventions in Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and Iraq. No small wars are truly needed for self-defense, he says, so therefore all are by definition imperial wars. While revisionists and the political left might support U.S. interventions abroad if they were truly on behalf of progressive forces and hard realists support interventions as necessary to achieve vital if extensive American interests, restrained realists would argue for abstention except in extreme cases that posed a mortal threat to the United States.

Bacevich criticizes U.S. imperialism prior to World War II not so much because it went against American interests or exceeded American power to achieve but because it increased the economic appetite of Americans for a luxurious lifestyle that could only be sustained by intervention abroad. After World War II, however, he believes that U.S. imperialism not only exceeded the limits of American power and led to perpetual war for unattainable goals, it also transformed the American empire from one based on production to one based on consumption.¹² First, the United States abandoned the restrained realism of Henry Stimson’s power elite which, if blind to social justice, at least limited its confrontation with the Soviet Union to a prudent policy of containment, and turned instead to the frantic anti-communist hyper-interventionism of James Forrestal and especially Paul Nitze, who followed his NSC-68 with equally alarmist analyses like the Gaither Report and the Team B estimate of Soviet military power. Then, rejecting the warnings of Jimmy Carter that the United States needed to abandon its inordinate fear of communism and lower its expectations, the United States chose as its president Ronald Reagan, the “prophet of profligacy.” Far from being a conservative, Reagan assured the Americans that they could have it all – economic prosperity, strategic invulnerability with Star Wars, and

⁹ Ibid., 46-48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 178.

¹¹ Ibid., 112.

¹² For this point, Bacevich cites Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006)

unambiguous military supremacy. While Reagan's spending may have helped end the Cold War, Bacevich implies that the same could have been done without such profligacy.¹³

For Bacevich, George W. Bush has taken this profligacy and hubris to new heights. While Bacevich calls Bill Clinton's Iraq policy both "strategically misguided and morally indefensible," he does note that the chief complaint of Clinton's critics was that he was not dropping enough bombs. After 9/11, Bush launched a war of liberation in Iraq to transform and make anew the entire Islamic world. Yet he asked no economic or other sacrifice of any but the military members and their families. "While soldiers fought, people consumed." Meanwhile, Bush enhanced the imperial presidency, condoned torture, and promulgated the "misguided Bush Doctrine of preventive war."¹⁴

It must have been agony for Bacevich to see his son sacrificed for a foreign policy and a war with which he so much disagreed. Yet Bacevich argues that there is more continuity than difference between Bush's policy and what has come before. He pleads for the leaders and people of the United States to recognize that "American power has limits and is inadequate to the ambitions to which hubris and sanctimony have given rise."¹⁵

In writing this review before the results of the 2008 presidential election are known, it has been interesting to speculate on the chances that the right and left could come together on a more restrained U.S. foreign policy of the sort Bacevich advocates. While many liberals seem to be rallying to that idea, there seem to be very few conservatives who feel as Bacevich does. Certainly, there are fewer conservatives supporting a more restrained policy than there are liberals who style themselves Truman or Kennedy Democrats and support a more confrontational policy. Thus, the trend of the last several decades in which Republicans have been favored by a substantial majority on issues of foreign and national security policy is continuing in the present race between McCain and Obama. Polls seem to show that the majority of Americans favoring a hard line policy has diminished in the wake of Iraq, just as it did in the wake of Vietnam, but the hard-liners are still the majority and pugnacious remarks about nations that disagree with the United States still win the most plaudits. Consequently, Obama emphasizes his assertive policy in Afghanistan, his support for Israel, and his desire to extend NATO to Russia's borders to offset his restraint on Iraq, Iran, military spending, and Georgia. More important, he does his best whenever he can to change the subject from foreign policy to the economy, where he rather than McCain has the edge. If the United States does follow a policy of restraint and multilateralism in the next administration, it is likely to be the result more of economic and power constraints and the inclinations of the president than of the change of heart among the American electorate that Bacevich so desires.

¹³ Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, 33-35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57-66, 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

Andrew J. Bacevich is an important voice in the emerging debate that cuts to the heart of the nation's egregious foreign policy. As Bacevich argues in this historically rooted polemic, the problem clearly goes much deeper than George W. Bush or the neo-cons. The problem with American diplomacy is the problem of "America" itself.

The essential issue, as I have argued elsewhere and in greater depth, is what Bacevich describes as the "conviction that American values and beliefs are universal and that the nation itself serves providentially assigned purposes." (7) The "reality," however, is that "American power has limits and is inadequate to the ambitions to which hubris and sanctimony have given rise . . . The day of reckoning approaches." The solution lies not abroad but at home. "Rather than insisting that the world accommodate the United States, Americans need to reassert control over their own destiny, ending their condition of dependency and abandoning their imperial delusions." (11-13)

Bacevich is wonderfully positioned to deliver this message. He has a distinguished bearing, grey and chiseled, possesses an Ivy League Ph. D. (Princeton) and is well connected with the liberal establishment from his base in Boston, but above all Bacevich is a retired military officer (he achieved the rank of colonel in the Army) in a culture that reveres the military and militarism. Moreover, Bacevich dedicates the book to his son and namesake, a first lieutenant in the army who on May 13, 2007, was killed by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Iraq. Thus Bacevich cannot be dismissed as a wimp, a pink, an unregenerate leftist, a revisionist, and it can hardly be said that he fails to "support our troops." Patriotic nationalists, neocons, the foreign policy establishment, and mainstream academics will have to find more creative ways to contain his blatantly "un-American" discourse.

