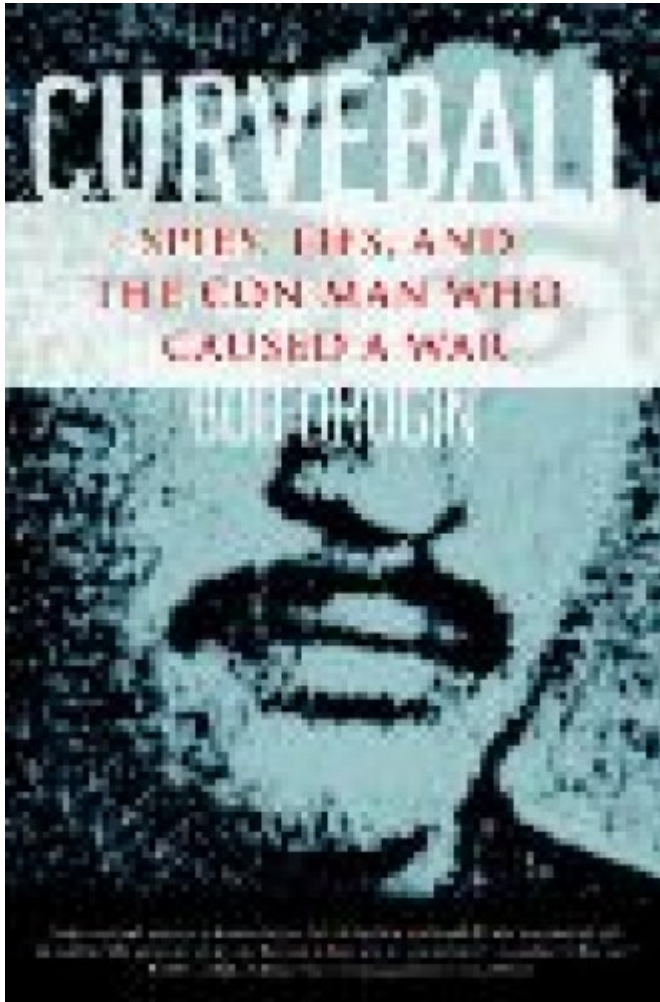


Spies and lies

By [Bruce van Voorst](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

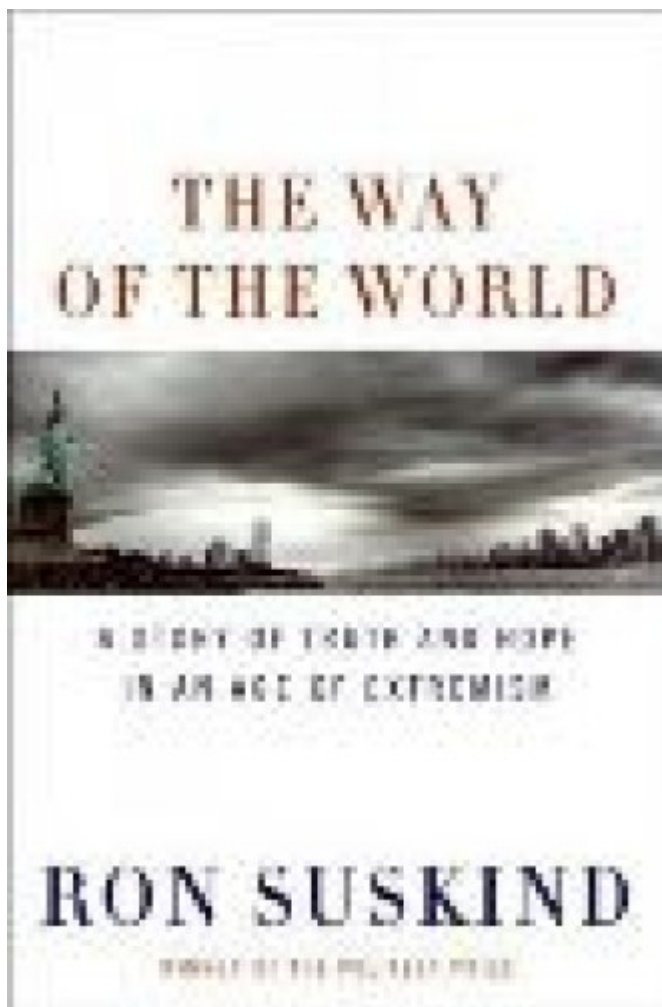
In Review



Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War

Bob Drogin

Random House



The Way of the World: A Story of Truth and Hope in an Age of Extremism

Ron Suskind
HarperCollins

THE LIMITS OF POWER



*The End of American
Exceptionalism*

ANDREW J. BACEVICH

Author of *The American Way of War*

The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism

Andrew J. Bacevich
Metropolitan

"The most significant moral characteristic of a nation is its hypocrisy."
—Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

