Washington Rules, Andrew J. Bacevich (Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Co., 2010)
(read spring 2018)

The subtitle of this book, "America's Path to Permanent War," states its thesis: Since World War II, our national security strategy, which relies on global military presence and global power projection (i.e., global interventionism) has "propelled the United States into a condition approximating perpetual war." (p. 16)

Bacevich, a retired U.S. Army colonel and now a professor of history and international relations at Boston University, is a skillful, clear, and self-deprecating writer. He begins his Introduction by stating, "Worldly ambition inhibits true learning. Ask me. I know. A young man in a hurry is nearly uneducable. ... Only as ambition wanes does education become a possibility." (p. 1)

He says his own education did not begin until he reached middle age, when he visited East Berlin after the fall of the Berlin wall and found the shabby remains of Soviet power. East Germany was reputed to be "the most advanced and successful component of the Soviet Empire" but he realized that it was actually more like "part of the undeveloped world." (p. 5) That's when he began to entertain the possibility that what he had believed over the previous 20 years as a professional soldier, especially about the Cold War and U.S. foreign policy, might not be entirely true. He says that by temperament and upbringing he had always taken comfort in orthodoxy, but now he began to appreciate that truth is never simple, especially versions of the truth handed down from on high. He writes, "The exercise of power necessarily involves manipulation and is antithetical to candor." (p. 3)

Bacevich makes the interesting point that a lot of what we think of as education is just "inert facts possessing little real educational value." He also claims that, for him, "graduate school proved a complete waste of time – a period of intense study devoted to the further accumulation of facts, while I exerted myself to insuring that they remained inert." But he admits that in graduate school he was "pelted with challenges to orthodoxy, which I vigorously deflected." (p. 9) In other words, he refused to honestly face opposing versions of the truth.

The final straw that pushed him fully into opposing "American vainglory" was George W. Bush's decision to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. He writes:

> The contradictions that found an ostensibly peace-loving nation committing itself to a doctrine of preventive war became too great to ignore. The folly and hubris of the policy makers who heedlessly thrust the nation into an ill-defined and open-ended "global war on terror" without the foggiest notion of what victory would look like, how it would be won, and what it might cost approached standards hitherto achieved only by slightly mad German warlords. (p. 10)

He defines the essence of the way Washington has attempted to govern the world as a combination of the "American credo," which "summons the United States – and the United States alone – to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world" (p. 12), and a "sacred trinity" of beliefs requiring the United States to "maintain a *global military presence*, to

configure its forces for *global power projection*, and to counter existing or anticipated threats by relying on a policy of *global interventionism*." (p. 14, emphasis by author)

In a slightly different analysis, Bacevich lists the four assertions in the "catechism of American statecraft," to which he says every president since Harry Truman has faithfully subscribed: (1) the world must be organized or shaped; otherwise chaos will reign; (2) only the United States has the capacity to prescribe and enforce such a global order; (3) America's writ includes the charge of articulating the principles that should define the international order, which are necessarily American principles since they "possess universal validity;" and (4) almost everyone in the world wants the United States to lead. (pp. 20-21)

The author says the two main American "empire builders" during the Cold War were Allen Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and Curtis LeMay, the four-star Air Force general who built the Strategic Air Command (SAC) into an unrivaled military force. Both were single-minded patriots, Bacevich says, with weaknesses that would only be revealed in hindsight (and then, apparently, only by people like Bacevich). He notes that Dulles led the CIA in overthrowing democratically-elected governments in Iran and Guatemala, and that he had a penchant for choosing subordinates with "impressive talents and flawed personalities." One committed suicide, another descended into paranoia, and so on. Although Dulles himself was "an inveterate womanizer and indifferent father," he and the other CIA leaders sincerely believed that the Cold War was a righteous cause and that they were helping to insure the survival of freedom, democracy, and liberal values (despite their own skullduggery). (p. 39)

As for General LeMay, nicknamed "Old Iron Ass," he possessed unequaled genius in developing and holding in readiness the means to destroy entire societies through long-range aerial attack. (p. 43) What he did not possess was any sense of moral accountability for the vast nuclear resources under his command. He would readily annihilate civilians as well as military forces if that would accomplish victory sooner. "LeMay, like Dulles, declared in effect that the ends justified the means," says Bacevich. (p. 53) LeMay also was unable, or unwilling, to consider that "the production, testing, and use of nuclear weapons might have negative political, strategic, or environmental implications. Short-term interests swept aside longer-term considerations." (p. 52)