The Limits of Power relentlessly condemns U.S. foreign policy, past and present. Dismissing a pervasive mythology representing the United States as a beacon of liberty, Bacevich sums up the formative years of U.S. diplomatic history as follows: "We infiltrated land belonging to our neighbors and then brazenly proclaimed it our own. We harassed, filibustered, and, when the situation called for it, launched full-scale invasions. We engaged in ethnic cleansing." (20)

Not content to condemn the nation's diplomacy, Bacevich links foreign policy with domestic consumption in his first chapter, entitled "The Crisis of Profligacy." "For the majority of contemporary Americans," he explains, "the essence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness centers on a relentless personal quest to acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere with those endeavors." (16)

Effectively juxtaposing Jimmy Carter's famous "crisis of confidence" speech in 1979 with Ronald Reagan's even more famous "Star Wars" epic in 1983, Bacevich argues that Americans made their choice. They chose the option of total security, symbolized by the fatuous promise of an effective nuclear shield, which would enable unfettered consumption

and profligacy at home, over Carter's call for personal sacrifice and a broader moral vision on the part of individuals and the nation. Carter, of course, expediently changed course after the widespread repudiation of his speech, but too late to save his presidency.

Since Reagan the United States has operated "on the assumption that military power offered an antidote to the uncertainties and anxieties of living in a world not run entirely in accordance with American preferences." (41) September 11 unleashed "puerile expectations" that the United States could dominate the world while making no sacrifices at home. "Far from producing a stampede of eager recruits keen to don a uniform," Bacevich acidly notes, "the events of 9/11 reaffirmed a widespread preference for hiring someone else's kid to chase terrorists, spread democracy, and ensure access to the world's energy reserves." (131)

Chapters on the two Iraq Wars, the failed regime of sanctions in between, and the Afghan intervention systematically unfold the devastating contradictions of arrogant and inane pretensions such as "full-spectrum dominance." As Bacevich points out, "The IED—which can be built for about the cost of a pizza—brought the American victory express to a crashing halt." (158)

In chapters entitled "The Political Crisis" and the "Military Crisis" Bacevich unapologetically skewers the nation's "political elite," highlights the "incompetence" of the bloated national security establishment, and laments the absence of effective military leadership. "The slightest suggestion that the United States ought to worry less about matters abroad and more about setting its own house in order elicited from the political elite, Republicans and Democrats alike, shrieks of 'isolationism,' the great imaginary sins to which Americans are allegedly prone." (65)

There are not many heroes in this story but Reinhold Niebuhr is one. Bacevich claims to be adopting a "Niebuhrian perspective" and insists that the theologian "deserves recognition as the most clear-eyed of American prophets" (6) for his warnings that Americans should not succumb to "our dreams of managing history." (6-7) Niebuhr's linkage of "moral man and immoral society" lies behind Bacevich's critique of profligacy and his argument that changes in foreign policy must begin at home.

Bacevich's veneration of Niebuhr is problematic, however. He implies that Niebuhr was a consistent advocate of restraint but the "Christian realism" that Niebuhr advanced often encompassed unremitting campaigns against the forces of evil. Thus Niebuhr's "enlightened realism," like George Kennan's, could and easily slip into crusades against evil that meshed seamlessly with the darker side of American diplomatic impulses.

Additional contradictions surfaced as I read through this brief but biting book. Bacevich writes a lot, probably too much, and has spun this book off as part of the American Empire Project in which he joins Noam Chomsky, Chalmers Johnson, and many others in trying to rein in the nation's militancy. But I am not sure that Bacevich has thought it all through or fully found his voice.

Despite his hammer blow condemnation of U.S. foreign policy, Bacevich offers up the postwar containment policy as a putatively rational alternative to the global war on terror against Islamic extremism. The problem with this suggestion is that containment itself was neither limited nor defensive, as he depicts it, and moreover the Cold War embodied many of the same practices Bacevich otherwise condemns: American self-worship, domestic profligacy, rampant militarism, global intervention, an imperial presidency, and so on.

Bacevich's own radical critique belies such warmed over liberal "solutions." The central problems he identifies—profligacy at home, endless war abroad—flow from hubris. Americans comfort themselves with endless representations of freedom and chosenness when gluttony and bloated militarism better represent national identity. "In our public discourse," Bacevich notes, "freedom is not so much a word or even a value as an incantation, its very mention enough to stifle doubt and terminate all debate." (6)

It is precisely this discourse that must be challenged and deconstructed in the fashion that Bacevich has done it here. We need to be willing to say, as this man with impeccable "patriotic" credentials has boldly done, that the United States is neither special nor chosen. The good that we are capable of doing at home and abroad is being overwhelmed by reckless militarism and insatiable appetites.

"The imperative of the moment," Bacevich declares "is to examine the possibility of devising a non-imperial foreign policy."(143) True enough, but it can only happen if and when we are willing to re-imagine America itself.

