Biographical Notes

Andrew Bacevich is a professor of international relations at Boston University, where he runs the Center for International Relations.

Introduction

JOEL ROSENTHAL: We welcome Andrew J. Bacevich to discuss his book, American Empire.

When I think of American empire, I have two images in mind. One of them is etched in memory. I was at an airport in Beijing, stranded there with Professor Chase, on our way to Shanghai. Why we didn’t fly directly to Shanghai I’ll never know, anyway, there we were, waiting for our flight.

We struck up a conversation with a French businessman. We had a nice conversation, and I shared some noodles with him. Toward the end of the conversation, he said, “I have an important business call to make to the United States and I couldn’t remember the country code, at which point James looked at him and said, ‘001. What else could be?’”

The Frenchman was not amused.

But there is another side, which is the other side of the arrogance of power. This dialogue was forwarded to me by a Canadian friend. It’s a transcript of a conversation from Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995. This transcript was released by the U.S. Chief of Naval Operation:

The American: “Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.”

The Canadian: “We recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.”

The American: “This is the captain of a U.S. naval ship. I say again, divert your course.”

The Canadian: “No. I say again divert your course.”

The Americans: “This is the aircraft carrier USS MISSOURI. We are a large warship of the U.S. Navy. Divert your course now!”
The Canadian: “This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

Those are the two images of the empire. There is a bit of levity in both of those stories but especially today and in the wake of what is happening overseas, Andy Bacevich written an extremely important book. This book was published last year and we had occasion to discuss it several times.

Andy is Professor of International Relations at Boston University where he runs the Center for International Relations. He is a West Point graduate, has his Ph.D. from Princeton in American diplomatic history. He writes often. You have probably seen pieces in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and First Things.

Andy, thanks for making the time to come.

Remarks

ANDREW BACEVICH: Thank you very much for inviting me.

To put it mildly, we are living in momentous times. And so rather than spending my twenty-five minutes talking directly about my book, it might make more sense to offer at least one observer’s reflections on the implications of the war in Iraq.

I will do that in a way that does connect to my book. What I will offer you in brief is an addendum to the last chapter of the book. The story I tell, which is a preliminary effort to describe U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War, ends with the conclusion of President Bush’s first year in office. Much has happened just since that is not in my book. So let me reflect on that a little bit.

My book offers an interpretation of what is and invites readers to reflect on what is because, what is is problematic.

The essential point of the book is captured by the title, that we have come to preside over something like a global empire, and it is time for us as citizens to begin to face the implications of that very large fact.

In the 1990s, there was a tendency on the part of American policymakers to employ veiled language, to conceal the extent of American ambitions. To put it bluntly, the people in the policy elite were reluctant to call a spade a spade. A couple of examples.

One, which made a bit of a splash at the time, was then forgotten, but now has been revived and has been written about quite a bit lately, was the controversy surrounding the drafting of the Defense Planning Guidance of 1991 during the Bush I era. That document was drafted by now Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who in 1991 was the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

This document, which was leaked in draft form to The New York Times, said: We’re number one. We won the Cold War. There is only one superpower. This is a circumstance which is not only agreeable, but the perpetuation of this circumstance ought to be the central thrust of U.S. foreign policy from this day onward.

When that hit the press in 1991, the reaction on the part of both politicians and the media was that of shock and horror, that a senior U.S. official should so boldly pro the notion of orienting American grand strategy with an eye toward perpetuating American supremacy.

I dub this in the book “the Wolfowitz indiscretion,” because it taught an important lesson to others in the Bush Administration and to members of the Clinton Administration followed, and that was: we don’t say these things out loud. It is unseemly to talk about the United States trying to perpetuate its supremacy.
A second example that I offer in the book is what I call “Albright’s rule.” Albright’s rule was the creation of Madeleine Albright during her time as Secretary of State.

You may recall the very famous incident when we were gearing up to pummel Sad Hussein in the ineffective way that we did during the Clinton Administration. Albright was. Sandy Berger and William Cohen went to Ohio State University to make an appeal before students “to make the case for war.”

