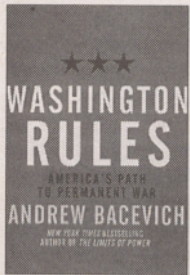


USA: United Saviors for All, whether they want it or not



Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War
By Andrew Bacevich

BY THOMAS VINCENT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After reading a few chapters of "Washington Rules," it might seem mystifying why its author is not more of a rising star in Washington politics. Andrew Bacevich is so knowledgeable about his topic — history and political science — so analytically solid in his reasoning and so articulate, it seems a wonder that he has not been tapped by some administration or other to serve as a foreign policy advisor or even an assistant cabinet official. After finishing the book, however, the mystery resolves itself. The reason Bacevich remains a lowly college professor is because he persists in exposing troublesome, inconvenient facts that few in Washington even want to acknowledge, much less discuss seriously.

For example, in commenting on President Barack Obama's choice of advisors, the author writes: "By retaining Robert Gates as defense secretary and by appointing retired four-star officers as his national security adviser and intelligence director, Obama had already offered Washington assurances that he was not contemplating a radical departure from the existing pattern of national security policy." Furthermore, "Obama wanted it known that by sending tens of thousands of additional troops to fight in Afghanistan his own administration was carrying on the work his predecessors had begun. Their policies were his policies."

The crux of the book is the author's cogent observation that since the end of World War II, United States foreign policy has adhered to a rigid and orthodox set of principles — what he calls the "Washington Rules." When it comes to international politics, Bacevich asserts, the American government has largely held firm to a credo that "summons the United States — and the United States alone — to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world." Most importantly, adherence to this credo has remained inviolate regardless of which party has been in power.

According to Bacevich, this belief has resulted in a "sacred trinity" of strategy

initiatives that "require 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." In other words, not only do those in power feel it is America's job to be the world's police force, it is our manifest destiny to have the world's biggest S.W.A.T. team.

Bacevich supports his thesis with copious examples from recent history. From covert C.I.A. operations such as the 1953 coup d'état that removed Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, to the Cold War, the Vietnam War, three wars in the Middle East and now to today's saber rattling over attacking Iran. The author makes a strong case that, even under supposedly moderate presidents such as Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, U. S. foreign policy has been an uninterrupted one — one of less butter and more guns — lots more guns.

As the author points out, even today this credo is ever-present in the American politics. "It permeates speeches, state papers, and official ceremonies. ... Mainstream Republicans and mainstream Democrats are equally devoted to this catechism of American statecraft." Bacevich follows this observation with a typically acerbic aside: "Little empirical evidence exists to demonstrate (the creed's) validity, but no matter: When it comes to matters of faith, proof is unnecessary."

As an historian, the author isn't interested in pointing fingers and assigning blame, however. The book devotes few pages to expounding on whether this president blundered or that one succeeded. Instead, "Rules" seeks to illustrate the surprising degree to which power elites in Washington have given unquestioning support for a militaristic, interventionist foreign policy despite the almost complete lack of evidence that the policy even comes close to its stated objective: namely, to keep the United States and the world safe.

If the book has one flaw, it is that after spending 250 pages raising questions as to the efficacy and validity of the "Washington

Rules," here's the most forceful call to arms Bacevich can muster: "If change is going to come, it must come from the people. Yet unless Americans finally awakened to the fact that they've been had, Washington will continue to have its way." Compare that to Thomas Paine's: "These are the times that try men's souls," and it is clear that Bacevich, while a well-spoken historian, is no great orator.

That minor criticism aside, "Rules" is a fascinating book and definitely a worthwhile investment for anyone interested in foreign policy, history, warfare, economics or any other area related to government. It is easy to read, well researched and raises tons of awkward questions about the direction this country is headed. It begs answers from those in the halls of power.

Last year, President Barack Obama invited nine prominent historians to dinner at the White House. It was billed as an opportunity for them to tell him how they thought he was doing and what he might do differently. After reading Bacevich's book, I think it a crime the Boston University professor was not one of those invited. Not that he was exactly waiting by the phone for the president to call. As the author notes somewhat philosophically, "Although nonconformists always exist, they rarely matter — a dictum that applies to American statecraft no less than to theology or any other pursuit that rests on faith rather than empirical evidence."

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