In a long chapter entitled "Illusions of Flexibility and Control," Bacevich reviews American disasters from the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba under President Kennedy to the ignominious Vietnam War under President Johnson. It started with the concept of "flexible response," the brainchild of General Maxwell Taylor, characterized by Bacevich as "another now-forgotten figure who left in his wake a wide swath of calamity." (p. 60) Taylor argued that counting on nuclear weapons to avert war was foolish, offering "only two choices, the initiation of general nuclear war or compromise and retreat." Instead, he proposed that a "new, more diverse mix of capabilities ... would enable the United States to respond anywhere, any time, with weapons and forces appropriate to the situation. (p. 61)

Although "flexible response" seemed to be a more civilized approach to the use of American power, it proved hopelessly inadequate. Bacevich says that "[w]ith all the certainty of men

unacquainted with the actual use of power, [President Kennedy and his advisers] did not doubt their ability to compel war to do their bidding." (p. 63)

But war, once unleashed, is not so easily tamed. The Bay of Pigs, "the most humiliating foreign-policy the nation had experienced in decades" (p. 74), did not reorient U.S. policy, but rather strengthened the resolve of those in power to do better the next time. The "Cuban missile crisis," in which Kennedy distinguished himself, in Bacevich's eyes, by resisting the goading of Generals Maxwell Taylor and Curtis LeMay to use direct military action, and exhibiting "admirable coolness and sophistication" in choosing a naval blockade styled as as "quarantine." Secretly, Kennedy also pledged to Khrushchev that the U.S. would not invade Cuba and would remove certain American missiles in Italy and Turkey that threatened the Soviet Union. Bacevich says this was appeasement, but it worked in defusing the immediate crisis. (p. 87)

Then came Vietnam. Bacevich acknowledges that Kennedy inherited a mess there, but says that "over the course of his brief tenure in office, he compounded that mess, passing to his successor a far more difficult situation." (p. 89) The turning point was the U.S. overthrow and murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam in 1963. Contrary to American expectations, this "threw open the floodgates of instability and dysfunction" in South Vietnam, and turned out to be "yet another debacle on a par with the Bay of Pigs, this time entirely of the administration's own making." (p. 91) The slowly escalating involvement of American troops, plus massive bombing of Viet Cong, did not produce the expected wilting of North Vietnam resolve, but rather a stiffening of that resolve.

The only national figure to oppose the reckless plunge into war in Vietnam was Senator Mike Mansfield, the Democrat from Montana who was then Senate majority leader. He did his best, but did not prevail. The efforts to snuff out this "brush-fire war" that, in the minds of American policy makers, loomed large as a test of American global leadership, produced instead "a massive conflagration" over which "they were incapable of exercising any control whatsoever." (p. 108)

Bacevich compares the American response to the Vietnam War to the response to the toppling of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Rather than just tightening airport security, within 24 hours senior officials in the administration of George W. Bush were pressing for an invasion of Iraq, a country that was not even involved in the 9/11 conspiracy. Averting further terrorist attacks became the pretext for launching a "global war on terror." (pp. 100-101)

Why didn't the Vietnam War change the direction of American foreign policy? Bacevich points to two prominent figures who did, temporarily, change the focus. Sen. J. William Fulbright and Gen. David M. Shoup differed in their perspectives and their proposed remedies, but "together they fashioned a sustained and probing critique of the American credo." (p. 110) As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright questioned the assumptions that informed U.S. policy, most completely in his 1996 book *The Arrogance of Power*. Bacevich shares many good quotes from Fulbright's book, like his take on the Vietnam War:

> What I do question is the ability of the United States ... to go into a small, alien, undeveloped Asian nation and create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where

> there is defeatism, democracy where they is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is almost a way of life. (p. 112)

General Shoup was quite different from the scholarly Senator Fulbright. Shoup was "given to action rather than reflection" (p. 115) and became an outstanding, courageous marine. But after leaving active duty, Shoup blasted the Vietnam War, speaking to everyone from rebellious students to government committees. He said that if the United States kept its "dirty, bloody, dollar-crooked fingers out of the business of these nations so full of depressed, exploited people, they might well arrive at a solution of their own." (pp. 117-118)

Richard Nixon took over the presidency from Lyndon Johnson, and despite his avowed intention to seek "peace with honor" in Vietnam, in a week and a half at Christmas time in 1972 the U.S. deposited over 20,000 tons of high explosives on Hanoi and Hai Phong. But public attitudes were changing in this country. Congress ordered an end to the draft and beginning in 1973 the U.S. military became an all-volunteer force, which sounded like a positive development but actually gave the "decision makers ... a free hand to use a military over which the American people had forfeited any ownership." (p. 126)