Madeleine Albright didn’t want to call it war. The student reaction was very negative; the Clinton people were getting heckled. At one time, Albright spit out, “We’re not about war; we’re talking about the use of force.” This was very much part of the 1990s. We didn’t like to talk about war.

You may recall the Kosovo war of 1999, a seventy-seven-day bombing campaign, the Clinton Administration never called a war. Albright’s rule said we weren’t supposed to do such things.

Point number one: Both the Wolfowitz indiscretion and Albright’s rule have been repealed. Now, for better or worse, we have begun to say out loud what our intent genuinely are.

In that regard, there is nothing more important than the Bush Administration’s National Security Strategy, which was published last September, available on the White House Web site, a document that makes quite explicit our intention to maintain our global dominance. Wolfowitz’s view is back with the imprimatur of the President of the United States.

The whole notion of “we don’t do war” has also gone by the board. We do make war. Now we marry that to the language of liberation so that our wars are virtuous.

Indeed, when my publisher, Harvard University Press, persuaded me to call my book American Empire, it was with the thought that it would be a catchy title to irritate people. It is remarkable the extent to which words like “empire,” “imperium,” phrases like “Americana,” have now insinuated themselves into public discourse and are no longer controversial.

So the veil has dropped since 9/11. We see it in the war that is going on right now. It is a very important recent development that I would add onto my last chapter we expand it.

Point number two: I would cite the militarization of U.S. foreign policy as a major theme of American empire.

It is remarkable the extent to which the United States came out of the Cold War in an era in which we no longer faced a major threat and that the response was a far greater willingness to use force.

And who paved the way in that tendency? It was the individual who one active duty Air Force General Officer referred to as “that dope-smoking, skirt-chasing, draft-dodging fella who was in the White House in the 1990s,” Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton led the way in removing the barriers with regard to the use of force.

And it’s not just the use of force. It’s the level of U.S. defense spending. Fareed Zakariah had a piece, called “The Arrogant Empire,” in Newsweek recently. By his calculation, the United States spends more on military spending than every other nation in the world combined. I do believe that is historically unprecedented.

The surprising bit is that, for those of us who are Americans, this is utterly uncontroversial. So in the aftermath of the Cold War, the use of force, the maintenance of force, the perpetuation of American military supremacy, have come to be very important themes, and recent events have simply reinforced and reaffirmed that.
Again, I refer you back to the Bush Administration’s National Security Strategy, which strikingly promulgates a doctrine of preventive war and warns explicitly against another nation thinking that it can exercise a similar prerogative. And it’s not just talk action, because the war against Iraq is a preventive war, it is a war of choice. It is war that is forced upon us. It is a war that we have chosen to undertake.

So the militarization of America on foreign policy continues in the period following period covered by my book, so much so that I at least am convinced all the more that the exercise of military power has become the preferred instrument of American power.

Point number three: The exercise of American global leadership. This is one euph that survives.

One expression of American global leadership has been a determination that the United States will maintain a dominant position — hegemony — in any region of the world the United States views as strategically significant.

This is not a recent development. During the course of the nineteenth century the United States determined that having a dominant position in the Western Hemisphere was essential to our well-being and security. By the time 1898 rolls around, we had set that, and maintained it ever since.

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States had decided that a dominant presence in Western Europe and in East Asia were also essential to our well-being, and we devoted a tremendous amount of attention, energy, resources, including a couple of East Asian wars, in an effort to maintain those positions, as we have, down to the present day.

It is among those facts that as Americans we so take for granted that we don’t even notice them. More than a half-century after the end of World War II, when no security threat exists that threatens the well-being of Western Europe, we still maintain 100,000 troops there, without even thinking about it.

The end of the Cold War focused attention on yet another region, the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf War of 1991, the elder President Bush thought that he had secured American hegemony in that strategically important region.