The policies of George W. Bush have profoundly agitated historians and other international affairs specialists. Among the most agitated has been Andrew Bacevich. His *American Empire* (2002) melding realism with the progressive approach of Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams put him in the front ranks of the critics. The publication of *The New American Militarism* (2005), a searching examination of militarization in U.S. society, kept him to the fore. In *The Limits of Power* Bacevich once again weighs in. A lively, extended essay, it reprises themes prominent in the previous two books in a plain-spoken style calculated to appeal to a broad readership. Bacevich's military experience, his academic standing, and most recently his family loss have given his critical views considerable credibility.

Limits argues that U.S. policy has fallen into a deep crisis. The reason, he argues, has less to do with the miscalculations of a particular administration or leader and more with a deeply dysfunctional American system. The unprecedented interventionism of the 1990s, the morass of Iraq and Afghanistan, the contempt for international opinion and institutions -- all these are but symptoms of problems developing within American society. Bacevich focuses on the three main manifestations of that dysfunction, according each a separate chapter in what is the core of this book.

The first is the degeneration of freedom. The time-honored understanding of freedom stressing rights and obligations of citizens began to fade in the 1940s in the face of a rising, self-indulgent orgy of consumption. Acquisitiveness and its evil twin, individualism, drained citizenship of meaning and drove policymakers to extract from overseas the resources (not least credit and oil) essential to sustaining the high standard of living Americans were coming to equate with freedom. The result, as Bacevich sees it, is perpetual war for perpetual prosperity and a sad state of dependency and debt at home.

No less badly out of whack in Bacevich's view is the constitutional order. This second tale of national declension also dates back to the 1940s when an imperial presidency driven by an ideology of national security began to take shape. Congress became "a haven for narcissistic hacks" (70), while the national security apparatus became the special preserve of an obtuse and self-interested elite.

Finally, Bacevich turns to the mess surrounding the exercise of U.S. military power. Civilians making policy have since the end of the Cold War tended "to confuse strategy with ideology" (165). Their repeated attempts to use the military to transform the world or to exert control over other countries have validated a timeworn rule: "The utility of armed force remains finite" (160). Senior commanders have had their own problems. A string of mediocre generals has been prone "to confuse strategy with operations" (166), a point Bacevich develops in a review of the interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and again Iraq.

Bacevich's review of the nation's ills is informed from beginning to end by a mix of righteous anger and realist certitude. The anger makes this work something of a jeremiad. It laments the decline of a "traditional" America and warns that the present course will carry the country to "the day of reckoning" (12). National grace is possible but only through repentance and return to the values of a virtuous golden age. In this account Reinhold Niebuhr takes the place of Beard and Williams as a voice from a wiser past validating the author's indictment of the current hubris and his call for humility from a nation in the grip of "imperial delusions" (13). Woven into this *cri de coeur* is a familiar strand of realism, which Bacevich equates with "the iron laws of international politics" (21). Realism informs Bacevich's understanding not only of how the world works but also what imperatives policymakers should follow. Policymakers attuned to the iron laws will match means to ends and thus avoid overreaching. They will see the world in a clear-headed way -- as it really is, not as the naive would like it to be. They thus will be pragmatic and avoid the siren call of idealism.

In appraising *Limits*, we might ask whether the argument is fresh, appealing, and historically sound. The first test is easily disposed of. Much of what is said in *Limits* is familiar from other, earlier works critical of the Bush administration, including of course Bacevich's own writing. Knowledgeable readers will find few surprises here.

The likely appeal and impact of this book can only be a matter of speculation. It appears at a promising point -- as the Bush administration gives way to a new team. At this time of transition a clearly argued and impassioned work could have an outsized impact, perhaps even garner support for addressing the national deformities identified here.

But it is also easy to imagine more of the same from an Obama administration, leaving Bacevich a voice crying in the political wilderness. The grip of old ways on U.S. policy seems strong:

- Continuing entanglement in the Islamic world even if the center of military gravity shifts from Iraq to Afghanistan.
- Continuing commitment to an international economic system which U.S. leaders have built around free market principles even if the system is inherently unstable and inequitable and its leading sponsor a deadbeat.
- Continuing ambivalence about international institutions and norms which US. leaders helped put in place a half century ago.
- Continuing anxiety about a world that is becoming more and more multipolar politically as well as economically. China as a rising power, Russia as a resentful power, and Europe still trying to digest its post-Cold War acquisitions all pose serious challenges to Washington's conception of itself as the ultimate international arbiter.
- Continuity in policy thinking as a president with few well formed and tested views of his own surrounds himself with familiar figures from the Clinton years.

On the third point, the soundness of the historical scholarship informing the arguments in *Limits*, I can only express puzzlement. There is the usual sprinkling of specific claims that

cause pause. What was Bacevich thinking when he linked Curtis LeMay to the emergence of the National Organization for Women (27)? Did he really consult accounts of the Gorbachev era before crediting both Nixon and Reagan with precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union (22 and 44)? Even more puzzling is the way in which *Limits* stands aside from much of today's U.S. foreign relations literature even though three substantial bodies of it bear heavily on the argument.¹

First is the writing on consumer society. At least two pertinent points emerge. The rise of consumer values that Bacevich deplors was not a recent development but rather a central strand in American economic, cultural, and social development going back well before the 1940s. Indeed, the structural changes in the economy that made the consumer fluorescence possible date back to the late nineteenth century. Moreover, consumer society has had a multifaceted character and thus a complex relationship to foreign policy during the interwar years no less than during the Cold War decades that Bacevich holds most salient. How exactly, for example, did the wars in Korea or Vietnam derive from consumerist pressures? Why did other consumer societies such as those that emerged in Europe and Japan not also turn militant? The notion of consumer society raises big, complex issues that require greater care and nuance than we get in the bold, sweeping, simple generalizations offered here.

