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National Security or Insecurity? **Andrew Bacevich on American Militarism and the New NSS**

by
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Andrew J. Bacevich is a graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Vietnam war who is now a professor who directs the Center for International Relations at Boston University. He is a conservative and a Catholic, not a secular leftist. Yet he is very upset with the new National Security Strategy (NSS) released by the White House earlier this year. The background for his critical assessment of current American foreign policy is detailed in two books: *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (Oxford, 2005) and *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Harvard, 2002).

The title of Bacevich's article in the April 24 issue of *The American Conservative* contains his thesis about the NSS: "Insecurity With Insolvency." An explanatory blurb expands on the title: "The president's National Security Strategy is vague on fiscal details and ignores geopolitical realities." Before looking into his book *The New American Militarism*, consider the author's assessment of the new NSS.

Insecurity With Insolvency

The 2006 NSS, says Bacevich, "disregards the first principle of strategy: the imperative of balancing means and ends." The 49-page report or proclamation "comes chock-full of declarations, exhortations, and gaseous generalities . . . [but] is almost entirely devoid of facts, never bothers to consider how we got into our current mess in the first place or how we're going to pay for the 'Long War' that the president has contrived as the best way to get us out."

Not only does the NSS fail to add up current and projected costs of American

engagements around the world and especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, it does not even mention the degree of “U.S. government indebtedness, currently hovering above \$8.3 trillion, including an increase of \$1.1 trillion since the Republican Party gained control of the executive and legislative branches in 2001.”

One might also imagine, Bacevich writes, in view of our American addiction to oil, that petroleum imports and domestic reserves would be an important topic of consideration in a national security document, but no, “energy issues get dismissed with the wave of a hand.” It is also shocking, he points out, that the NSS offers no assessment of the current status of our armed forces, such as the difficulties of recruiting new enlistees for the army.

All of these omissions matter, says Bacevich: “Shortfalls in dollars, resources, and soldiers suggest that American power just might have limits—but that’s the one thing that the Bush administration’s strategists will not admit.” Bacevich quotes Lord Rutherford who “famously remarked in the 1930s, ‘We’re out of money; it’s time to think.’” The Bush administration, by contrast, “finds it easier to pretend that the supply of money is endless, thereby obviating the need for thinking altogether.” Instead, the NSS simply keeps on preaching “against the evils of ‘isolation and protectionism, retreat and retrenchment,’ vowing that the United States will ‘shape the world, not merely be shaped by it,’ and reaffirming America’s commitment to the ‘goal of ending tyranny in our world.’”

The tendencies articulated in the 2006 NSS, Bacevich explains, represent “the central defect of American statecraft” in our day, “namely, an unwillingness to deal with the world as it actually is rather than as we might like it to be,” and this defect did not first show up in the current administration. The NSS does, however, exhibit the defect in spades. “Drenched in ideological claims, the new National Security Strategy goes out of its way to ignore the past. Where history figures at all, it does so only on the margins. Even then, it’s a self-serving and sanitized version of the past.”

For example, says Bacevich, the NSS reduces the history of the 20th century to “the triumph of freedom over the threats of fascism and communism.” Rhetorically, this sets up the current administration’s goal for the 21st century, which is to see freedom triumph over Islamic radicalism. While we need not in any way endorse Muslim claims of being innocent victims, we should recognize, however, says Bacevich, that the administration’s recollection of the 20th century “does not comport with the way that Iranians, Iraqis, Kurds, not to mention Afghans, Palestinians, and Pakistanis, recall that era. As they remember the 20th century, its defining features were not liberation and uplift but exploitation, manipulation, and betrayal at the hands of foreigners. If by no means ranking first among the exploiters, the United States did not exactly keep its skirts unsoiled either.”

The latest NSS does little to prepare government officials or citizens to make sound judgments about the future, and it gives no assurance of either security or solvency. We need something sounder and more realistic, and that is what Bacevich outlines at the end of his book, *The New American Militarism*.