But it turned out during the course of the 1990s that our hold in the Persian Gulf was quite uncertain. We miscalculated the impact of the first Persian Gulf War, and it turned out that Saddam Hussein had survived. It turned out that maintaining a troop presence in the Persian Gulf on a somewhat smaller scale than we did in Asia and in Europe not have the same stabilizing effects. On the contrary, it had a destabilizing effect, the attacks on Khobar Towers, on the American embassies in Africa, on the USS Cole. That is to say, the U.S. presence created a backlash.

All of which ended up setting the stage for the present war, the removal of Saddam Hussein, and I would suggest to you, in all likelihood, the conversion of Iraq into simply a bastion of pro-American sentiment, but a new base for operating American military power, intended to secure hegemony for good now in the Persian Gulf.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has also established at least a foothold in yet another region, Central Asia. Will that result in an effort to maintain hegemony there? Hard to say, but its a development that we ought to continue to watch.

Point number four: I define a strategy of openness, an effort to inculcate norms and values favorable to us as a prerequisite for American security in America, and indeed global prosperity.

Up to 9/11 the Arab world was given a waiver on the notion of adhering to American norms. The basic relationship between ourselves and the Arab nations, particularly those of the Persian Gulf, was that they got security; we guaranteed it. The development of the world got oil. And we both got stability.
In the course, Arab notions of governance were ignored. No longer. The current w really doesn’t end in Baghdad. Baghdad is the first phase in a larger effort, which I Bush Administration is now clearly signaling, intended to fix a problematic part of t world through modernization, liberalization, and openness.

I will give you a dramatic reading, when I talk about this strategy of openness and didn’t apply to the Middle East:

"After 1991, U.S. troops garrisoned the Persian Gulf not to pry the region open to American enterprise and American values, but to prop up the status quo. But only temporarily. In due course, the opportunity to open the Arab world would present itself, for if, as members of the American policy elite insisted with near unanimity, democracy, market principles, and globalization were indeed sweeping the world, then existing regimes in key states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia were living on borrowed time.

"When it became expedient to do so, senior U.S. officials could be expected to unveil all the truths that the White House and the State Department had for many years chosen to soft pedal or ignore, that these regimes were deeply corrupt, denied civil liberties, engaged in wholesale violations of human rights, and resolutely opposed anything even remotely resembling popular rule. That is what we know places like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to be.

"When they went, few members of the American foreign policy establishment would lament their demise. Virtually all would applaud the opening of the region to democratic capitalism that would presumably ensue."

The words that I wrote in 2000 are now coming to pass, and we will hear much a the need of the Saudis and the Egyptians to be more cognizant of human rights.

Point number five: I am not as cynical as you may think based on these remarks. I pretty idealistic, but when it comes to American statecraft, despite all our talk abo American idealism, ideals matter only when they coincide with U.S. interest.

And indeed in the 1990s most of the military interventions undertaken on Bill Clint watch, which were justified as humanitarian interventions -- Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti were driven and shaped by considerations of self-interest.

Today, the first day of the liberation of Baghdad and the Iraqi people has occurred because of our concern for the Iraqi people, but because of American strategic, economic, and political self-interest. That is to say that liberation is real but it’s a b product.

The war to bring down Saddam Hussein is no more motivated by a desire to free t Iraqi people than the war to bring down Hitler was motivated by a determination to those in the death camps. We may wish that that’s why we fought World War II, w wish that the reason we are doing what we are doing in Iraq is to free oppressed p; but it’s simply not the case.

That is to say don’t expect to see Operation Burmese Freedom happen anytime s The people of Burma deserve to be freed, and if one were to take seriously the ide rhetoric of that Bush Administration National Security Strategy, then we ought to b sending our aircraft carriers to Burma next.

Nor will there be any effort to liberate the people of Zimbabwe from the yoke of oppression of Robert Mugabe, nor are we likely to see any regime change anytime in Havana.