The second notable omission is the constellation of work dealing with nationalism and the attendant notions of race and cultural superiority. Perhaps the most fundamental theme to draw from that work is the importance of nationalism over the entire arc of U.S. history. Studies bearing on U.S. nationalism don't support in any obvious way Bacevich's distinction between traditional and recent conceptions of U.S. identity, and they directly challenge his realist impulse to dismiss nationalism in the American case as a tool to close down debate, as "a moral gloss" (77) to help win public support, or as a device "to camouflage American ambitions" (113). By neglecting this literature, Bacevich fails to take account of the full century-long rise of a powerful American state with the president as the embodiment and voice of the nation. He moreover fails to confront the possibility that U.S. nationalism is even today an extraordinarily strong force. If so, then reforming, restraining, or expunging it is an enormous task that Bacevich's analysis does not adequately address. Simply getting rid of the hacks in Congress or the blinkered foreign policy specialists is not going to do the job.

Finally, *Limits* proceeds oblivious to a stream of new work on the global context in which U.S. policy has developed and functioned. This literature highlights all the ways in which globalization has over the last century and more created networks and norms with massive effects on state sovereignty, interstate collaboration, and popular attitudes in virtually every part of the world. How these international threads binding the United States to the

¹ The essays in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), consider from a variety of directions the literature that I have in mind. Some of the leading works are noted in the bibliographical essay in my *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

rest of the world were woven, what effect they have had, and what might happen were they to fray or break are perhaps the leading historical questions of the moment. They seem to have little or no place in Bacevich's realist conception of the nature of power or in his consideration of the limits and possibilities of U.S. policy.

With its strong elements of jeremiad, nostalgia, and realism *Limits* turns its back on an extraordinary accumulation of directly relevant historical work. By failing to grapple with findings so central to much of the literature on U.S. foreign relations, this work runs the risk of misunderstanding present problems and thus formulating flawed prescriptions for addressing them. However well done, a realist critique that slights the function of domestic forces (not least political economy and ideology) and the dense, far-reaching transnational links generated by global forces may persuade, but it is not likely to succeed. Indeed such a work may illustrate how a realism without strong historical engagement can veer dangerously close to the very state of idealism that realists deplore.

Review by Matthew F. Jacobs, University of Florida

Let me begin by thanking Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable and for inviting me to participate in it. It is both an honor and a pleasure to be in the company of some of our field's top scholars and to be asked to review a book by a scholar whose work is regularly read outside of academia.

Andrew Bacevich has developed through his earlier works—most notably *The American Empire* and *The New American Militarism*—and his op-ed contributions to publications such as the *Boston Globe* and the *Los Angeles Times*, a reputation as a public intellectual strongly critical of U.S. foreign policy and of Americans' general lack of appreciation for the connections between the domestic and international arenas. Readers looking for an up-to-date and succinct version of those views will not be disappointed when they pick up his latest product, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. Engagingly written in prose that is frequently informal and often downright punchy, *The Limits of Power* is an angry book that seeks to explain how the United States finds itself in an endless global war on terror while continuing to compile massive debt and making commitments—military, economic, and political—it cannot sustain.

The heroes and villains of the story Bacevich recounts are clear from the outset. The latter are without question the American people and the leaders they elect. Throughout history, but particularly since the end of the Cold War, both have viewed their country as “the indispensable nation,” responsible for defining and defending international norms in the post-Cold War world and for extending economic and political opportunity across the world through the process known as “globalization.” This expanded U.S. role in the world “assumed the existence of bountiful reserves of power—economic, political, cultural, but above all military” (2). Thus, the United States came to specialize in power projection, rather than in actually defending its core interests, and committed itself to an unending war that both policy makers and the public believed had been thrust upon them and that they had no choice but to wage. Bacevich challenges that assertion by arguing that foreign policy has long “provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears,” and has become in recent years “an expression of domestic dysfunction—an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way of life.” Indeed, those contradictions are one consequence of excessive adherence to the founding principle of the United States: “the accumulated detritus of freedom, the by-products of our frantic pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness” (5).

The hero, on the other hand, is Reinhold Niebuhr, “the most clear-eyed of American prophets” (6). According to Bacevich, Niebuhr's emphasis on realism and humility are crucial to seeing the United States through the deep and long-building crisis in which it finds itself today. Realism “implies an obligation to see the world as it actually is, not as we might like it to be,” while humility “summons Americans to see themselves without blinders” (7). Each has its enemy, hubris and sanctimony, respectively, which Bacevich believes have combined to create a guiding philosophy stating that Americans are both determined to remake the world in their image and that they have the power to do so. It is

only by following the wise council of Niebuhr, then, that Americans might work their way out of “the central paradox of our time: While the defense of American freedom seems to demand that U.S. troops fight in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, the exercise of that freedom at home undermines the nation’s capacity to fight” (11).

