

U.S. delusions: An army man changes his mind

by [Wendy Murray](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

Andrew Bacevich, professor of international relations at Boston University, uses strong words to describe what is going on in the U.S. He speaks of a “crisis of profligacy,” “collective recklessness” and a “dysfunctional country.” He says our political system empowers an “imperial presidency” and possesses “delusions of grandeur.” This is surprising commentary coming from a onetime military man who was a soldier’s soldier.

Until the early 1990s Bacevich devoted himself for decades to an upward trajectory in the U.S. Army, where he attained a rank just below that of brigadier general. He bent all things to that end. For 20-some years he possessed a no-nonsense devotion to duty, honor and country and answered the call of his country even when he might have questioned it.

After having lived one lifetime on the inside of the military establishment, now—from the outside—through his teaching, speaking, writing and editorializing, Bacevich renders a disturbing prognosis and a sharp rebuke of U.S. foreign policy. And evidently it has struck a chord. His latest book, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, enjoyed ten weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list last fall. Bacevich’s thinking has evolved after a lifetime of twists and turns and no little tragedy.

He was the son of military parents (they both served in World War II). The family settled in East Chicago, Indiana, where the young Bacevich spent his early school years attending a Catholic grade school. During high school he attended a Benedictine boarding school where he lived among the friars and saw their “human foibles.” He remembers those years with fondness; living among the friars and seeing in them real human weakness, he says, made them and God seem more accessible.

After high school, he chose to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point over Princeton University. His reason was simple: money. West Point didn't charge tuition (asking instead for a five-year commitment to the army). Since both of his parents had served in the military, he reasoned, going to West Point would enable him to keep the family's military tradition going.

Bacevich's time at West Point involved a period of intense socialization that, Bachevich said in a recent interview, was "not fun at all." West Point is designed to "socialize you to the primacy of duty, while not encouraging you to assess critically whether the duty makes any sense. One is devoted to one's country above devotion to anything else other than your family: country above the notion of humanity; country above the notion of what's right or wrong or true or beautiful."

Bacevich served in the army not only for the obligatory five years, but for 15 more. "The army defined my universe," he said. "I was absolutely persuaded that the army was the most important institution in the United States, if not the world. The socialization process very effectively made me an institutional person." He was quick to add, however, that while recognizing the rewards and personal satisfaction that attend belonging to something very important, he possessed "an ambiguous" relationship with the army even as he served as one of its most dedicated officers.

He served a year in Vietnam (1970-1971), during which time he confronted some twinges of ambivalence. "The war was already a failed venture when I arrived. Rather than confront that reality I preferred to give in to President Nixon's [notion of] 'peace with honor.' I wasn't willing to acknowledge the extent to which it was a fool's errand.

"When I was a serving officer I accepted that I was a servant of an institution that did not welcome critical thinking. I accepted these constraints even when my personal observations caused me to be uncomfortable with those constraints. But I suppressed them."

Bacevich went on to hold posts in Germany, the U.S. and the Persian Gulf, attaining the rank of colonel. (An army colonel typically commands brigade-sized units of 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers.) He earned a few fellowships during his career that enabled him to step back from active duty and reflect. During these interludes, his critical thinking had more elbow room. Even so, he says, he kept his thinking within the accepted purview of the military establishment. He served as a fellow on the Council

of Foreign Relations (1984-1985) and was a national security fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard (1987-1988). The army sponsored his Ph.D. studies in American diplomatic history at Princeton (he made it to Princeton after all), and he subsequently taught at West Point and Johns Hopkins.

He retired from the military in 1992 after a catastrophe that occurred while he served as the commanding officer at Camp Doha in Kuwait. In July 1991, a motor pool of artillery vehicles blew up and set off a chain reaction of explosions that caused casualties and a loss of major equipment that rendered the base inoperable. A soldier who was on the scene wrote in a letter to *Atlantic* columnist Andrew Sullivan, "Col. Bacevich allegedly took full responsibility for the mess, even though it was not his fault. . . . He believed in accountability." Bacevich is less sentimental: "I was the commanding officer. The commanding officer is responsible for his command. I accepted responsibility, finished my term and retired from the military."

Once retired, Bacevich viewed the military from a greater distance and more critically. What had been gnawing doubts blossomed into forceful critique. The result has been the unleashing of a starkly critical assessment of U.S. "military adventurism." (He cited, among others, engagements in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

Military adventurism, he maintains, is rooted in the notion of American exceptionalism introduced by John Winthrop's concept of national destiny. Winthrop, the first governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, declared that the founding colony was in a covenant with God and was called to serve as a light to the world and a city upon a hill. This evolved into the conviction that America possessed a special relationship with God and thus a special purpose. "I take Winthrop's idea to mean that we [as a nation] would illuminate [the world] through our behavior," said Bacevich. "We will live with one another as brothers and sisters; we will love one another. We will keep faith with the Lord's commandments. That's what it will mean to exemplify a Christian commonwealth. It's a wonderful aspiration," he said, "but almost from the outset American exceptionalism got perverted."

President Woodrow Wilson drew upon American exceptionalism as he led the U.S. into World War I with the intention of creating an international order of peaceful democratic states. Global instabilities have stubbornly persisted, and the use of Winthrop's mandate has taken a sinister twist: "It is not sufficient simply to provide light to the world. We have delivered light to the world, usually by the sword. That

has had profoundly perverse effects.”