Let us celebrate the achievement of American men and women in uniform and the extraordinary military campaign they have fought. Let us celebrate that the people Iraq are indeed free today of a tyrant, and we wish them well. But let’s not allow
ourselves to become intoxicated on the vapors of the idealistic rhetoric that we sp
order to find an idealistic rationale for doing something that we actually do for quit
reasons.

One last point: Today’s events affirm that we will never again be a normal nation. ‘
are many people here roughly my age, and some a little bit older, meaning you an
the Cold War.

When I was a kid growing up in the 1950s, and even in the 1960s, we understood
some vague way that this thing called the Cold War, this danger called communis
ominous threat called the Soviet Union, needed to be addressed and confronted. ‘
there was the notion in the back of my mind that, even though I had no concep
when these problems would go away, when they went away, whenever that was, I
United States would once again become a normal nation. I didn’t even know what
normal meant, but I thought I knew that the exertions of the Cold War were out of
ordinary, and we would revert to a status quo.

When I was a kid in the 1950s, what would the word “Baghdad” have meant to m
would have meant “Arabian Nights,” flying carpets, something so exotic that it wou
utterly alien, the stuff for Disney cartoons.

What would I have thought of the word “Afghanistan,” which clearly I would not ha
be able to identify on a map? In the 1950s Afghanistan would have been for me
same category as a name place, Siberia, Mongolia -- distant, desolate, far away fr
anything that would have to do with me.

Because we have been living through these events, we know how things came to
know what happened yesterday and the day before and the day before, and so w
why we’re in Afghanistan and in Baghdad.

American soldiers invading Baghdad, to stay for how long? American soldiers figh
Afghanistan, a place that if it has any meaning at all, is a place where empires cla:

Now again, in a sense we know how we got here. But step back from it a little bit,
least if you are of my generation, and think about it. You cannot help but be astoni
And you cannot reach any conclusion about what is going on other than that we ai
new Rome, we do preside over a global empire, we do have a militarized foreign f
and there probably is no escape.

Thank you very much.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Thank you, Andy. We’ll take questions now.

Questions & Answers

QUESTION: If your analysis is correct, and it certainly is logical, then the self-inter
the United States would seem to be on an economic basis also relative to Iran, an
perhaps other countries which are in the same category as Cuba or Zimbabwe. Do
foresee the United States’ interest being sufficient to cause us to enter into on our
interest military efforts in those countries?

ANDREW BACEVICH: This is what is going on right now. This Administration is d
divided in many respects. We have the Powell camp and the Wolfowitz camp, des
his being number two in defense, but in recognition of his being intellectually the d
force of what I would label the imperialists.

Powell -- much more cautionary in his views, or cautious -- lost this round totally. F
is the good soldier and he continued to serve his President. But having lost the fir
round doesn't mean that all subsequent rounds are lost.

The imperialists wanted to go get Saddam for a whole variety of reasons, but ultim
because the imperialist strategy, the strategy of cementing American hegemony ir
Persian Gulf, pursued not for any sordid, cynical reasons, like oil in particular, but pursued because they are determined to ensure that 9/11 doesn’t happen again.

For people in the imperial camp, the two big numbers to emerge from 9/11 are fifteen and nineteen -- there were nineteen hijackers; fifteen of them came from Saudi Arabia. That is to say that the key fact is that conditions in that part of the world bring people who hate the U.S. and are willing to die in order to kill us.

And so the strategy aims to bring about the transformation of this region, to remove these conditions, again to open it up to inculcate our norms so that terror won’t come from them.

Iraq is step number one. Wolfowitz, and others, for example, have said, “We intend make Iraq the first functioning Arab democracy.” There is consensus in the Administration on that score.

Where there is not consensus is: how do we get to steps two, three, four, five, and because those do require opening up Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Iran?

The methods that are deployed will depend upon the particular case. Certainly, the optimistic scenario is that when the people of other Arab nations and those in Iran that Iraq prospers, Iraq is democratic, Iraq is free, that that will encourage liberal tendencies from the bottom up in these other societies, which will force repressive leaders to adapt, change. That is a nice thought. I am not optimistic.