In order to pursue these arguments, Bacevich develops three main points, each in its own self-contained chapter. The first focuses on what Bacevich calls “The Crisis of Profligacy.” That crisis is rooted in the defining American identity of “*more*,” or the “ethic of self-gratification” (16). The enduring desire to acquire more money, consumer goods, land, and power, among other things, has defined both individual and state action throughout America’s lifetime. That worked for a long while, as it promoted economic growth that helped overcome social and political tensions at home and brought the United States to the height of its global power. The peak came in the two decades following World War II, when increasing U.S. power internationally coincided with—indeed facilitated—the dramatic (though by no means complete) expansion of freedom at home. That all changed, however, between 1965 and 1973, when the United States overreached abroad in Vietnam and at home with the Great Society, advancing a trend of declining U.S. economic power that was brought home even more powerfully through the two oil shocks of the 1970s. It was at this moment that the United States had its first real opportunity to alter its priorities in fundamental ways, a choice that President Carter laid out in his famous “Crisis of Confidence” speech in July 1979. According to Bacevich, President Reagan made the definitive decision, articulated in his March 1983 speech outlining the Strategic Defense Initiative, to rely on technology and the pursuit of unrivalled and permanent military superiority as the “antidote to the uncertainties and anxieties of living in a world not run entirely in accordance with American preferences” (41). Rather than decreasing dependence on foreign oil and adjusting their desires to match their means, Americans and their country embarked on an unprecedented frenzy of conspicuous consumption over the ensuing quarter century, and as a result were drawn ever more deeply into the Middle East and a variety of other crisis points around the globe. The end of the Cold War and the way in which it came about, with the United States becoming involved in areas like Afghanistan that had previously been of no real interest, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Union only exacerbated these tendencies. From the Reagan years right through 9/11 and beyond, then, Bacevich contends that U.S. foreign policy was driven by an ever-expanding definition of U.S. interests designed to protect America’s freedom of profligate consumption. But it came at the cost of rapidly escalating private and public debt to support both the consumption itself and the maintenance and use of the military to protect it.

At the same time the United States was becoming immersed in its crisis of profligacy, there was also a growing and closely connected political crisis emerging, the second major component of the overarching problem Bacevich sees facing the United States today. This crisis was a product of the rise of the national security state that came into being at the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. That state was governed by an ideology in which the path of history led toward liberty and freedom for all, the United States was the embodiment of that freedom and had been called by God to guarantee its “ultimate triumph,” and, lastly, that “the American way of life” could endure only if freedom

“prevail[ed] everywhere” (75). Over time, that ideology offered “a highly elastic rationale for action,” particularly “the exercise of executive power” (77). In its elasticity, the ideology could be used to justify almost any action that the state pursued, and it served in practice both to enhance presidential power and to squelch dissent. Moreover, policy makers came to realize that supporting and perpetuating the ideology also helped them retain their grip on power, and thus self interest prevents most politicians from offering any viable alternative intellectual framework for understanding America’s role in the world. The great irony, however, is that according to Bacevich the national security state has in fact made Americans less secure. Put bluntly, maintaining the national security state has led to “behavior that is dishonest, unprofessional, unethical, and frequently at odds with the nation’s well-being,” as exemplified by Abu Ghraib (87). In addition, each president since Eisenhower has failed to utilize the system the way it was intended, and in fact has worked explicitly to circumvent and operate outside of it by appointing to critical positions weak individuals who would offer limited dissent to presidential policy or by seeking the secret council of outside advisors in support of specific policies. The overall impact was that an imperial president could use the ideology of national security to pursue policies that had not been subjected to wide-ranging review and criticism and that were the product of like-thinking individuals. The Iraq War and the Bush Doctrine of “anticipatory self-defense” were the most egregious examples and culmination of a process that began half a century earlier.

Compounding the problems created by the crisis of profligacy and the political crisis is a military crisis, the focus of the third chapter. Here Bacevich eschews the approach of the previous two chapters, focusing almost exclusively on the post-Cold War period rather than going back to the end of World War II to establish the foundation on which to construct the rest of his argument. He contends the belief (widespread in policy making circles, the military itself, and the wider population) in U.S. military mastery has been completely discredited not only by events in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also by a broader arc of events since the end of the Cold War. In combination, these events have demonstrated that “U.S. forces win decisively only when the enemy obligingly fights on American terms” (130). In addition, the wider population, though frequently expressing emotional claims to support the troops, in practice was asked to provide very little tangible evidence of that support. The failure of policy makers, military officials, and the wider public to understand the nature of military conflict today and what it entails have led them to focus on drawing lessons applicable to future wars, rather than to question the fundamental assumptions and priorities that led the country into these wars in the first place. One of those lessons emphasizes letting the military operate independent of civilian leaders, which Bacevich finds to be highly problematic both because President Bush gave his generals a relatively free hand in Afghanistan and Iraq and because he does not believe they performed very well. Indeed, Bacevich pulls the fewest punches in this section of the book, labeling the post-Cold War generation of military leadership “mediocre” (147). He is unsparing, as all of the familiar names—H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Colin Powell, Wesley Clark, Tommy Franks, Ricardo Sanchez, George Casey, and even David Petraeus—come in for heavy criticism. To overcome the broader military crisis, Bacevich suggests his own set of lessons to be drawn from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: 1) the basic nature of war is unchanging; 2) military force can only accomplish finite objectives; 3) preventive war does

not work; and 4) the need for a military leadership that can think not only about the tactics to achieve a particular objective but also about the broader strategic implications and utility of using the military. Acknowledging these lessons, Bacevich argues, leads one to the logical conclusion that the United States “needs a smaller—that is, more modest—foreign policy, one that assigns soldiers missions that are consistent with their capabilities” (169).