From Aristotle to Hegel to Reinhold Niebuhr, historians and theologians have argued about the "Great Man" theory of history—about whether dominant figures determine the course of events. Overlooked in this debate are the many instances in which the "little" person, the mere footnote in books, played a dramatic role in determining critical historical developments. One such is Oleg Penkovsky, a lowly colonel in the Soviet air force, whose information from the highest Kremlin circles during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis persuaded President John F. Kennedy not to invade Cuba, an action we know now would have resulted in nuclear war.

In a universally acclaimed book, veteran *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Bob Drogin describes another “little” person who made a monumental impact on history, an obscure Iraqi chemical engineer so central in providing the Bush administration with a pretense for attacking Iraq that Drogin titles his book *Curveball: Spies, Lies, and the Con Man Who Caused a War*.

Although library shelves now groan under the weight of books describing how the Bush administration fraudulently brought the nation into the Iraq war, Drogin unravels as nobody else has a meticulously documented case history of how officials twisted, ignored or fabricated intelligence when making the case for war. He vividly relates a tale of professional incompetence by the CIA and provides a revealing window into the political skewing of intelligence by the White House. U.S. officials knew at least three months before the invasion that Saddam had neither nuclear nor biological agents.

The Curveball saga began in 1999 when 32-year-old Rafid Ahmed Alwan told officers of the German intelligence agency Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND) in Munich that he had been director of Iraq’s biological poison agent program at Djerf al Nadaf, near Baghdad. Given the cryptonym “Curveball,” Alwan claimed that for four years he had been a top engineer in Saddam’s efforts to build trucks (“Winnebago Merchants of Death,” as the media called them) to carry biological weapons laboratories. Curveball’s revelations stunned BND officials, and beginning in January the agency passed almost a hundred reports on him to the CIA in Langley, Virginia. The CIA, always dismissive of the BND, virtually ignored the reports at first.

As time passed, BND officials told Drogin, the German spy agency was becoming more and more dubious about Curveball. He became obstreperous in debriefings, moody, excitable; he began to drink; he was curt and unresponsive. The BND “had little confidence in him.” Nevertheless, in October 2002 the CIA issued a new National Intelligence Estimate (the gold card of the intelligence community) declaring that Iraq was continuing its nuclear program, was developing biological weapons and had contact with al-Qaeda. In fact, reports on Iraq’s nuclear program had already been discredited, and the biological information came solely from Curveball, a point which seemed to get lost in the assessment.

Drogin did find that many mid-level people at the CIA were skeptical about those conclusions. Their concern was that the BND had not allowed the CIA to have access to Curveball. “We don’t know who he is,” said Margaret Henech, an operations

officer who fought against Curveball all the way. But the CIA's analyst group persisted in accepting Curveball—and circulating his reports. Some confrontations reportedly were monumental.

In what is perhaps the most incomprehensible feature of the debacle, when the BND continued to refuse the CIA access to Curveball, CIA director George Tenet sent a personal message to BND chief August Hanning. In his personal response to Tenet, says Hanning, he expressed regret that the BND still couldn't give the CIA access but warned that "attempts to verify the information have been unsuccessful" and that Curveball's reports "must be considered unconfirmed." In his only reference to Curveball in his 500-page memoirs, Tenet claims that he never received the letter—a dubious possibility, given the efficient CIA bureaucracy—and says he was not generally alerted by CIA officers to doubts about Curveball.

In practice CIA officials recognized that, regardless of their reporting, the White House was going to war. Drogin quotes a senior CIA officer: "Keep in mind that this war is going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn't say." Told that the British had concluded that Saddam had neither nuclear nor biological weapons, Tenet said, "They're not going to like this downtown." "Downtown"—the White House! Jim Pavitt, the CIA's third in command, exclaimed they could have "stood on their hands and tap-danced up and down Pennsylvania Avenue, and I don't think it would have made any difference." The White House really didn't care whether Curveball was telling the truth. His function was to supply justification for the war.

On its own, the CIA didn't have an accurate clue about Saddam's programs. "The CIA's biggest secret," writes Drogin, "was how dysfunctional it had become." He quotes the CIA's second-ranking official, John McLaughlin: "We were almost in chapter 11 in terms of our human intelligence collection."