In short, nothing really changed after the Vietnam War. "By 1980, both major parties had concluded that Vietnam was best forgotten while the energetic reassertion of American global leadership, backed by plentiful supplies of firepower, had once more become the order of the day." (p. 136)

Bacevich is also critical of secretary of state Madeleine Albright, whose "substantive contributions to diplomacy were exceedingly thin." (p. 139) He says she was not especially eloquent but did have a gift for expressing what most Americans in a leadership role believed: That "American leadership is indispensable, that Americans possess a unique grasp of history's purpose, [and] that these factors should empower America to act ...." (p. 141) Bacevich says that Albright was not expressing cynicism or hypocrisy; it was "conviction encased in an implacable sense of righteousness." (p. 143)

Invading Iraq, after apparent success in routing the Taliban in Afghanistan, proved to be another debacle. Bacevich writes,

> Campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq intended to showcase an unprecedented mastery of war demonstrated the folly of imagining that war could be mastered. When he finally left the Pentagon in late 2006, {Donald] Rumsfeld found himself running neck and neck with Robert McNamara for the title of worst defense secretary in U.S. history. The concept of transformation had become the symbol of overweening arrogance and hucksterism that had characterized his entire tenure in office. (p. 166)

The concept of transformation that Bacevich was referring to was Rumsfeld's "Revolution in Military Affairs," speed combined with overwhelming "smart" power resulting in "shock and awe." Of course, it didn't work. Despite Vice President Dick Cheney's glib assertion (to a conservative think tank) that "Iraqi Freedom has been one of the most extraordinary military

campaigns ever conducted," it turned out to be a disaster that, as of 2018, continues.

One of the things that makes Bacevich's books so fascinating is his choice of quotations, many of which proved, in time, to be laughably off-base. Here are a few:

In May, 2003, speaking about Operation Iraqi Freedom, President George Bush said that the invasion of Iraq

> was carried out with a combination of precision and speed and boldness the enemy did not expect and the world had not seen before. ... Today, we have the greater power to free a nation by breaking a dangerous and aggressive regime. With new tactics and precision weapons, we can achieve military objectives without directing violence against civilians. .... (p. 171)

On the same day, Vice President Dick Cheney declared that "Iraqi Freedom has been one of the most extraordinary military campaigns ever conducted." (p. 172) The basic message was that the speed and precision of U.S. military operations now ensured success for our overseas adventures. However, that did not happen. Bacevich says,

> Despite all the technological paraphernalia in their possession, U.S. forces were effectively fighting blind. Lacking adequate intelligence, they conducted massive nighttime "sweeps" in which they knocked down doors, terrorized Iraqi women and children, and detained large numbers of military-age men. They threw innocent and guilty alike into overcrowded detention camps that then served as incubators of anti-American resistance. (p. 178)

General David Petraeus next took the stage, urging a new emphasis on counterinsurgency to defeat the stubborn insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. (p. 193 et seq.) Although implementing "the surge" (with President George Bush's cooperation) in Iraq did, for a time, avert the country's outright collapse, it failed to destroy the insurgency. General Petraeus faded from view, but the wars continued.

Although the Republicans were the main drivers of perpetual war, the Democrats were complicit. They made hay politically by vowing to end the war in Iraq, then did nothing to stop it when they were in power. President Barack Obama not only did not end the twin disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, he continued both efforts and even expanded the conflict in Afghanistan.

President Obama appointed a new commander, General Stanley McChrystal, to bring the war in Afghanistan to a successful conclusion. Within weeks after his inauguration, Obama ordered 21,000 more troops into Afghanistan, and then, responding to an appeal from General McChrystal and a clamor for action by various civilian experts, he sent an additional 33,000 troops. Bacevich drily comments, "As it had with the lessons of Vietnam, Washington now successfully absorbed (and trivialized) the lessons of Iraq so as to ensure that nothing of importance would be learned and little would change." (p. 200)

Some really interesting quotations from a speech by President Dwight Eisenhower about the Cold War and associated arms race (pp. 225-226) are followed by Bacevich's comment that although Eisenhower's speech had little practical effect, "Worth recalling, however, is this soldier-statesman's acute discomfort with the progressive militarization of U.S. policy." (p. 226)

Professor Bacevich is no pacifist, nor is he an isolationist. He does not argue that we should destroy all our nuclear weapons or dismantle all our overseas military bases. He just thinks that what we are trying to do in the world is wildly disproportionate to the threats we face and also to the benefits we reap. He gives three examples to think about:

