Thunder from the Right—BOOM!

A conservative denounces Bush foreign policy—and blames Democrats, too
by Glenn C. Altschuler  |  1:41 PM August 6, 2008

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The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism
By Andrew J. Bacevich
Metropolitan Books, 224 pages, $24

Although John McCain wants U.S. forces to stay in Iraq until the mission really has been accomplished, an army of conservatives remains implacably opposed to the war and the occupation. Andrew Bacevich is among the most outspoken of them. A West Point graduate and Vietnam veteran who became a professor of history and international relations at Boston University after he retired from the Army, Mr. Bacevich warned back in March 2003 that if the United States encountered greater resistance than the architects of the Iraq invasion had promised, the nation would be tested "in ways that will make the Vietnam War look like a mere blip in American history."

In The New American Militarism (2006), The Long War (2007) and now The Limits of Power, Mr. Bacevich argues that the militarization of foreign policy has had catastrophic consequences for the U.S. and the world. He blames Democrats as well as Republicans. "In Iraq," he writes, "the knaves and the fools got their war," because the "deciders" in the Bush administration forgot the lessons of Vietnam (i.e., that our forces prevail only when the enemy fights on our terms), and Congress, "a haven for narcissistic hacks," let it happen.

By now so familiar, the denunciations of the misadventure in Iraq in The Limits of Power are noteworthy principally because they come from a conservative Catholic colonel. More provocative is Mr. Bacevich’s passionate but not entirely persuasive thesis that Bush 43 has not “broken decisively with the past.” The president, he argues, is only the most recent representative of a power elite that since the 1940s has “shown an almost pathological tendency to misinterpret reality and inflate threats.”

Drawing on the work of progressive historian William Appleman Williams, Mr. Bacevich claims that U.S. foreign policy is animated by a desire to feed the appetite for an ever-larger standard of living—and not a missionary zeal to spread democracy to oppressed people around the world. Instead of renouncing 1960s-style hedonism, he writes, Ronald Reagan became “the modern prophet of profligacy.” Assuring voters that “we must decide that ‘less’ is not enough,” Reagan “did as much to recast America’s moral constitution as sex, drugs, and rock and roll.” Similarly George W.
Bush spurned suggestions that Americans might have to change their lifestyles as a result of the "war on terror." "Do your business around the country," Mr. Bush suggested after Sept. 11. "Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida."

AS EMPIRE HAS BECOME a prerequisite for domestic prosperity, Mr. Bacevich insists, presidents have acted with "a boldness unburdened by excessive scruples." Global military supremacy has become the means of maintaining the illusion that Americans can continue to have access to cheap oil and indefinite extensions to their lines of credit. To gain support for the national security apparatus, political leaders keep elevating the threat. They seem well on their way to demolishing the proposition that the United States does not start wars.

Mr. Bacevich's hyperbolic, one-size-fits-all analysis of foreign policy effaces countervailing tendencies in American administrations since World War II. Does he really believe that "regardless of which party is in power, the people in charge don't know what they are doing"? The hawks, as Mr. Bacevich acknowledges, albeit grudgingly, haven't always prevailed. Harry Truman was a Marshall Plan man. Dwight Eisenhower refused to commit American troops to Vietnam. And Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton pushed for human rights and international trade agreements.

Nor is it "poppycock" to deem the administration of George W. Bush distinctly different from its predecessors. No president, not even Richard Nixon, has been as contemptuous of checks and balances in the federal government—or of multilateralism—as Mr. Bush. No other president has sanctioned torture or so brazenly embraced preemptive war. "National Security Council Report 68," the "interpretive key" to America's cold war foreign policy, was, according to Mr. Bacevich, "a hothouse of apprehension, dread and panic—the same combination of emotions that helped facilitate the Iraq War and with as little connection to reality." But, though it did offer a recipe for permanent militarization, NSC 68 ruled out preemptive war as "repugnant" and "morally corrosive."

Although, as Andrew Bacevich suggests, it’s unlikely that Barack Obama or John McCain will take on—or take out—the national security state, one of them may well substitute a smaller foreign policy for a bigger army. In any event, once Mr. Bush has cleared out, we’ll have a better view of the horizon.

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