The World Trade Center terrorist attack suddenly thrust Curveball front and center. "After 9/11," writes Drogin, "it was as if Curveball suddenly drove his hellish trucks straight into the front lobby of CIA headquarters." The CIA—and especially the White House—were desperate for any information linking Saddam to WMDs (weapons of mass destruction). Previous reservations were swept away as the CIA suddenly began distributing Curveball reports, now labeled as coming from a "new source." BND's growing doubts about Curveball's veracity were matched by the CIA's growing love affair with him.

Despite agency internal misgivings about Curveball, Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell continued to warn on television of the threat of a “mushroom cloud.” And, apparently only vaguely aware of the intense debate over Curveball’s credentials, Tenet went to the Oval Office to give President Bush his famous “slam dunk” assurances that Saddam possessed WMDs.

In building its case for invading Iraq, the administration hoped to prove two WMD issues: Saddam’s continued development of nuclear weapons and a parallel biological weapons program. In his January 2003 State of the Union message, President Bush said that the British government had confirmed Saddam’s search for uranium for nuclear weapons and that “firsthand witnesses” had reported that Iraq had seven mobile factories for the production of biological agents.

Three days later Powell, at Bush’s orders, delivered the same message before the United Nations Security Council and the world. Powell, the most popular and persuasive man in the administration, having scrubbed the “facts” in the speech for three days at Langley and armed with Tenet’s personal assurances (“George, are you sure?”) on the reliability of the information, argued both the nuclear and biological case against Saddam, adding as well allegations that Saddam was behind 9/11. “These are not assertions,” said Powell, “they are facts, corroborated by many sources.” It’s not too much to say that Powell’s UN speech was the single most decisive factor in convincing Americans—and Congress—on the imperative of invading Iraq.

What neither Bush nor Powell knew was that the entire bio-weapons story came from a single source, Curveball, and that neither the CIA nor anybody in the American intelligence community knew his real name, the reliability of his information or even who he was. The entire WMD case collapsed a few days after Powell’s speech when highly professional UN inspectors, having scoured Iraq for four months, reported that they had found nothing. The notorious Djerf al Nadaf proved to be a seed purification plant. Chief Inspector Hans Blix, tragically denigrated by the U.S. administration, told the Security Council that “no evidence” of mobile biological or nuclear production had been found. Washington wasn’t listening.

Failure to find any WMDs even after the occupation was a huge and continuing embarrassment for the Bush administration and the CIA. The United States sent in a 1,000-person search mission, which produced nothing. Tenet then dispatched David Kay, a well-respected former UN inspector, to head a special investigative mission to

Iraq, but when Kay returned with information discrediting Curveball, Tenet banished him from the CIA. The BND finally allowed CIA access to Curveball. After a day of interrogation it was clear that he was lying. His motivation was straightforward enough: he wanted a visa to remain in Germany, and with thousands of other refugees seeking the same thing, he needed to prove why one should be granted him. In May the agency was forced to issue a “burn notice” on Curveball, withdrawing all his reporting and advising all government agencies and foreign liaison services to stay away from him. This is the most humiliating confession an intelligence agency can make. Worst of all, it happened in a monumentally significant case. A week later Tenet resigned.

To a degree, of course, Drogin’s book title is a reach. Curveball didn’t cause the war. He merely supplied the justification to Bush and Cheney and others who had already decided on war. Tenet recognized this: “The rush to Baghdad,” he told intimates, “wasn’t going away.” And: “Those who tried [to stop it] would just be stepping in front of a moving train.”

Regardless of who is president, there is always constant pressure to politicize intelligence analyses. Bush and Cheney made unprecedented visits to Langley urging analysts to buttress the case against Saddam. Dissatisfied with what the CIA was saying, the Pentagon created an Office of Undersecretary for Intelligence, a bald-faced move to circumvent the agency. In perhaps the most critical move, Cheney set up his own highly controversial intelligence circle under Lewis “Scooter” Libby, which cherry-picked raw incoming intelligence reports to serve their preconceptions. The CIA’s Alan Foley, head of the agency’s weapons analysis group, saw the way the winds were blowing. “If the president wants to go to war,” Foley told his staff, “our job is to find the intelligence to allow him to do so.”

The result of the manipulation of Curveball’s information was the greatest calamity in CIA history, worse even than the Bay of Pigs. Curveball’s allegations served as the primary justification in the administration’s case for invading Iraq. As a result, 150,000 American troops are still in the country, more than 4,000 are dead and 6,500 have suffered severe injury. Estimates of Iraqi deaths exceed 100,000. The cost to the U.S. treasury is a trillion dollars and climbing. The cost in America’s loss of standing throughout the world is incalculable. Curveball, when last seen, was selling used cars in Germany and flipping burgers at a Burger King. *Der Whopper!* How appropriate.