Bacevich concludes the book by asking how the United States might work its way out of its current crisis. Skeptical of election year promises to change Washington, he contends that focusing solely on the occupant of the White House “promotes expectations of easy, no-cost cures, permitting ordinary citizens to absolve themselves of responsibility for the nation’s predicament” (171). Instead, Bacevich suggests that it will be only when Americans are willing to acknowledge limits on U.S. economic and military power that they can begin to reverse the process of U.S. decline by exploring previously inconceivable policy options. First among the alternative courses he proposes is a switch from President Bush’s “manifestly absurd” effort to eradicate evil and the seemingly unlimited Global War on Terror to a more sustainable, more narrowly focused, and ultimately more flexible strategy of containing Islamic extremism (176). Such a policy would allow for strong military and intelligence activity when absolutely necessary, but would also create space for other forms of “selective engagement” through exchange and educational programs, and even more importantly, allow Muslims to work out for themselves what should be the appropriate relationship between religion and the state (177).

As significant as it would be for the United States to withdraw from its self-proclaimed Global War on Terror, the other two courses that Bacevich proposes would require even greater transformations in the country’s popular and policy making psyche. He calls for the abolishment of nuclear weapons, which he argues are “unusable” because “their employment in any conceivable scenario would be a political and moral catastrophe.” Moreover, maintaining a substantial stockpile only supports those countries that continue to pursue weapons programs by suggesting “that nuclear weapons play a legitimate role in international politics.” At a minimum, the United States could make a strong statement to the international community by reducing its stores from nearly six thousand warheads to a few hundred (178-79).

Even more daunting is the task of combating climate change, particularly by transitioning the United States and the rest of the world out of their reliance on fossil fuels. Bacevich is under no illusion that such a policy shift would be cheap, but suggests that the expenditures would be far more productive than spending equal sums on “large-scale efforts to engineer political, social, and cultural change abroad” with results that have been “mixed” at best and “downright abysmal” at worst. The biggest challenge to such a shift in emphasis is the amount of sacrifice it would require from “a people for whom freedom has become synonymous with consumption and self-actualization” (181).

Overall, Bacevich concludes on a pessimistic note, suggesting that Americans will not see the consequences of their actions until it is far too late to alter the outcome. All the while, they will continue to believe that the exercise of military power offers the best path to protect their interests, pursue only token efforts to deal with climate change, and hold

neither themselves nor their leaders accountable for either the mounting individual and national debt or the “stupefying incompetence and dysfunction in the nation’s capital.” Americans thus seem “increasingly inclined to write off the future” as they chart a course toward “willful self-destruction” (181-82).

There is much in *The Limits of Power* that readers will recognize and with which they will agree. Most scholars who study the history of U.S. foreign relations will readily concede that Americans have dramatically overspent on both the individual and national level. We will also concur with his definition of a national security ideology and that the national security state has contributed greatly to the rise of the imperial presidency, though some of us might question whether its rise has continued uninterrupted since the end of World War II. And while we might not all possess the military expertise that Bacevich’s two decades in the Army provide, many of us can readily observe the shortcomings of the U.S. military and the ways in which it has been used over the last decade or more. Several of these arguments have been laid out by other scholars in recent years, but that Bacevich has been able to synthesize them into a short and accessible volume is welcome and a testament to both his intellectual and writing talents.

There are also some new arguments here. Bacevich’s implicit effort to re-periodize both U.S. and international history is compelling. The argument that the years from 1979 to 1983 are more important than the actual end of the Cold War itself for understanding U.S. foreign policy after 1989 is bold and well developed. Equally powerful is his contention, pursued more stridently here and in different form than in *The American Empire* and *The New American Militarism*, that we should consider the period from the 1960s to the present as a whole, rather than observing a fundamental breaking point in 1989.

Finally, certain of Bacevich’s arguments seem particularly prescient. Anyone doubting that the United States has fallen into a crisis of profligacy need only look around them at the carnage left by the U.S. and global credit and financial crisis that erupted just as *The Limits of Power* appeared in bookstores around the country. Indeed, here were Bacevich’s concerns about profligate deficit spending on both the individual and national levels coming to life before our very eyes.

There are of course places where one can quibble with Bacevich on the specifics. For example, he contends that since World War II policy making with respect to national security “has become oligarchic rather than democratic. The policy making process is not open but closed, with the voices of privileged insiders carrying unimaginably greater weight than those of the unwashed masses” (82). One might reasonably ask when in the history of the United States was this not the case? In addition, chapter three on the military crisis is the only part of the book that is difficult to read, as one can get lost in a dizzying array of lists and lists within lists of “illusions,” wrong “lessons,” “perspectives,” and correct “lessons.” That chapter also raises a series of related, though somewhat tangential questions that Bacevich never addresses. What explains the mediocrity of this generation of military leaders? Were they poorly trained, or do these individuals simply lack the intellectual abilities necessary to rise above mediocrity? And does the ascent of a new group of Ph.D.-trained leaders, including David Petraeus and H.R. McMaster, bode well or

ill for the future? Bacevich is uniquely positioned to answer these questions, since he was part of this generation of leaders until he separated from the Army at the rank of colonel in the early 1990s.

