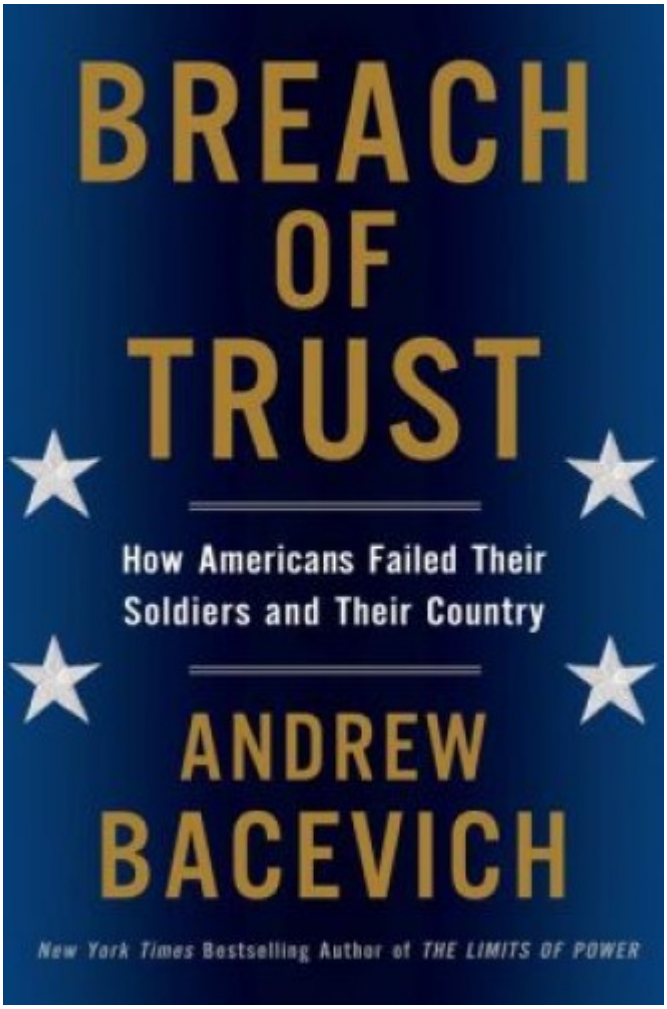
Breach of Trust, by Andrew J. Bacevich

reviewed by Timothy Mark Renick in the October 16, 2013 issue

In Review



Breach of Trust

By Andrew J. Bacevich
Metropolitan Books

Every year, hundreds of thousands of freshly minted high school graduates enter college across the United States. On the surface, this fall's ritual of college orientation looked very much like any other's. Yet there is something different about

this group of 18-year-olds. They represent a rare generation of American college freshmen whose country has been at war since the day they entered elementary school.

Numbed to the reality of U.S. troops fighting overseas and fixated on the issues of day-to-day life, Americans rarely pause to note that more than a decade after 9/11, our nation is still at war. Even fewer of us note how rare this period is in U.S. history. We sometimes forget that despite its immense impact on American life and the American psyche, U.S. involvement in World War II lasted under four years. Twelve years in and counting, the current war on terror has now joined the Vietnam era as one of the two longest periods of sustained combat in the nation's history.

We are often told that the protracted nature of modern conflicts is due to the emergence of counterinsurgency warfare and nonstate actors. Andrew Bacevich, a professor of history and international relations at Boston University who served for 23 years as an officer in the U.S. Army, offers an alternate explanation. He argues that the sustained character of modern American wars has little to do with the changing nature of the enemy and everything to do with who we have become as a people.

In this provocative book, Bacevich traces a dangerous shift in the relationship between the military and the American people over the past 40 years. Prior to this period, Americans were invested in every major American conflict—from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War to World Wars I and II. It is not just that we were invested in the outcome of these conflicts. We were expected to sacrifice personally to attain the outcome—often with our own lives or those of our loved ones. We knew and lived the reality that war was costly and that its ravages could touch any one of us. Given this equation, war had to be entered into with great reluctance and executed with great efficiency.

