

The Age of Illusions - How America Squandered Its Cold War Victory

A Book Review

By [Jim Miles](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Another in his series of remarkable books, **Andrew J. Bacevich** has written an interesting, coherent, and timely work, **The Age of Illusions**. In a clear fashion it describes how Donald J. Trump is not the cause of current U.S. problems both foreign and domestic, but is the cumulative result of the decline of the U.S.

Trump is “a mere bit player” in the overall scheme of schisms in the U.S. domestic scene. He is a “transitory figure who simultaneously embodied and laid bare the accumulating contradictions of American life.” Throughout the work, Bacevich introduces Trump as a background noise to unfolding events, a narcissistic self promoter.

The work starts with the post war era and a quick look at a few of the important players of that time. He transits into discussing Nixon and Reagan as they lead into the presidency of George H. W. Bush and the sudden unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union. From that event, Bacevich argues that the elites of the time “devised - and promulgated - a new consensus consisting of four elements.”

Four elements

These four elements carry throughout the rest of the book. They are easily recognized by readers following current events.

First mention goes to globalization which he describes as “globalized neoliberalism...all about wealth creation: Unconstrained corporate capitalism operating on a planetary scale.” The second element is global leadership, “a euphemism for hegemony or, more simply still, for empire”, supported by “unchallengeable military might” or as set out by the neocons, “full spectrum dominance.” The third element is freedom used in the context of “the removal of constraints maximizing choice” both in domestic politics and human behaviour and in global politics with corporate freedom above and beyond governments and people. Bacevich’s final element is presidential freedom, with the “Oval Office accorded quasi-monarchical prerogatives and granted quasi-monarchical status.”

This system was used in such a way that it “squandered the advantages it had gained by winning the Cold War.” While this is arguable as it worked for some - the elite corporatists and politicians - it did not work for the average citizen.

End of history

After discussing the ideas of Rudyard Kipling, Frederick Turner, and Alfred Thayer Mahan, all

who promoted using “American power on an increasingly expansive scale,” the book focuses on Francis Fukuyama’s influential piece, “The End of History?”. The essay is of the genre of writing “that captures something essential about the moment in which they appear, while simultaneously shaping expectations.”

Fukuyama’s essay had two attributes: first its “sheer grandeur...a big argument...to explain everything; the second was that it “certified what the United States had professed to stand for all along.” He “articulated an all-purpose justification for the American project precisely as the prior justification [the Soviet Union] was about to expire.”

The presidents

The presidents that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union are examined and critiqued in the context of the four elements of globalization, global leadership/military dominance, freedom, and presidential freedom. The 1992 election, Bush against Clinton, was “a campaign foreshadowing the future trajectory of American politics and culminating with Donald Trump’s election as president twenty-four years later.”

Before actually looking at the presidents records he reprises the four elements in contemporary i.e. 1990s, perspective. He discusses one of my favorites, Thomas Friedman, whose writing is described as “The promotion of globalization included a generous element of hucksterism.” His discussion of global leadership includes the view that ties leadership into effectively leading with the military, full spectrum dominance.

The third element of freedom was “now expressed in a determination to remove limits on personal autonomy while discarding restrictions rooted in tradition and religious belief,” with an increasing role of technology in shaping those new limits and boundaries and the removal of “The last remaining constraints on the operation of global capitalism.” The losers were cultural conservatives in the first case, and the average citizen in the latter case – but that did not mean that they disappeared or stayed out of the picture.

As for the president, he became a demi-god, the leader of the “free world”, the most powerful man in the world. “They all promoted globalized neoliberalism and supported militarized hegemony.”

Within these elements and as per Fukuyama, the U.S. had proven its supremacy and was set to endure, to be the leader of the globe, thus the end of history.

And their legacies

In spite of all the hype, the jargon, and hubris from the politicians and the mainstream media, Bacevich’s analysis of the presidential legacies clearly demonstrates how each succeeding leader reinforced the four elements and each time increased the negative effects of U.S. policies both domestically and in foreign affairs.

In an interesting self critique, he speaks of his own role in having his views solicited by various state and media personnel. He realized later that “virtually all of this was theater...pretending to debate matters that were not in actuality up for discussion....All the chatter served one purpose only,” as a distraction from what was really happening. In a similar vein he again brings Donald Trump into the dialogue, noting he “was already market testing themes that within a decade would make him president.”

His biggest disappointment was Obama whose presidency “saved globalized neoliberalism” modified “American militarism and gave it a new lease on life,” and liberalized the limits of personal freedoms “that combined righteousness with a tinge of smugness,” qualifying “as either entirely appropriate or absolutely the last straw, depending on one’s point of view.” Bacevich describes himself as a conservative in this respect but his analysis of how the latter has worked out shows serious consideration of different perspectives. For someone who promised “hope and change” the U.S. only received more of the same, bigger and better.

The Trump era

Bacevich ends his critique of Obama at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 2011 where Obama roasted Trump with mocking humor about his birth certificate and the *Celebrity Apprentice* show. His conclusion “Yet the last laugh would be his.”

To start the Trump era, Bacevich highlights many statistics demonstrating how “evidence of acute economic distress and insecurity was evident, even among those fortunate enough to have jobs.” A significant number of Americans had not benefited from the financialization of Wall Street and the large corporations, globalized neoliberalism had failed them. He explores how “Americans have become inured to war and to a ...never ending national security emergency.”

Similarly with the concept of freedom, it was “undertaken in an environment in which consumption and celebrity had emerged as preeminent values.” Free perhaps but “obsessively narcissistic”, filled with “stress, anxiety, and a sense of not quite measuring up,” and for many “alienation, anomie, and despair.” He follows this with a wide range of social demographic statistics clearly supporting his argument.

Trump did not make the U.S. this way, rather “he demonstrated a knack for translating those conditions into votes. Here the moment met the man....He was...very much a man of his time.”

The description of how the electoral process unfolded for both the Democrats and Republicans provides well informed and interesting reading. For describing Trump he adds, “As a strategic thinker, Trump had no particular talents. Yet as a strategic sensor [*italicized in original*] he was uniquely gifted, possessing an intuitive genius for reading the temper of his supporters and stroking their grievances....The number of pissed off Americans...sufficed to install Trump in the White House.”

The divide in America between those disaffected and those in control (and all those who have simply given up) was not caused by Trump, “it was pervasive division that vaulted him to the center of American politics in the first place....Trump did not create this cleavage. He merely turned it to his personal advantage.” He is a “transitory figure who simultaneously embodied and laid bare the accumulating contradictions of American life.”

You get the picture. Bacevich does not like Trump, nor do I as a critic, but perhaps I like this work so much because it presents a broader perspective on why and how Trump succeeded in spite of his own expectations. He touched a populist chord in America that remains solidly in support of him. Trump is all that his critics claim he is, but he is also much more: he is a turning point in U.S. society where all its ugliness comes to the headlines, personified but not caused by his election.

Finale

The Age of Illusions closes with a brief summary of how the U.S. has been eclipsed in global affairs. First is the end of western primacy focussed on the emergence of China. Next is that the convenience and antidote to boredom that is technology exacts a price including “submission to vast, profit-hungry corporate entities.” Finally, and this is where Bacevich ends, “the way that humankind in the twenty-first century aspires to live is pushing Earth to the brink of exhaustion.”

This is a wonderfully well written history of how America squandered its Cold War victory and how that developed over the decades and through different presidents to make the U.S. what it is today. It offers no great solutions to the many problems facing the U.S. and the world as too many other exceptionalist U.S. oriented writers do. It is an analytical work that deserves to be widely read in order to understand the U.S. today, and the global position of the U.S. today.

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