How Americans are Seduced by War

“Already in the 1990s,” Bacevich writes in his 2005 book, “America’s marriage of militaristic cast of mind with utopian ends had established itself as the distinguishing element of contemporary U.S. policy.” Yet, our version of militarism “has deep roots in the American past,” going back at least to the sense of anxiety and vulnerability Americans felt during the Great Depression and in the early stages of World War II. “In an age during which war, actual as well as metaphorical, was a constant, either as ongoing reality or frightening prospect, national security became the axis around which the American enterprise turned.

The “new militarism,” as Bacevich puts it, is in large measure a multifaceted outcome of our reaction to Vietnam. “The clamor after Vietnam to rebuild the American arsenal and to restore American self-confidence, the celebration of soldierly values, the search for ways to make force more usable: all of these came about because groups of Americans thought that they glimpsed in the realm of military affairs the solution to vexing problems.” And this was unfolding even as the last half of the century was producing an abundance of evidence “pointing to the limited utility of armed force and the dangers inherent in relying excessively on military power.”

“Much as dumping raw sewage into American lakes and streams was once deemed unremarkable,” Bacevich writes, “so today ‘global power projection’—a phrase whose sharp edges we have worn down through casual use, but which implies military activism without apparent limit—has become standard practice, a normal condition, one to which no plausible alternatives seem to exist.”

Bacevich sees in the emphasis on “military solutions” an ignoring of “limits.” Though he does not detail it in his book, his mode of judgment is what one would expect from someone who thinks from within the framework of the just-war tradition. Despite America’s massive military advantage over all other nations in the world, no nation can rule the world; none can pursue ends without limits. Moreover, there is much more to the relation among nations than “power projection” and military engagement. American trade deficits reflect another kind of relation we have with other nations and one that might lead to huge insecurity completely apart from military weakness. Diplomatic dealings, such as the one the U.S. and other countries are now attempting with Iran, have a life of their own and the Bush administration can succeed or fail in them no matter how great its military capability. Bacevich is a realist who recognizes both that the United States has limits and that there is more to foreign relations than military positioning and engagement.

Throughout his book, Bacevich illumines the build-up of this militaristic mind-set, which grips not only government leaders and the Pentagon but American citizens as well. We’ve all become habituated to thinking about America’s role in the world in terms of military categories and calculations. And it is a grave mistake.

Achieving Realism

In the final chapter of *The New American Militarism*, Bacevich lays out his own prescription for balanced, realistic, and solvent American foreign and defense policies. He does so by means of “ten fundamental principles.”

1. First, he says, we must learn to “*heed the intentions of the Founders*” who were reluctant even to support a standing army and who would never have authorized perpetual warfare to try “to save the rest of humankind or remake the world in [the American] image.”

2. Next, it will be necessary to “*revitalize the concept of separation of powers*.” The problem since Vietnam, Bacevich explains, “is not that the presidency has become too strong. Rather, the problem is that the Congress has failed—indeed, failed egregiously—to fulfill its constitutional responsibility for deciding when and if the United States should undertake military interventions abroad.”

3. In keeping with one of the most important of the just-war principles, Bacevich argues that the president and Congress must “*view force as a last resort*.” Doing this “requires an explicit renunciation of the Bush Doctrine of preventive war, which in arrogating to the United States prerogatives allowed to no other nation subverts international stability and in the long run can only make Americans less secure.”

4. Bacevich’s fourth principle is to “*enhance U.S. strategic self-sufficiency*.” “With globalization a fact of life, autarky is more than ever a chimera. The argument here calls for something more modest: taking prudent steps to limit the extent of U.S. dependence on foreign resources.” In other words, since America’s approach to the world right now assumes that limitless action may be needed to preserve American preeminence in the world, the accompanying requirement is that all necessary resources—whether oil, minerals, or anything else—will have to be guaranteed by American means. But this ideal quite unrealistically stretches the country beyond self-sufficient bounds and actually makes us more insecure and more dependent on everything that happens outside of our control.

