

Twilight of the American Century

A Review of Andrew J. Bacevich's Book

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Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#)

The histories of empires and the histories of war are generally written by the winner to put themselves in a positive light. It has been difficult for the U.S. empire to maintain their facade of goodness for their endeavours after World War II, and even more significantly after 9/11. In Twilight of the American Century, a selection of his own collected writings, Andrew J. Bacevich reveals the contradictions between what is said about U.S. actions – either as anticipation or as definition – and the results of such actions. In essence, the rationalizations, the hubris, and the arrogance do not match up with the lack of accomplishments, the latter themselves ill-defined.

After a short introductory mini-biography, the book is divided into four sections. The autobiography highlights Bacevich's Roman Catholic middle class military background and the inculcation from Westpoint in which essentially the army equals the nation, but even more importantly, sees promotability as a characteristic – accepting orders, conformity – becoming the main ambition, the main career goal.

The first essay section is a series deconstructing rationalizations for U.S. military actions and deconstructing the histories of some of those who claim authority to define their personal historical involvement. Bacevich does not mince his words, along the way calling George Kennan a “bigoted crank....feeling sorry for himself,” and describes novelist Tom Clancy's work as “military pop-lit” and Clancy himself as a “hack”. His longest essay of the section deconstructs the arguments of the Wohlstetter School, saying it “does not trouble itself over how the United States got enmeshed in whatever predicament it happens to be facing” and has “produced lubricants that kept the wheels of the national security state turning, while also helping to fuel the military-industrial complex.”

The second and third sections, “History and Myth” and “War and Empire”, examine the differences between rhetorical expectations and the bravado of defeat as compared to the disastrous reality of the outcomes of the various U.S. wars since 2000, with a few dips into earlier history. The essays can be a bit repetitive as they are snapshots of Bacevich's ideas over a period of time, with the disconcerting reveal as they are placed in a descending timeline with earliest essays presented later in the sections. Regardless, the message is consistent: U.S. military actions are poorly conceived, poorly enacted, poorly explained and produce clearly negative results both overseas and domestically.

The last section “Politics and Culture” is as direct as the title, examining U.S. culture and politics domestically as it developed through the era of a militarized empire. As a baby boomer myself, I had to laugh at his description of the boomer path to liberation as “taking their cues....from rockers, dopers, and other flouters of convention.” I was more of a peace, love, and flowers kind, but the naivety of it all in light of the political power of inculcation

overpowering any opposition is all too clear today. A combination of two other essays highlights this.

In the "One Percent Republic", a contrast of the financial top one percent with the bottom one percent joining the military, and the rest of us in between, Bacevich describes the domestic "expectations of unprecedented material abundance". When that fails, as it has, people become "accessories" to war through "detachment, neglect, and inattention," having "forfeited their say", their "grant of authority" to the state to make war is "irrevocable." Domestically, he says "Shrugging off wars makes it that much easier for Americans - overweight, overmedicated, and deeply in hock - to shrug off the persistence of widespread hunger, the patent failures of their criminal justice system, and any number of other problems." In the second rather basic descriptive essay, "Ballpark liturgy", Bacevich highlights this discrepancy between the two one percenters when viewing the military pregame presentation at a Red Sox baseball game where "America's civic religion [is] made manifest....support the troops."

Parochial view

This book is well written and instructive for those wondering about the true state of the U.S. empire. It is a positive read in that a former active military person has taken on in educational role that exposes and highlights the failures of the U.S. empire. I have no doubt that many other military personnel would support his viewpoint from a more hardened experience.

It is somewhat of a parochial view, both in the secular and religious meanings of the word. Bacevich is to be commended for the insights he does have towards the reality of a militarized U.S. society and its effects overseas and domestically. I would have to argue that he has not quite eroded the effects of his Catholic/military upbringing as there are a few misses that need to be more fully considered. Two of them are hidden in passing comments.

Russia

In the 2017 essay "Saving "America First",," a lament on the Trump era, he simply says of Russia that it is "in decline while still retaining residual importance." This seems a foreign geopolitical aspect where Bacevich has not truly maintained updated information and is more or less following the mainstream exposition on Russia. And no, I do not mean Russian interference in U.S. elections, a smoke screen in my view, but the overarching aspects of recent Russian strengths. These range from its demonstrated military efficiency in Syria, and its increasing diplomatic influence in Turkey, Egypt, and Libya, all Mediterranean littoral countries. It includes economic strengths ironically given propulsion from U.S. sanctions.

