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Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008. Pp. 206. ISBN 978-0-8050-8815-1.

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The Limits of Power is a book for our times, one that belongs in the hands of presidential aspirants in 2008 and beyond. It is a short book, but offers food for thought on almost every page. Andrew Bacevich is currently professor of history and international relations at Boston University and the author or editor of a dozen other books on the U.S. military and related subjects.¹ An Army career veteran who retired at the rank of colonel, he fought in Vietnam and has lost a son serving in the U.S. Army in Iraq. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. This résumé makes him someone we should take seriously. He is also an old-fashioned conservative of the kind not much encountered any more.

Bacevich's prose is spare and no-nonsense in style, directing a withering sarcasm at people he considers fools. He pulls no punches:

Thus does the tragedy of our age move inexorably toward its conclusion. "To the end of history," our prophet once wrote, "social orders will probably destroy themselves in the effort to prove that they are indestructible." Clinging doggedly to the conviction that the rules to which other nations must submit don't apply, Americans appear determined to affirm Niebuhr's axiom of willful self-destruction (182).

Bacevich starts by citing Reinhard Niebuhr on the American penchant for grandiose dreams "under the most grievous temptations to self-adulation" (7). He further quotes the influential Protestant clergyman and thinker when Niebuhr decries the hubris and sanctimony of American post-WWII policies, especially in his magisterial *The Irony of American History*.² Niebuhr says that we cannot have perfect solutions to our problems; the world does not work that way. Then he adds that "the trustful acceptance of false solutions for our perplexing problems adds a touch of pathos to the tragedy of our age" (182). Bacevich shares this dark indictment.

Granted, the remedies Bacevich proposes seem minor and "surprisingly small bore: America should live within its means, pursue a more modest foreign policy, act to abolish nuclear weapons and combat global warming."³ But how difficult and far-ranging in effect these "simple" changes would be. Bacevich writes that "American exceptionalism" colors almost all the domestic audience ever hears. For the record, he feels that all American ad-

¹ See esp. *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2002), *The Imperial Tense: Prospects and Problems of American Empire* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005), and *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy since World War II* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2007).

² 1952; rpt. with an introduction by Bacevich (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2008).

³ J. Tepperman, *NYT Book Review* (14 Sep 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0818.htm>.

ventures in foreign affairs have actually been the actions of a self-interested nation-state, even though few Americans, whether common citizens or policy-makers, admit it.

Bacevich examines the economic, political, and military roots of our current dilemmas. American stress on “freedom” has the rationale of ensuring that our children have it better than we did. The ‘land of the free’ is the myth of everlasting and increasing abundance in a consumption-based society. We have borrowed heedlessly; now the American economy depends for one-quarter of its viability on consumer spending. Wal-Mart and China are prospering. No longer is there any attempt at matching our means to our ends. We need a more limited redefinition of the “American dream.” This will not be easy!

Our political system is currently dysfunctional, giving power to the President and leaving Congress concerned only with pork and other favors to secure its members re-election. Bacevich maintains that presidents have acquired a national security administration impervious to any outsiders’ check, and that, if the people do not demand it, nothing will change. He also contends that presidents employ outsiders for advice because the national security apparatus is splintered, each component seeking to carve out and protect its own bailiwick (e.g. the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the FBI, etc.). Of course, he is correct in his warnings about taking advice on military and strategic matters from any outside group (or a selected groups of insiders/outside, e.g. JFK’s Executive Committee for the Cuban Missile Crisis). But what does a president do when his National Security apparatus is broken and gives him advice that is half-baked or just plain loony?

Bacevich does not feel that the person we select as president will change the national security apparatus: the president has become too dependent on it. His comment on the role of the president has been applauded by a veteran White House hand on the PBS program *Bill Moyers Journal* (15 August 2008).⁴ During a wide-ranging interview, Moyers said Bacevich’s description of the roles the president has to play was the best he had ever read. Bacevich says that, starting with JFK in 1960,

the occupant of the White House has become a combination of demigod, father figure, and inevitably the betrayer of inflated hopes. Pope, pop star, scold, scapegoat, crisis manager, commander-in-chief, agenda setter, moral philosopher, interpreter of the nation’s charisma, object of veneration, and the butt of jokes—regardless of personal attributes and qualifications, the president is perforce all these rolled into one (68).

Although careful to admit that there are always a few who have it right, Bacevich nevertheless says the majority of Americans—be they bureaucrats, presidents, or plain citizens—do not. His critique of the military is bitter and far-ranging: among other things, we are wrong to give so much attention to the valor and sacrifice of our troops rather than concentrating on whether they are fulfilling their mission and whether that mission makes any sense. He definitely *does not* feel American troops should become imperial guardians of policies neither valid nor serving America’s interests.

Bacevich thinks that the American military has concentrated on new weapons to the neglect of strategic thinking, and has done a mediocre job generally since 1945. The problem is not lack of authority (they have been given wide discretion), but failure to blend

⁴ Both video and transcript of the interview are available online <www.miwsr.com/rd/o819.htm>.

politics with might in a limited framework of American interests. (For some exceptions, I note the careers of Generals Eric Shinseki and Wesley Clark).

Bacevich worries that the military is helping civilians make the case for ceaseless war with no exits possible, under cover of the claim to be spreading “democracy.” The new weapons systems also appear to make the case (wrongly in Bacevich’s view!) that wars can be quick, easy, and cheap, with low casualties and negligible “civilian collateral damage.” Certainly the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan make the opposite case! He cites Niebuhr again: “The paths of progress ... proved to be more devious and unpredictable than the putative managers of history can understand” (49). Despairing of false assumptions about the easy spread of democracy and the banishment of Islamic terrorists, he agrees with Niebuhr’s maxim— “No simple victory of good over evil in history is possible”(81). He recommends that American generals and admirals reread Carl von Clausewitz on the fog of war and note his conclusion that “War is the realm of chance. No other human activity gives it greater scope; no other has such incessant and varied dealings with this intruder”(156).

This book is a first-rate argument against the neo-conservatives, who have risen to such great power in the present Bush administration. Somehow I think George F. Kennan in heaven is smiling over Professor Bacevich’s shoulder.