Significantly, nobody has stepped forward to challenge Drogin's findings.

That can hardly be said of Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Suskind's new and hugely controversial *The Way of the World*, which stirred a fierce whirlwind in Washington. Suskind, a highly regarded reporter on the Washington scene (*The Price of Loyalty*, *The One Percent Doctrine*), describes how before the invasion CIA personnel had met clandestinely with Naji Sabri, Saddam's foreign minister, who told them Iraq had no WMDs. Even more sensationally, Suskind learned that the British MI6 had contacted Tahir Jalil "George" Habbush, head of Iraqi intelligence. Habbush, who took great risks in meeting a British agent, confirmed that Saddam no longer had a nuclear or bioweapons program. Three months before the invasion, with plenty of time to call it off, the White House dismissed these reports out of hand.

The furor raised by Suskind's account of these meetings was nothing compared with reaction to his description of how the White House, painfully embarrassed after the invasion in its failure to find Saddam's alleged WMDs, tried to prove a Saddam connection with Mohamed Atta, leader of the 9/11 operation. Suskind writes that the "White House" (Bush? Cheney?) instructed Tenet to forge a letter from Habbush to Saddam, backdated before the 9/11 attack, in which Habbush says that "Mohamed Atta" has completed his training. The White House and Tenet vociferally denied the charge, but a letter of this nature did circulate in Baghdad; committees in both the Senate and House are investigating the matter, which is constitutionally an impeachable offense; and Habbush did get a \$5 million payoff.

Virtually unnoticed is what might be Suskind's most damning account—if accurate: how the administration abandoned Benazir Bhutto when, after eight years in exile, she returned to Pakistan. Suskind spent hours talking with her and reports that "she realized she had essentially been abandoned by the U.S." Aware of the threats to her life, she pleaded with Vice President Cheney to call Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf and emphasize that he was responsible for her security. Musharraf's response was equivocal, and there was no Cheney follow-up. Shortly after her return, Bhutto spoke before a huge crowd of supporters in Rawalpindi. Heading to her car, she commented to aides that her security detail had suddenly disappeared from sight. A few moments later a shot rang out. Bhutto died almost immediately. Abandonment is one thing; a set up for assassination is another.

Readers who focus solely on Suskind's explosive revelations, however, will miss the broader thrust of what he wants to say. As suggested by his subtitle, *A Story of Truth*

and Hope in an Age of Extremism, what distresses Suskind is the broader trend of world history, social justice issues and America's deplorable standing in the world. For Suskind the revelations of political misdeeds are merely further evidence of what he defines as America's malaise, its slippage as a model for the world, its loss of "moral energy." He describes the despair—and determination—of a woman lawyer defending a Guantánamo prisoner who was chained to the floor, whom the authorities were starving to death. There's the shock and disappointment of a young pro-American Pakistani Connecticut college graduate who was brusquely arrested near the White House because he carried a backpack. There's Abu Ghraib. Waterboarding. Renditions. Violation of constitutional privacy precepts.

Suskind focuses particularly on the nuclear threat, which he says "may be humanity's last race." "The government of the United States," he writes, "is . . . wildly disintegrated—uncertain about which original principles should define action, much less how they might fit into a coherent whole." Suskind laments how little Americans know—or care—about this predicament. The national motto seems to be embodied in Donald Rumsfeld's comment before the Iraq war about how to deal with "those foreigners": "We will impose our reality on them." Given these conclusions, it's hard to see where Suskind finds grounds for optimism. In a very real sense, Osama bin Laden has won—achieving his objective of destabilizing the West.

In his call for America's moral rearmament Suskind joins a growing number of American observers—Fareed Zakaria, Thomas Friedman and others—who are dismayed over the worldwide impact of America's messianic policy, especially in the past eight years, and over how the "New Imperialism" is undermining America's position in the world.

Among the best of these is the noted historian Andrew Bacevich, who in *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* offers a powerful—and profoundly depressing—critique of America in the world today. A West Point graduate, 23-year army veteran and retired colonel now teaching at Boston University, Bacevich is a Niebuhr scholar. His book (which reached the No. 1 spot on the Amazon best-seller list) draws heavily on Niebuhr's analysis of the political world of uncertainty, confusion and fear in the 1930s—which, Bacevich observes, happens to be comparable to our own. Following in Niebuhr's tracks, Bacevich challenges Americans on three counts: a crisis of profligacy, a crisis in politics and a crisis in the military.