It reaches further into Russian advances in agricultural production, the strengthening of its resource sectors including and beyond oil, its development of ways and means to avoid using U.S. petrodollars including buying tons of gold, developing new money transfer systems, selling U.S. Treasuries, and liaising all these with China and other Eurasian countries. Russia's "residual importance" probably came from its nuclear capabilities which are still there, enhanced, and now backed by a powerful set of shorter range defensive armaments. It is truly not a unipolar world, and Russia is definitely one of the poles.

U.S. interests and "just wars"

Two other comments that I look on as essentially the same idea concern saving the military for specific actions, “vital U.S. interests [which] are immediately at risk,” and then arguing in a 2006 essay “God forbid the United States should fail.” The first comment needs definition as all U.S. wars are presented as being national and geopolitically strategic wars. The question becomes whose definition of vital interests does one choose? Later in the essays Bacevich discusses the idea of “Just Wars” perhaps serving as a reflection of his earlier Catholic indoctrination, but that becomes another matter of definition – in my opinion, no wars are just, only rationalized as “we” are the good guys, the ‘other’ is simply that, the ‘other’, readily done away with.

The latter comment about God forbidding the U.S. fails in its war to control the Greater Middle East is unfortunate in that it unravels much of the anti-war sentiment expressed throughout this book. Sure it was written in 2006, but common sense would dictate at least a footnote to indicate whether this sentiment still holds, or why it was presented in the first place. Was it because the U.S. needs to control the oil? Well, no because it has many other sources and now is overproducing. And yes, because the US\$ is based on the Saudi’s agreeing to sell oil only with US\$ – and look what happened to Iraq, Libya, and Syria who did not want to use the US\$. Is it because of Russian influence? Not when contrasted with his previous comment on Russia declining (2017), and Syria had yet come into the mainstream picture. Or is it because of Israel, the U.S. outpost in the region supporting U.S. hegemony?

Israel

At first Israel did not appear to be of much concern in Bacevich’s writing. As the book progressed it became more and more significant but in a contradictory manner. While acclaiming that Israel is a “vibrant, flourishing state” he also recognizes that it is using military power to control the Palestinian population in Israel. He also recognizes the role Britain had in originating the creation of Palestine, even before Balfour, citing Churchill’s comment, “The establishment of a strong, free, Jewish state astride the bridge between Europe and Africa...would not only be an immense advantage to the British Empire, but a notable step towards the harmonious disposition of the world among its peoples.” The latter part of that statement is just gibberish, but overall reflects the ‘civilizational’ hubris of any conquering empire. Israel was to serve as an ‘outpost’ both militarily and civilizational as described by Leo Amery of the Lloyd George cabinet, saying, “using the Jews as we have used the Scots, to carry the English ideal through the Middle East [Britain could] make Palestine the centre of western influence.”

While describing Israel as vibrant and flourishing, the connection is not directly made to the knowledge that the U.S. became “Israel’s preeminent international supporter and a generous supplier of economic and military assistance.” Without that assistance Israel would not likely be as vibrant and flourishing as imagined, but would appear as Bacevich himself compares it with the U.S. later as using “unambiguous military superiority” to force peace, which has done “little to enhance Israeli security.”

In the essay “How we became Israel” Bacevich again recognizes that Israel wants peace through “military superiority” by using “anticipatory action” and “targeted assassination” [italics in original]. Both countries have normalized the use of force to the extent of using “disproportional deterrence.” He maintains that both have huge problems that will prevent their success: with Israel it is the demographic problem of too many Palestinians, an historical concern from the outset; and with the U.S. it is the enormous debt accrued

through military spending. There are other problems beside those, but these two are certainly dominant.

The really big miss concerning Israel is the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC signals the powerful control over U.S. foreign policy that Israel exerts, as the creation of chaos by the U.S. military in the Greater Middle East helps propel Israel to military dominance in the region. While U.S. actions in the region are rightly placed as being for control of oil, they also serve as a way of strengthening Israeli attempts at regional hegemony. The power that AIPAC holds over U.S. foreign policy is very strong – a combination of neocon chickenhawk Israeli supporters in unelected power and Congressional supplication to the Israeli cause due to the imagined influence of the Jewish vote in elections, but mostly to Israeli money pumped into the electoral system.

Until this latter discussion is presented more fully, a true understanding of U.S. interests in the region – beyond containment of Russia and maintaining the US\$ – will not sufficiently cover the context for U.S. wars in the Greater Middle East.

Overall, Twilight of the American Century is another in the series of strong critical writings by Andrew Bacevich. Perhaps I am putting too much emphasis on what I call the passing comments and misses, but they do signal areas, important areas, in which the author needs to supply more definition and more context. The recognition of U.S. imperial militarism and its influence domestically is strong, the additional definition of “vital interests” placed in context with overall Israeli influence would help round out the discussion. A good read, I highly recommend it for the insights it provides into the overall examination of the U.S. empire.

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