The more fundamental problem with the book, however, is that its final recommendations, while admirable, seem incommensurate with the crises Bacevich identifies. How, for example, does switching to a policy of containing Islamic extremism fundamentally solve the political crisis or the crisis of profligacy? There is little question it would be a welcome change, and it is possible that it could be part of a broader reassessment of priorities, but a president could pursue such a policy without addressing in substantive ways either of those crises. It is easier to make the case that abolishing nuclear weapons would have a direct impact on the political crisis as exemplified by the national security state, but there too one can envision ways in which nuclear weapons could be abolished without shifting power away from an entrenched political elite and the ideology on which they continue to rely. While each of the three recommendations might indicate a more modest foreign policy, and would be good to pursue even if they did not, only the sustained commitment to combating climate change by transitioning away from dependence on fossil fuels would by definition offer a direct attack any of the three crises.

Ultimately, though, we are also left wondering—to borrow a phrase that Bacevich himself used in his December 2007 H-Diplo roundtable review of Michael Hunt's *The American Ascendancy*—"who cares?" Bacevich's conclusion suggests that he is doubtful Americans will turn things around, but surely there must be a glimmer of hope, or else why write the book? It is clearly intended to be assigned to students and to be read by wider audiences. Indeed, I anxiously await the responses of the one hundred students in my undergraduate survey of U.S. foreign relations since 1914 who will read and respond to this book as their final essay assignment this semester. Personally, I am at least a bit optimistic, particularly regarding the issue of public engagement in the issues at hand. Perhaps it is the fact that I write in the afterglow of the United States' having just elected its first African-American president, combined with the wide and deep economic crisis within which the United States finds itself (one that Bacevich can be said to have predicted), but I do see an opportunity for a searching reappraisal of priorities. It of course remains to be seen whether or not Americans and their leaders will seize that opportunity, but it seems to me that it is at least more likely now than it was even just a few months ago.

Author's Response by Andrew Bacevich, Boston University

I thank H-DIPLO and Roundtable Editor Thomas Maddux for organizing this exchange. I'm very grateful to Professors Combs, Hixson, Hunt, and Jacobs for each providing such a thoughtful and thoroughgoing review of my book.

My own response will be brief.

In Professor Hixson's reading, "*The Limits of Power* relentlessly condemns U. S. foreign policy, past and present." Just to clarify: my aim is not to condemn but to demythologize.

My target is the concept of "American Exceptionalism." Professor Hixson might agree that "American Exceptionalism" is like kudzu. However diligently historians hack away, they never succeed in killing it. It just keeps coming back, with 9/11 having triggered an especially luxuriant efflorescence.

What are we to make of this phenomenon? Although Americans were never as innocent, as naïve, or as benign as they claimed, sustaining the pretense during the nation's rise to the status of great power did prove quite useful. It provided a reassuring moral gloss to an expansionist project notable for being anything but moral. The statesmen who wrapped themselves in the cloak of "American Exceptionalism" as they directed that project were pragmatic, opportunistic, and, as the occasion required, ruthless. Viewed in retrospect, they were also astonishingly successful.

As Professor Combs suggests, it is not my intent to denounce this expansionist project. Instead, I acknowledge it for what it was and for what it produced: by the mid-point of the 20th century, expansionism (helped along by the folly of our chief competitors) had made the United States the most powerful and the richest country in the world. Further, American power and American material abundance created the conditions whereby ever greater numbers of American citizens were able (through considerable struggle) to gain access to freedom.

Was all of this good for the world? I'm not prepared to hazard an answer to that question. Was it good for Americans? By and large, yes. Until the 1960s or so, an expansionist foreign policy sustained by a belief in "American Exceptionalism" did much to facilitate the average American's pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

Since the 1960s, however, this happy correlation between expansion, power, abundance, and freedom has come undone. The impact of "American Exceptionalism" is now increasingly perverse – it prevents us from seeing that adherence to the old expansionist routines (today finding expression in efforts to "liberate," i. e., pacify, reorder, and thereby dominate the Greater Middle East) is actually contrary to our own interests. Expansionism today is squandering American power, undercutting American prosperity, and compromising American freedom. This I do condemn.

Professor Hixson's understanding of Reinhold Niebuhr differs from my own. To suggest that Niebuhr supported "unremitting campaigns against the forces of evil" implies that he disregarded his own core convictions. People who wage unremitting campaigns tend to be oblivious to careful distinctions. Niebuhr specialized in drawing such distinctions. He supported war against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, but did not hesitate to cite the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as grievously sinful. He supported efforts to contain the Soviet Union, but criticized U. S. intervention in Vietnam as a perversion of sound strategy.