The pessimistic scenario says that the leadership resists the requirement to change perhaps the leadership crushes the forces that are advocating change from within which would provide an opportunity to do what? To declare our solidarity with the of -- fill in the blank -- and to use our superior military power.

I am working on an Op-Ed “Operation ‘insert Name Here’ Freedom,” because that we’re engaged in.

QUESTION: You talked about what has led to the increasing use of force since the Cold War and you laid most of it at the door of the Clinton Administration. What you think about the first Persian Gulf War being a major reason that has led to increased use of force? It demonstrated a much lower cost of using our military.

ANDREW BACEVICH: You are correct. And indeed, in the book I did say just that this tries to tell the story of U.S. foreign policy from 1990 to 2001. And yes, I try to give credit to the elder Bush, who launched us into -- what was the first, long-forgotten episode of the post-Cold War era?

VOICE: Panama.

ANDREW BACEVICH: Panama. Somebody didn’t forget. Very interesting reassert American dominance in this hemisphere.

But yes, that was then followed by the Persian Gulf War. And certainly, what seen be the enormous success of Desert Storm encouraged tendencies, including tend on the Left, to now believe that force had become much more useful. Bush the elder was certainly correct in arguing that “now we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome” as result of that.

I say “seemed like a great victory” because, in retrospect most observers would ar that Desert Strom was a deeply flawed victory that has probably led us down a path got us where we are today, and it has been a bloody path and may well be a bloody one still.

QUESTION: It’s hard to argue with the facts that you have laid out. But what make a little bit skeptical is that it ignores some of the changes that have happened since Cold War ended in other parts of the world, which suggest that not everybody is a
to submit to our definition of empire as they may have been a hundred years ago by Britain or others.

And added to that is the question of whether this concept of an American empire is directly related to Bush II, which raises the question: will it last past the current administration? How deep is this and how long can the number of other organizations and coalitions that are out there in the world survive?

**ANDREW BACEVICH:** It is certainly a major theme of my book, which you will have to either be persuaded or not, to argue that there is far more continuity than discontinuity between administrations, that, to pick on *Time* magazine, for all kinds of good reasons, want to argue difference and discontinuity. And it’s not that that’s illegitimate and it’s not that that’s not illuminating to a degree.

But my argument is that that doesn’t tell the story. The real story of U.S. foreign policy comes in seeing the extent to which liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, by and large think alike, talk alike, and act alike.

One of the reasons that it’s important to say “we’re an empire, face up to it,” is because it ain’t gonna come for free. We see that in the events that are now unfolding.

And you are certainly correct, that if we wield our power in a way that comes across arrogant, that does not take into account the concerns and needs of those groups view as part of our empire, the result will be to increase the likelihood of opposition is the problem with “old Europe” today.

How is it that we became the hegemon in Western Europe? How did we come to be a nation that says “we are the leading European power?” We’re not even in Europe.

That came about as a result of World War II, but it came about in the aftermath of World War II because the Europeans wanted it. Somebody has written a book called *Em by Invitation*. The French, the Brits, the Germans wanted us there, they wanted us as the guarantor of their security.

And the American empire in Europe produced what? It certainly strongly contributed to the emergence of a Europe today that is peaceful, affluent, and democratic. And it is good.

We get to the end of the Cold War, and, even in Paris, European statesmen’s calculation was: “There’s only one superpower left. What kind of world will that be?”

They concluded that it was a world that they could live with, an expectation that at they would be able to nudge the Americans, or perhaps restrain the Americans, from time to time, and that Americans shared their views and were sensible people, an a world in which America was the sole superpower would be a world good for Europe too.

The events since 9/11 have now called that into question. It hasn’t made them change their mind, but what they see now is a nation which, again, has committed itself to the doctrine of preventive war. President Bush is genuinely persuaded that that doctrine is in the interest of the U.S., but it scares the bejesus out of the Europeans.

And we now have shown that with regard to the United Nations Security Council. I don’t care what the Security Council says. When we see a requirement to use force major way, we’re going to do it.