Bacevich argues that profligacy—with the country living beyond its means abroad and at home—is a fundamental source of the American dilemma. The U.S. has a dependence on “imported goods, on imported oil, and imported credit.” America wants to fight wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but with no pain, no strain, and above all no new taxes to pay for the wars. As Americans see it, the primary objective of U.S. policy is to prevent anything from disturbing this cozy existence, even if that requires going to war. Writing before the implosion of America’s markets, Bacevich could hardly have anticipated that his projections would be realized so immediately and so dramatically.

In the political realm, Bacevich finds the crisis in the wake of the Bush administration simply devastating for the U.S. system of government. America’s constitutionally established congressional-executive system has become totally dominated by the president, he argues. “No one today seriously believes that the actions of the legislative branch are informed by a collective determination to promote the common good.” Appalled by the Iraq war, he finds nothing in the Constitution that “tells us that Americans have to remake the world in our image.” Do we really think we can transform the status of the Middle East’s hundreds of millions of people? Bacevich is fully aware, too, that the fault lies not just with Washington policy makers; the crisis also reflects the general wishes of the people. His warnings sound like Niebuhr’s about “our dreams of managing history.”

Focusing on one of the most critical issues of the day, Bacevich deplores the almost total American ignorance of the outside world, and especially of Islam, which, with 1.3 billion adherents and followed by a majority of the population in over 50 countries, is the second largest religion worldwide. For most Americans, Islam is a blank; all they know is that they don’t like it, and they’re afraid. Attempts to inject some balance in the reporting, such as making the moderate al-Jazeera news network available in America, are blocked by powerful forces. Against this background it’s not difficult for some Americans whose minds are still blocked by 9/11—and for some Christians suspicious of Islam—to describe all Muslims as jihadists eager to chop off Christian heads and to mindlessly equate Islam’s followers with the likes of Hitler and Mussolini, calling them “Islamofascists.”

The hate film *Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West* demonstrates dramatically what Bacevich is talking about. Although there’s some truth in its description of events—the World Trade Center towers toppling, huge Muslim crowds chanting “Death to America,” imams urging jihadists on suicide missions—it lacks

any sense of proportion, any recognition that the jihadists are a tiny fraction of Muslims and that Islam has a long and distinguished history. The presentation has nothing to do with logical thought—and to make matters worse, it is served up with an ear-splitting mélange marked by the pounding of drums and the deafening roar of weapons in a fashion that would have done the Nazis' propagandist and filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl proud. It's no surprise that the documentary has entered the presidential campaign: millions of Obsession DVDs are being distributed for free across the nation. Bacevich recognizes that if people with such views are put in charge of the war against terrorism, America could trigger yet another 100-year war.

Bacevich says the forward projection of U.S. military power has become a form of escapism from these realities. America has become a garrison state. The government is dominated by an ideology of national security that assumes that the U.S. is loved and that is blind to the degree to which it isn't. Drawing on his military experience, Bacevich, whose son was killed in Iraq, brilliantly displays the abuse of military force, both in misuse of the volunteer army and in diversion of resources desperately needed at home.

Bacevich warns, as did Niebuhr, that war is not the answer to the country's problems. He supports a strong military, but argues that the so-called volunteer military is in fact a professional army which under the present political leadership is being used as an "imperial army." He questions the size of America's military armada—4,000 military and civilian personnel in the Pentagon, 14 aircraft carrier groups (the Pentagon is asking for another one—at \$4.2 billion); 750 military bases outside the U.S. (including 50 in Iraq alone); the army's \$160-billion Future Combat Systems; and the air force's multibillion F-35 combat aircraft. He's not optimistic that a change in Washington, regardless of the party, will bring a change in the situation. Both candidates want the U.S. to remain in Iraq (at least to some degree), to expand forces in Afghanistan and to increase military spending.

Ironically, this proposed military expansion comes at a time when seasoned observers are calling for a reversal of the Bush administration's unilateralism. In a series of podium discussions, five former secretaries of state, from both parties, decried the "global crisis in confidence" in America—painfully demonstrated in worldwide polls. They agreed that the greatest challenge facing the U.S. is, as Henry Kissinger put it, to "reach out to the world." America must recognize, they stressed, that today's enormous globalization problems can be solved only in cooperation with other nations. They emphasized that America must realize that Russia is now back in

play, that China is a player and that India soon will be.

Bacevich, who has devoted his career to foreign policy, is nevertheless convinced that America's problems lie within. He urges Americans to "look at ourselves in the mirror, to see the direction in which we are headed." He deplores the hypocrisy in the nation's self-image. Bacevich cites 2 Kings 20:1: "Set your house in order." And he endorses Reinhold Niebuhr's searing assessment: "One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun."