

**Luce Falls Short:
Andrew Bacevich on the End of the American Century**

By Jefferson Flanders

Andrew J. Bacevich, currently a professor of history and international relations at Boston University, and a former Army colonel, has become an outspoken critic of US foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Bush-era doctrine of preventive war.

Bacevich's latest contribution to the debate is his editing of [The Short American Century: A Postmortem](#) (Harvard University Press), a collection of critical essays about America's historic and future role in the world.

Jefferson Flanders sat down with Bacevich in his BU office to talk about the book and Bacevich's views on recent developments in the Mideast.

Q: Why this book now? It sees the American Century as a metaphor for American triumphalism—in your words, the illusion that the United States can preside over and direct the course of history. Isn't the pendulum swinging away from large footprint military action? Aren't we at a point where's there a recognition that we can't have both guns and butter?

Bacevich: I think we should realize that, but I don't think we have realized that yet. The inspiration of the book is as follows: my own study of US foreign policy has increasingly been informed by an appreciation that we justify doing what we do in the world based on massive claims of our ability to shape or determine the shape of history. This notion really can be traced back all the way to the founding of Anglo-America but has been particularly evident in the post-Cold War era. When the Cold War ended there were any number of commentators and powerful politicians who proclaimed that the United States had triumphed, had become the indispensable nation, that the world was entering a unipolar moment, that somehow we were called upon now to play the role of benign global hegemon—these are phrases I'm using in a kind of a sarcastic way, but back in the 1990s before 9/11 they defined the conversation.

If you fast forward to the post-9/11 period, in particular take things up to about 2008, none of those claims seem to stand up very well. And in particular, they don't stand up when we consider the failure of the American project in Iraq—which was not just a failure in Iraq but signified the failure of the George W. Bush plan to transform the greater Middle East using American military power. Combine that also occurring in 2008 with the onset of the Great Recession and suddenly we don't look like the world's only superpower; suddenly it doesn't look like a unipolar world. I concluded that if there had been an American Century, if there had been a period of American dominion, by 2008 it was pretty clearly over. And what I wanted to do was to invite a number of historians to reflect on what the American Century had been about—if indeed there was one.

In order to try to provide sort of a hook for that project I went back and took a look at Henry Luce's great *Life* magazine essay from February 1941, an essay which he called "The American Century," which consisted of an impassioned summons for the American people now to accept the burdens of global leadership, the challenges of global leadership, which Luce himself was absolutely persuaded was our destiny. And so the result is this book, *The Short American Century*, an American Century which arguably began with the end of World War II and by 2008 had concluded. The various scholars who contributed to this offer a wide variety of perspectives about what the American Century was all about and they don't agree with one another, nor was the intent for them to agree with one another. I wanted to get this wide variety of opinion.

Now, the subversive purpose of the book, not so much academic but more polemical, is implicit and that is to suggest to anyone who bothers to pick it up and read it, if indeed the short American Century has come to an end, if this period of American dominion has now passed, where does that leave us? What is the era in which we are entering likely to be all about, this post-American Century world? I think that is a question that urgently needs to be addressed, ought to be at center stage of our politics but in fact is not. So I am struck, here in the middle of a presidential campaign, by the fact that on the one hand the country is struggling economically and militarily, but on the other hand, the rhetoric of American dominion continues to be heard.

If you go take a look at a speech that Governor Romney gave at The Citadel in October 2011 he says quite explicitly "elect me and I will ensure that the 21st century is an American Century, I will ensure that we continue to lead the world, I will ensure that we continue to shape the world." Although Republicans have criticized President Obama for being too timid in that regard, being too quick to apologize they say, not believing in American exceptionalism they say, the reality is that if you at what Obama says he and Romney are reading off the same page.

Q: Is there a disconnect between political elites and the average American on this question? Walter Russell Mead calls it the Jeffersonian strain—the notion that we should minimize our global commitments and shouldn't get into what George Washington called entangling alliances. The current wars are extremely unpopular.