For much of this period, conscription served as an equalizer. During World War II, for instance, 453 Harvard students lost their lives—just 35 fewer than the number of West Pointers who died. The biggest sports stars of the day—Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Hank Greenberg—found themselves in uniform, as did movie stars such as James Stewart, Clark Gable and Henry Fonda. Sons of sitting presidents and of the wealthiest American families—the Roosevelts, the Kennedys—served. The reality that war involved all of us shaped the nature of conflict. As Bacevich writes, "the citizen-army's strengths and limitations as a fighting force reflected . . . a widely

shared determination ‘to get the goddam thing over and get home,’ the sooner the better.”

Vietnam changed the equation. Throughout U.S. history, the central questions of war had been: Who fights? Who dies? Who stands up for freedom? Bacevich contends that “in the wake of Vietnam, seeking to put a catastrophic war behind them, the American people devised (or accepted) a single crisp answer to all three questions: not us.” After Vietnam, American turned to a large, all-volunteer standing army—an army that reflected the nation neither racially nor economically but allowed for the elimination of the draft.

The discontinuation of the draft in 1973 was popular not just with the American people but with politicians who faced constituents disillusioned by the death of their children in the seemingly never-ending war in Vietnam. The shift was also embraced by military leaders, many of whom had long sought a standing professional force to shape in their own image, and it became a multi-billion-dollar boon to defense contractors, who multiplied their profits by supplying a large military force even in times of peace.

Bacevich reminds us, however, that this move toward a professional army was far out of step with the history and philosophy of the nation. President Washington had proposed to the First Congress that the new nation raise a small standing militia to keep the peace, then reinforce it with a larger force of “able bodied” citizen-soldiers during times of emergency. As recently as the end of World War II, General George C. Marshall said about standing professional armies: “This is the system of Germany and Japan. It produces highly efficient armies. But it . . . has no place among the institutions of a modern democratic state based on the government of the people.” When the United States largely abandoned its centuries-old suspicion of large professional armies in the 1970s, it didn’t pause to consider many of the implications.

In the aftermath, Bacevich observes, policy makers came to realize that the political cost of going to war had been reduced dramatically: “For those enjoying access to rarefied policy circles, intently surveying the globe in search of anything remotely resembling a nail, the all-volunteer force provides a proverbial hammer.” Once the costs of war—not the loss of life, mind you, but the political liabilities—were mitigated, there was “no need to consult the American people; that’s what the all-volunteer force allows.”

Bacevich pulls no punches in his sweeping condemnation of the sins that have been wrought because of the American people's willingness to wash their hands of the costs of war. This deal has led, Bacevich believes, to a dangerous complacency toward war in the minds of most Americans. It has made breaches of the law at the highest political levels ordinary. "Today, when it comes to national security policy, methods that got Nixon impeached have become the norm," he writes. It has led to the Pentagon's funneling billions of dollars to private security forces such as Blackwater, KBR and DynCorp—entities that are constrained even less by public and Congressional oversight than is the Department of Defense and that direct their immense profits to the former military officers who often run them. KBR, for instance, has been awarded a staggering $40.8 billion in defense contracts since 9/11.

The deal has also mortgaged the future of the next generation of Americans, including those hundreds of thousands of young men and women starting college this fall, by making the false promise that war need not have a financial cost. Not only have wealthy and middle-class Americans not been asked to sacrifice their sons and daughters on the battlefield, they have not been asked to sacrifice their cars and their lifestyles. The immense financial costs of war have simply been added to the national debt—a debt to be paid by someone else at some undefined point in the future.

Imagine public opinions about the war in Afghanistan if American taxpayers were no longer allowed to defer its staggering costs. Imagine support for the war if the sons and daughters of Harvard, the young heroes of the NFL, the stars of Hollywood and the offspring of the wealthiest Americans were being drafted and sent overseas to fight in it. Imagine the possibility that your own son or daughter could be conscripted and die in the conflict. Bacevich maintains that such possibilities must be real if we as Americans are to make sober decisions about the wars we wage.

At the end of World War II, General Marshall warned Americans about the principle that he believed inspired the Nazi war effort: that "an invincible offensive military force . . . could win any political argument." In *Breach of Trust*, Bacevich offers a similar warning to present-day Americans. Since the 1970s, he tells us, we have repeatedly abdicated our personal responsibility for the wars that our nation fights. The sad irony is that by trying to shield ourselves from the realities of war, we have made American wars both more likely and more deadly.