5. The next principle is that the government must “*organize U.S. forces explicitly for national defense*.” One would think that this is the self-evident meaning of the “Department of Defense.” But instead, the U.S., after World War II, located and built up its military forces all over the world. So much so that after 9/11, the immediate scramble was to come up with a new homeland defense department, eventually named the Department of Homeland Security. But what is the meaning of a “defense department” focused on the entire world and a “homeland security” department to defend the homeland? This is the outcome of building an American empire. Instead, argues Bacevich, the U.S. needs to return to a more modest responsibility of national defense.

“Focusing on defense rather than power projection implies jettisoning the

concept of 'national security,' an artifact of the Cold War employed as a device to justify everything from overthrowing foreign governments to armed intervention in places that most Americans could not locate on a map. 'National security' also undergirds the concept of a 'global war on terror,' which since 9/11 has provided the rationale for still more misadventures." Yet, says Bacevich, if we bring the troops home, it "does not necessarily imply abrogating alliances such as NATO. It does mean that in sharing responsibilities the United States should also share authority." This is another step of recognizing limits and practicing realism.

6. Next, we need to "*devise an appropriate gauge for determining the level of U.S. defense spending.*" This does not mean shifting toward isolationism, writes Bacevich. "If anything, it is the present-day excessive reliance on military power that constitutes an open invitation to neo-isolationism. Once the weight of U.S. military adventures and obligations abroad exceeds the willingness of the American people to foot the bill, the popular urge to turn inward could well become overwhelming and irresistible."

7. All of the first six principles push in the direction of needing to "*enhance alternative instruments of statecraft.*" In other words, it means recognizing all the other elements of international relations, including political, economic, and diplomatic that are more and more important in this increasingly interdependent world. The U.S. cannot get away with simply using force or threatening to use force to achieve its purposes. And the more it tries to do so, the more difficult become the diplomatic and other exercises in which it engages.

8. Bacevich is also intent on wanting to "*revive the moribund concept of the citizen-soldier.*" He does not think that this necessarily means reviving the draft, but rather changing the way the volunteer forces are drawn into military service so that the military is more closely connected with the people. "Whatever its other merits, the present-day professionalized force is not conducive to this civil-military intimacy." Bacevich quotes historian John McAuley Palmer in arguing that "'standing armies threaten government by the people not because they consciously seek to pervert liberty, but because they relieve the people themselves of the duty of self-defense.'"

9. Ninth, and in view of principle number eight, Bacevich calls for "*reexamining the role of the National Guard and the reserve components.*" Instead of being kept as a pool from which to draw recruits for foreign engagements, the National guard and the reserves should be maintained as "a trained militia kept in readiness as the primary instrument for community self-defense." And "community" in this context "refers not to Kosovo and Iraq but to Kansas and Iowa."

10. Finally, says Bacevich, we need to "*reconcile the American military profession with American society.*" "If the army of a republic ought to be rooted in society, so too should the officer corps." Instead of a culture of separateness, the military needs to cultivate a profession of service within society for its officer corps. "The idea that war and politics constitute two distinct and separate spheres has always been a fiction." That is even more true today. Consequently, Bacevich proposes that henceforth a prerequisite for the commissioning of any officer should be that he or she "earn a bachelor's degree at a civilian university" and obtain a liberal education.

Bacevich concludes his book with comments by and about George Washington, who warned against an "overgrown military establishment." If Americans today persist in the desire to exercise "unquestioned military dominance" in order to try to "perpetuate American global primacy and impress its values on the world at large," we will surely "share the fate of all those who in ages past have looked to war and military power to fulfill their destiny. We will rob future generations," says Bacevich, "of their rightful inheritance. We will wreak havoc abroad. We will endanger our security at home. We will risk the forfeiture of all that we prize."