Bacevich: I tend to think there's not much of a disconnect between elites and the great majority of the American people. Frankly I think that when someone like Romney gives a speech promising to continue the American Century that doesn't necessarily reflect his deepest belief, it reflects the advice he is getting from his political handlers. His political handlers are saying: "Hey, boss, you need to get out there and proclaim that we are going to determine the course of history because that's what Americans wants to hear." I think those political advisors probably are more or less right. And I think there is some evidence for that and it comes from the candidacy of somebody like Ron Paul.

Now Ron Paul, with regard to foreign policy, is the one guy who is willing to concede that the American Century is over. He is somebody who would like to see the United States play a more modest role, more self-restraint in the use of military power, a substantially smaller military. And his argument elicits a very enthusiastic and positive response from a very limited slice of the American people. So, whatever you would say the Ron Paul constituency is—what is it, five percent of the Republican party, ten percent? They love him. But it's only five or ten percent.

Q: I am thinking of the public opinion polls that show today that 60 percent of Americans think Afghanistan was a mistake.

Bacevich: I think that the number is actually bigger than that. But the question is, so what? Yes, if I walk up to you and put a microphone in your face and say "Tell me what you think of the Afghanistan war, is it a good thing or a bad thing?" the vast majority of our fellow citizens will say it's a bad thing and then they will say "thank you very much and I need to go about my business and try to pay the bills."

We have a substantial part of the country that is opposed to ill-advised military adventures but not opposed to the point that we actually care enough to actually do anything. The contrast between the public response to the unpopular Vietnam war and the public response to the unpopular Afghan and Iraq wars is striking.

Q: How much of that is due to an all-volunteer military?

Bacevich: I think that's a large part of it, but it's not just that. To make that point somewhat more broadly, we don't have skin in the game. We don't, in part, because there's an all-volunteer military and there's a gap between the military and American society that is frequently commented on now, to include senior military officers who think it's a problem. It's another one of these things that's a problem but not so big a problem that anybody is going to do anything about it. We simply lament it.

But we don't have skin in the game in a second sense because we don't pay for the wars. We will ultimately spend between \$4 and \$6 trillion on the Iraq war—well, your taxes didn't go up to pay for that war, my taxes didn't go up, what went up was the national debt. If we had a volunteer force, if we were told that war equals money out of your pocket and out of my pocket, then I think maybe the American people would be paying a little bit of attention. We, meaning both the people and the American

government, mutually indulge this fiction that these wars have no costs, or at least the costs are being kicked down the road.

Q: When President Obama ordered US intervention in Libya in 2011 under the doctrine of “responsibility to protect,” he argued that to stand by and let Qaddafi massacre his people “would have been a betrayal of who we are.” What about the humanitarian arguments for intervention as opposed to the realist position?

Bacevich: The realists argue that interests rightly and inevitably determine the behavior of states and therefore questions of when and where and how to go to war should be informed by matters of interest. There is another school that says that moral considerations also have a place in international politics and that there are some circumstances in which ongoing or prospective horrific events create an imperative to act. I don't think it's an either-or. I tend to see myself in the realist school, but I acknowledge that there may be circumstances in which interests get trumped by moral considerations.

I think that in a serious democratic system we would have a lively debate over whether the Libya case merited action as opposed, let's say, to the ongoing Syrian case and based on an argument in our democratic politics the president would reach some conclusion to act or not act. My point would be that if we are going to act in pursuit of humanitarian considerations, let's just be cognizant of the fact that this too is not free, that in all likelihood you're going to send Americans in harm's way and you're going to spend a whole lot of money. Once again, if it's so important to do, then it ought to be important enough to pay for.

We also have to be cognizant of what the consequences are, and they are not always those that we wish to see. I think the Libya case, which people view as now a concluded episode, may not be one. Let's wait a year from now and see what the politics of Libya are like. Do people with liberal sensibilities and a respect for human rights, do they emerge on top in Libyan politics? I think that's a question that I'm not sure that I would give an answer to it yet. So great, we got rid of Qaddafi. What did we get in place of Qaddafi has to weigh in evaluating whether the episode was successful or not.

Q: When President Obama flew to Afghanistan to sign a security agreement with the government there, the *New York Times* headline was: “Obama Signs Pact in Kabul, Turning Page in Afghan War.” Is this a turning of the page in your view?