Since World War II, successive presidential administrations have assumed increasing power for military ends. Bacevich cites President Kennedy’s support for the covert invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs as an example of presidential efforts to skirt official governmental channels. Other examples followed: Reagan’s support for Afghan “freedom fighters”; Clinton’s initiatives in Bosnia, Kosovo and Somalia; and the military adventurism of George W. Bush. He stops short of condemning Bush as the sole promoter of the imperial presidency, but asserts that American exceptionalism reached critical levels with the emergence of the “Bush doctrine of preventative war,” which has defined U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bacevich’s critique extends beyond politics, however. Referring to a general “crisis of profligacy” and “collective recklessness,” he argued that being a nation of consumers has made the U.S. a dysfunctional country. “We believe we can have whatever we desire without personal sacrifice.” To make matters worse, the delusion has been perpetuated by the concept of the “professional politician” whom the public assumes “will take any means necessary—probably military—to ensure they live happy consumer-driven lives.” This type of thinking has propelled the imperial presidency. During a recent interview with Bill Moyers, Bacevich said: “We look to the next president to fix things” so we don’t have to fix them ourselves, which, he said, signals that “the fabric of democracy . . . has worn very thin” and that the office of the president has replaced genuine democracy.

The professional military feeds the delusion that the U.S. can control security affairs and civilians can get on with their lives with minimal personal interruption. “The advocates of preventative war assume the changes of warfare have been driven by technology. They conclude that this makes force more precise, effective and economical, and that you could go to war with greater certainty about the outcome and achieve that outcome more quickly and at lower cost.” The U.S. military does lead the way when it comes to military information technology, but “it continues to be enormously difficult to control and to anticipate the consequences of opting for war. It is enormously costly when your judgments go awry.”

Bacevich does not presume to be a theologian, but he does reflect on the nature of humanity. “The Christian view [of human nature] is one of fallen man and that we are all in need of redemption. That would make you skeptical of projects that claim to create a utopian society. It would make you wary of committing politicians to

exercise too great of an authority. It would make you sensitive to the need to be wary of your own motives. It would incline you not to see the world as good against evil because there is plenty of evil to go around.”

Bacevich is not calling for retreat from engagement in a fallen world. “You have to confront evil,” he remarked, but said that confronting evil must involve knowing the hazards of doing so. “Confronting evil is going to produce consequences that you cannot anticipate, that are themselves going to create more problems. So you are trapped in these circumstances. You cannot refrain from acting, but you must act with a sense of modesty and self-awareness.”

Bacevich hopes that the Obama administration will demonstrate a shift in U.S. military policy (“it’s too soon to tell”). He dismisses the idea that Bush was the problem and Obama is the antidote. “We are part of the problem,” he said. “Therefore the solution isn’t going to become installing Obama in the White House. We ourselves are going to have to make some changes in the way we live. I don’t see any real awareness on the part of the public that that has been the case.”

The antidote, he maintained, is not in a new president but in a new citizenry. “As citizens of a free society we need to evaluate our values more consciously.” He cited Pope John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which warns against a consumer-obsessed culture, calling it a soft form of totalitarianism. “Thinking we are free,” Bacevich summarized, “we can succumb to a form of totalitarianism, being slaves to appetites and urges that are not connected to a larger purpose.” In this way, Bacevich affirms theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s social critique that democracy exists as much to constrain as to liberate. “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible,” Niebuhr wrote, “but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

Gary Dorrien, professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said in an interview that Bacevich’s social, political and military critique, at least in Niebuhrian terms, is “dead on.” “Bacevich represents Niebuhr at his best.” But George Weigel, Catholic theologian and author of a best-selling biography of Pope John Paul II, while respecting Bacevich as “a man of intelligence and moral conviction,” asserted in an interview that Bacevich is operating in “the thickets of neo-isolationism,” and fails to see that the “long war” against terrorism “can’t be won by playing defense alone.” This approach, Weigel said, has led Bacevich “to misread” the surge in Iraq and “the inner logic of the just war tradition.”

Bacevich asserted that the time has come for Americans to begin a long discussion about the long war in Iraq. The nation needs to scrutinize how this war was initiated and the costs it has imposed. Where is the money for it coming from? Who bears the burden? Who died? Who suffered loss? Was it worth it? This war, he said, will “make us look ourselves in the mirror and see what we’ve become.”

Even as he exhorts Americans to take a long hard look at themselves, Bacevich, too, has looked into the mirror. He asks himself why he chose the path of entering the military as a career officer. He has wondered how his life might have been different had he gone to Princeton initially instead of West Point. His reflections have also turned to the metaphysical as he has tried to make sense of the death of his son, First Lieutenant Andrew Bacevich Jr., who was killed in Iraq in 2007.

After many years of making choices, following orders, building a career and coming to terms with the degradation of war, when Bacevich looks at himself in the mirror, he sees “a slow learner.”

“I think I’ve come to see things the way they really are. I’ve now come to an understanding of American society and why the world works the way it does in a way that I believe is true. What amazes me is [that] it took me 61 years to reach these conclusions. Why was I so blind for so long? Why was I so deluded? I regret that it has taken me so long to get where I am.”

He hasn’t yet come to understand the death of his son. “I’m still wrestling with how to incorporate his death into my belief in God and my understanding of human existence. When my son was killed, it was not a faith-affirming experience. It was a faith-challenging experience.

“When you suffer a loss like I did in my son’s death, it really does give you a deeper appreciation of . . . a lot of other people whose lives are ripped apart. When you suffer pain in your own life I think you do appreciate how much pain there is in existence. Again, I’m a slow learner. Why did I have to lose my son to develop an appreciation of that? Why did I incline to be oblivious to the suffering of others until I experienced my own kind of suffering?”