> If, rather than exceeding the military spending of all the rest of the planet, Pentagon outlays merely equaled the combined defense budgets of, say, Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Venezuela, and Cuba, would the United States face great peril? If the U.S. nuclear stockpile consisted of several hundred weapons rather than several thousand, would the United States find itself appreciably more vulnerable to nuclear blackmail or attack? Were the United States, sixty-plus years after the end of World War II, finally to withdraw its forces from Germany, Italy, and the rest of Europe, would Americans sleep less easily in their beds at night? (p. 227)

So the germane question is, why do the "Washington rules" persist and who benefits from them? Bacevich's answer:

> The Washington rules deliver profit, power, and privilege to a long list of beneficiaries: elected and appointed officials, corporate executives and corporate lobbyists, admirals and generals, functionaries staffing the national security apparatus, media personalities, and policy intellectuals from universities and research organizations. Each year the Pentagon expends hundreds of billions of dollars to raise and support U.S. military forces. This money lubricates American politics, filling campaign coffers and providing a source of largesse – jobs and contracts – for distribution to constituents. It provides lucrative "second careers" for retired U.S. military officers hired by weapons manufacturers or by consulting firms appropriately known as "Beltway Bandits." It funds the activities of think tanks that relentlessly advocate for policies guaranteed to fend off challenges to established conventions. (p. 228)

Bacevich is not sanguine about the road ahead. He believes "the Washington rules are likely to remain securely in place for the foreseeable future, at least "until the strain laid on a military that is perpetually at war and on an economy propped up by perpetual borrowing causes one or both to collapse." And even then, if collapse occurs, the most likely result will be "a panicky rush to assign blame – a steady supply of McNamaras and Rumsfelds guarantees the availability of suitable scapegoats – and announce 'reforms' while further sweetening the Pentagon's budget." (p. 229)

Although he does not believe it is likely to be adopted, Bacevich does embrace a new credo, which he says is really what the founders of this nation believed: That America does have an obligation to the rest of the world, but in discharging that obligation we should "seek not to

compel or enforce, but to exemplify and illuminate." (p. 231) After quoting George Washington and John Quincy Adams, he says, essentially, that we lost that earlier vision by entering the two world wars. (Should we have *refused* to come to the aid of Britain and the Jews? That sounds like isolationism to me.)

Yes, there have been some prophets calling the nation away from what Bacevich calls the "Washington rules." He cites four especially: the "diplomat-turned-historian" George Kennan; Senator J. William Fulbright, a "liberal internationalist;" the "influential social critic" Christopher Lasch; and Martin Luther King, Jr., "arguably the dominant moral figure of the American Century." (p. 234 et seq.) Bacevich's conclusion, to which he says each of those four figures subscribed, is that:

> The proper aim of American statecraft ... is not to redeem humankind or to prescribe some specific world order, nor to police the planet by force of arms. Its purpose is to permit Americans to avail themselves of the right of self-determination as they seek to create at home a "more perfect union." Any policy impeding that enterprise – as open-ended war surely does – is misguided and pernicious. (p. 237)

Bacevich is also concerned with our current all-volunteer military, which sounds to him like the "standing army" that George Washington warned us against, although it is actually "a mix of military professionals and profit-oriented contractors." (p. 243) He is also against our ever-increasing national debt, which includes the "massive amounts spent annually by the Pentagon." He says, "Overall, members of the present generation have plundered the inheritance of their children and grandchildren as remorselessly as the disgraced financier Bernard Madoff bilked those who entrusted him with their money." (p. 246)

I have very little negative to say about this book, since so much of it rings true. But Bacevich is not without faults. Sometimes he comes across as the "know-it-all" who alone has all the answers. He also tends to mock some military leaders – perhaps out of jealousy – by giving them cute nicknames: General David Petraeus is "King David," General Stanley McChrystal was "heir to King David" as "Prince Stanley." (pp. 191, 215)

Is Professor Bacevich too cynical? What about this comment:

> ... when presidents use phrases like *fighting for freedom*, *eliminating tyranny*, and *liberating the oppressed*, they speak in code. Their real meaning ... is this: Safeguarding the American way of life requires that others conform to American values. Military victory offers the medium through which American warriors impose that conformity. (p. 189, emphasis by author).

I would say, rather, that Bacevich is a doomsday prophet. His final word is this: "Promising prosperity and peace, the Washington rules are propelling the United States toward insolvency and perpetual war. Over the horizon a shipwreck of epic proportions awaits." (p. 250)