Bacevich: When I was reading the *New York Times* online I caught that headline, and there was another headline that read: “Bomb Blows Up in Kabul, Killing Seven.” So I'm not sure if it looks like a turning of the page if you're an Afghan. It's a turning of a page in that the president is intent, and probably rightly intent, on ending direct US military involvement as much as he can. But guess what? The insurgency is not going to come to an end and war is going to continue, just as it has in Iraq. We have turned the page in Iraq. As far as we're concerned the Iraq war is over. Well, there's still an insurgency there. There are still bombs blowing up in Baghdad and other cities.

Q: At least in Afghanistan, the administration seems to be dropping the “hearts and mind” counterinsurgency and moving to a counterterrorism campaign.

Bacevich: And perhaps somewhat troublingly, expanding the counterterrorism campaign. So that’s the way we are waging war in Pakistan, in Yemen, in Somalia. I’m appreciative of the fact that we don’t have large-scale American forces occupying these countries, trying to pacify them. That’s good. On the other hand, where does this “whack-a-mole” approach to dealing with terror lead? How many Hellfire missiles do we launch from drones before the last violent Islamic radical is either dead or decides that the cause is futile and puts down his arms and goes home? To some degree, this approach creates new terrorists to replace the old ones. I think as an outsider, without having any access to intelligence it’s very difficult to get a sense of how many bad guys do we create for every one that we kill. I don’t know.

But it does seem to me that this is a tactic that is devoid of a political context. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, then there has to be some political framework within which the war is conducted. I don’t see what the political framework is as the Obama administration makes this transition to a counterterrorism approach.

Q: Of the presidencies since World War II, Eisenhower’s was marked by the most restraint in exerting military power. Why doesn’t he get more credit?

Bacevich: His farewell address—his warning about a military-industrial complex and its pernicious influence—is something that is repeatedly cited these days. But I also disagree with you a little bit, because I don’t think we can let Ike off the hook. Yes, it’s true that he wished to avoid future Korean wars. But it’s Eisenhower who unleashed the CIA as, in a sense, an alternative to using conventional forces and was guilty of all sorts of mischief as a consequence of that. It’s more complicated than just “peaceful Ike.”

Q: On balance, if you look at his eight years—

Bacevich: On balance I think he did a great job. You say that and acknowledge some serious flaws You know, basically I like Ike. I think compared to his successors, his record looks pretty good. But we have to note that the military-industrial complex came into existence during his watch in a very significant way.

I don’t know the exact numbers but when Eisenhower became president, the US nuclear arsenal was probably somewhere around 500 weapons and when he left the presidency it was probably somewhere around 18,000 weapons. I don’t think he intended it to happen. I think he probably regretted that it happened, but it happened and he was the president. He was responsible. That has to be part of the judgment we render.

Q: Isn't it true that Eisenhower, alone among the post—World War II presidents, had enough credibility based on his military background, to insist on more restraint in using power, in Korea and elsewhere?

Bacevich: Fair enough. He did. And therefore, what?

Q: Will it take a political figure with a similar solid military background to moderate future use of the military in American foreign policy?

Bacevich: That's a nice thought. The reason I don't think it's going to happen is because the generals we have today are not like Eisenhower. Even though Eisenhower was unquestionably a professional soldier, he was committed to the citizen-soldier tradition. His skepticism about military power was rooted in his understanding of what America was about even before World War II. The country in which he grew up, in whose army he served, was not a country that coveted military supremacy. Today we have an officer corps in which they probably are unable to conceive of a world in which the United States is not militarily supreme. Frankly, most of the students I teach, the undergraduates, take it for granted that to some degree wielding military power is what America is about. When I tell them this is a relatively recent phenomenon, I don't think they believe me. To try to persuade them that in the 1920s and 1930s the United States Army was an insignificant institution that existed on the margins of American politics that nobody cared about, I don't know that they get that.

Q: Maybe it's a captain in Afghanistan or Iraq today . . .

Bacevich: Maybe. Just from my own email there are any number of captains and lieutenants and majors who have had three or four or five tours and who say, "Hey, this makes no sense." People have read my books and say, "I'm with you."

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