Professor Hixson objects to my suggestion that the Cold War strategy of containment might provide a point of departure for conceiving an effective response to violent Islamic radicalism – something preferable to the ongoing Global War on Terror. My point is not to suggest that every action undertaken by the United States as part of containment was wise or prudent. Yet when it comes to strategic analysis, I'll take George Kennan over George W. Bush any day of the week. The same goes for choosing between the Marshall Plan and the Bush Doctrine or between NATO and AFRICOM. In the earliest days of the Cold War, American policymakers got more than a few things right.

Professor Combs sees few conservatives signing on to my critique of recent U. S. policy. He may well be correct on that point. He also notes – rightly in my view – that even after the debacle that is the Bush era, Republicans and Democrats don't differ from one another nearly as much as they claim when it comes to national security policy. To the extent that this perception is true, then Barack Obama's promise to "change the way Washington works" may not amount to very much. That very much accords with my own expectations – although it would please me to no end were the next president to prove me wrong.

Professor Hunt asks: "What was Bacevich thinking when he linked Curtis LeMay to the emergence of the National Organization for Women?" Answer: perhaps too glibly for some, I was illustrating the argument that power and abundance (manifested in the 1950s by LeMay's Strategic Air Command, both as the primary expression of U. S. military dominance and as the very embodiment of the military-industrial complex) helped create the conditions permitting those who pressed for a more expansive definition of freedom (the National Organization for Woman being one such group) to advance their cause. I described the relationship as an "ironic kinship" Perhaps it requires an appreciation of irony to get the point.

Professor Hunt faults me for "crediting Nixon and Reagan with precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union," preferring for his part to give all the credit to Gorbachev. I'm happy to honor the contributions of the Soviet leader and even more of all those who opposed the Soviet empire from within and helped to bring it crashing down. I would simply note that Professor Hunt misconstrues my claim, which is more limited than he suggests.

Regarding Nixon, I wrote that his collaboration with Mao "*helped* [emphasis added] bring down the Soviet empire." I'll defend that proposition: the tacit U. S. alliance that Nixon forged with China enormously complicated the strategic challenges with which the Kremlin had to deal. Ultimately it could not cope with those challenges.

Regarding Reagan, I wrote that “by expending huge sums on an arsenal of high-tech weapons,” he “nudged the Kremlin toward the realization that the Soviet Union could no longer compete with the West.” I doubt that Gorbachev himself would find that statement objectionable.

Professor Hunt chides me for writing a book that “stands aside from much of today’s U.S. foreign relations literature.” I’m tempted to enter a plea of *nolo contendere* – conforming to the latest historiographical fashions was not the task I’d set for myself. Yet Hunt’s explanation for what exactly standing aside means is more than a little perplexing.

Professor Hunt takes me to task for failing to “confront the possibility that U. S. nationalism is even today an extraordinarily strong force” and that “simply getting rid of the hacks in Congress or the blinkered foreign policy specialists” is not going to fix our problems. True enough, I pay little explicit attention to nationalism as such. Yet the book pays a whole lot of attention to “American Exceptionalism,” which is, of course, a powerful manifestation of nationalism. Nor does the book come anywhere close to implying that purging the ranks of our political elites (however desirable for all sorts of reasons) will provide an antidote to the crises that we confront. To state the matter as plainly as I can: the root of the foremost crisis is cultural.

I am baffled – no other word will do -- by Professor Hunt’s comment that *The Limits of Power* “slights the function of domestic forces (not least political economy and ideology).” I invite his attention to the quotations that Professor Jacobs cites as central to the book’s message: U. S. foreign policy has long “provided an outward manifestation of American domestic ambitions, urges, and fears,” having in our own day become “an expression of domestic dysfunction – an attempt to manage or defer coming to terms with contradictions besetting the American way of life.” These are not throwaway lines made in passing. They reflect a core conviction: domestic considerations drive American statecraft.

Toward the conclusion of a very generous review, Professor Jacobs cites my assertion that in recent decades the formulation of national security policy “has become oligarchic rather than democratic.” When, he asks, has this not been the case?

Good question. When it comes to formulating basic policy or rendering momentous decisions, the people seldom get consulted and don’t get much of a vote. That was as true in 1903 when TR intervened in Panama. It was still true in 1953 when Ike intervened in Iran. It remained true in 2003 when George W. Bush intervened in Iraq. To imply that American statecraft in an earlier day had been “democratic” is clearly misleading.

Professor Jacobs also asks why recent senior military leaders have proven so disappointing. This is another very good question, one for which no easy answers exist. My own guess is that some of the following have contributed: lingering poisons left over from Vietnam (affecting even officers who never served in that war); deep-seated flaws in our approach to civil-military relations; an equally flawed system of officer education and development; and an ethos within the military profession that fosters careerism at the

expense of intellectual honesty and moral courage. Throw in this additional factor: leadership at the very top during wartime is a demanding affair, fraught with uncertainty. That many leaders are found wanting should not be surprising – although that does not imply that we should be content with mediocrity. Whether the rise of the Petraeus generation will improve things remains to be seen. Personally, I am skeptical.

Finally, Professor Jacobs wonders about the pessimism that informs my book's conclusion. "[S]urely," he writes, "there must be a glimmer of hope, or else why write the book?" Professor Jacobs describes himself, in the warm afterglow of Obama's election, as "at least a bit optimistic." I commend him for that. For myself, however, I'll stick with T. S. Eliot:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

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