There are those who argue that the European response will be, given their affluence given the size of the population, the emergence of a counterweight. I am skeptical that because they haven’t figured out what language their army is going to speak, manifestly do not have the will to spend sufficient money on defense to create any of a counterweight, and they’re not even procreating at a sufficient rate to have enough young people to be in an army. There are huge dilemmas, given the kind of societ...
have become.

But they are deeply frightened and trying to figure out whether they are willing to live in a world in which there is one superpower that calls the shots.

**QUESTION**: What keeps you from being a prescriptive realist? Do you see a justifiably and also politically feasible alternative to this hegemonic picture? What might that look like? Many think that the war represents the effective elimination of any kind of cosmopolitan alternative to a hegemonic governance.

**ANDREW BACEVICH**: Why am I not prescriptive? The answer is because I can't answer this question. I am an idealist in that I believe in this republic. I love America. I am enamored with the vision of the founders of this republic, who set out to create something that was new and special, and some of what was going to be special about America was that this would be a place in which war and military power and politics and dominion -- all those things that were plagues in the old world -- would not exist here in the new world.

It makes me very sad that as a people we have lost sight of that and are becoming something that would appall the founders.

Having said that, I have no idea how, having mounted this tiger, we can now simply say "let's get off." So although my heart says I wish that we could not be an imperial power, my head says we're stuck with it, which means that we have to try to address some difficult questions, and not let the people in Washington telling us what the answers to those questions are.

For example, I was a serving officer for twenty-three years. I don't know what you think of the American military today. It's obviously immensely capable. There is nothing like it in the world. It's also a professional military. It is a military which is increasingly detached from American people. We'll send them over there and we'll applaud them, but we don't expect our hands dirty.

This is a remarkable abandonment of a tradition of citizen soldiering that was part of who we were. Is it a good thing to have a professional army? Maybe it's necessary if you're going to govern an empire.

On the other hand, we once thought that a standing army was a threat to liberty. Can it be the case now? Are you confident that it's not? Would it surprise you to know that the officer corps is now significantly politicized and defines itself as conservative if a leader votes Republican? Is that good or is that bad? I'm a conservative, but I don't think it's good that an officer corps has a political point of view.

So these are things we need to think about. How can we assure that American power has to take moral considerations into account? Self-interest says that when you govern an empire you have to take moral considerations into account or the natives get restless. How do we do that, given our reluctance to spend our resources for purposes of development? That is a very clear part of who we are as a people today.

The defense budget is up near $400 billion a year. But if somebody says, "Let's spend money to fix the problems of the world," it's "Oh no, that's a black hole, that's foreign policy." We need to revisit those issues.

**JOEL ROSENTHAL**: On the point of realism and idealism, I want to give the floor to James Chase. We have had a ten-year conversation on this very topic, as idealist and realists. Can you help us out, James?

**QUESTION**: I am very much a believer that the empire is here to stay and that we have to therefore deal with this reality.

If that is so, I would push you a little further on internationalism and our relationship with traditional allies. In the past, when we have had arguments with the allies -- o
Pershing missiles, for example -- they have always been patched over.

I’m wondering if this isn’t different. This is not a question of a strain. Tony Blair ma he is going to be a bridge, but I don’t think so.

How far do you think this will go? Do you think there is a way back?

ANDREW BACEVICH: I hope there is. I don’t know if Tony Blair is a bridge, but it seem to me that that’s the crucial relationship.

We are all the more impressed that the special relationship with Great Britain is something that is vital to us. Therefore, if Tony Blair says, “I need help on making occupation look like a UN operation,” it is very much in our interest to be forthcomi because the breakdown could be irretrievable with Europe.

The only reason that I am not certain there is a breakdown is because Europe’s ct from Europe’s perspective are lousy. If they are no part of the empire, albeit no wil part, then what are they? And how much will it cost them, and are they willing to g six-week-long vacations in Morocco in order to pay the cost of being, shaping, cre European power?

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Thank you very much.