

● A multipolar world order is emerging, and the United States will exercise only limited influence over its character. The big question is whether in the creation and management of this multipolar order we, humankind, will be able to avoid the misjudgments that made the 20th century such a human catastrophe.

● Basic tenets of prevailing U.S. national security policy—maintaining a global military presence, designing our forces not for defense but for projecting power, and global interventionism—are contributing to global instability and the squandering of American power and treasure. As a result, in all likelihood, the dangers we face are increasing.

● Collectively, the American people appear to have accepted war as a normal condition and consider it as not unusual or even objectionable. The “cult of the soldier” that has emerged allows citizens to express heartfelt regard for those who serve—but at the same time can relieve us of any further obligation to consider deeply the cost of war and its consequences.

● Roughly .05 percent of us are doing the fighting and dying; 99.5 percent of us are not. And we are not paying for the cost of the wars being conducted in our name. Our taxes have not gone up to cover the annual \$120 billion cost of the wars, and we’re not insisting that they do. The civic failure of American citizens is clear.

Confronting the Problem of American Decline

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One of the defining realities of the 21st century is that a multipolar world order is emerging, and the United States can exercise only limited influence over the character of this new order. Andrew Bacevich, retired U.S. Army Colonel and professor of International Relations and History at Boston University, describes two challenges our nation faces, both concerning the allocation of resources. The first is temporal, and stems from our spending too large a portion of our treasure on immediate requirements such as war and entitlement programs, and not investing enough in areas such as education, research and infrastructure. The second misallocation of resources is a result of national security policy that supports pursuits around the globe that provide inadequate returns here at home. Bacevich critiques what he calls our “sacred trinity” of national security policy, and offers his impressions drawn from a decade of the so-called war on terrorism. He notes that collectively, Americans appear to have become enamored of military power and accept war as a normal condition. He describes a “cult of the soldier” that allows citizens to express heartfelt regard for those who serve—but at the same time can relieve us of any further obligation to consider deeply the cost of war and its consequences. Excerpts of Bacevich’s remarks at the Forum’s 2011 Aspen Symposium are reprinted here.

I can’t remember who came up with the title of my talk today: “Confronting the Problem of American Decline.” In any case, I’m not going to talk about American decline, because the whole notion of American decline has such a toxic aspect to it. The response to that is, “What, are you a communist? Are you an isolationist? Don’t you believe in this country?”

It’s very difficult to render a judgment about whether or not the country is in decline. I also think, more to the point, it’s probably irrelevant and not worth wasting the energy to come to a conclusion about whether the country is in decline. I would argue that the real issue is as follows: That events since the end of the Cold War have demonstrated that the expectation widely held in Washington, and among what we might

call the governing class, is that the end of the Cold War began a period in which a unipolar order governed by the United States would, in effect, define the principal international reality.

We now know emphatically that that’s not going to happen. Rather, it appears that a multipolar world order is emerging, and that this multipolar order will be one of the defining realities of the 21st century. We could probably spend an hour or two having a discussion about which countries would be the principals in this multipolar order... yes, China, of course; yes, India, probably; Europe, well, playing what kind of role? Will we see a resurgence of Russia? Will Brazil make it into the top tier? It would be an interesting conversation, but I’m not sure it’s a conversation that would yield all that much. The

key point is that there is going to be, in all likelihood, a multipolar order and not a unipolar order.

The big question that emerges from that prospect is this: In the creation and the management of this multipolar order, will we—meaning humankind—be able to avoid the misjudgments that made the 20th century such a catastrophe? The last time we had a multipolar order, a world order consisting of multiple states, the efforts made to create some kind of stable, peaceful order failed. The consequence of that failure was two world wars and then the Cold War. Will we be able to avoid the mistakes of the 20th century?

I'd say that the events of the recent past—and whether you call the recent past since 9/11 or whether you call the recent past the last week—ought to require us as Americans to acknowledge this important reality: that the United States itself as an independent actor will in fact exercise only limited influence over the character of that emerging order.

Yet even today, after Iraq, and in the midst of the so-called Arab uprising, American policymakers and analysts who move in policymaking circles can be heard to speak of the need to “manage” the rise of China. Just imagine for a couple of minutes if some Chinese policymaker made a public speech talking about China's responsibility to “manage” the decline of the United States of America. How would that go over? But policymakers in Washington talk about the need for the United States to “manage” the rise of China, and to “shape” the course of the Arab world in its process of transition. Remember too that within the last decade, otherwise intelligent people asserted that the United States had the capacity and indeed the obligation to “transform” the Islamic world.

All of this language—“manage,” “shape,” “transform”—when directed toward the world beyond our borders, is to my mind misguided and indeed dangerous. We will do well, we Americans, if we can manage, shape and transform the United States. Indeed, whether or not we are able to make a useful contribution to the creation of a stable multipolar order in the 21st century will depend in part on our ability to manage, shape and transform ourselves.

In that regard, it seems to me that the principal challenges are two in number. Both of them relate to what I would call the allocation of resources. I grew up in the Midwest, and I live in New England. I love New England, and I don't come out west all that often. But unfailingly, when I go west, and I'm flying at 30,000 feet and looking out the window and taking in the vastness of this country that we basically stole, seized and connived to bring under our control, I cannot help but simply be impressed by its size. The resources that we have available to us may be limited, but they are great. Alas, we're misusing those resources.

Challenge number one is found in what we might call the *temporal axis*. Simply put, we're devoting too large a portion of our treasure to servicing immediate requirements and putting too little toward addressing future requirements. Or to put it another way, war spending and Medicare and Social Security are eating our lunch while investment in education, research and basic infrastructure is lagging far behind. I haven't told you anything that you don't already know.

Challenge number two is found in what we might call the *spatial axis*. Simply put, we are devoting very large sums of money in the pursuit of foreign or, indeed, I would call them imperial pursuits, while doing so provides inadequate returns here at home. One very specific manifestation of this misallocation of effort is found in reigning conceptions of national security policy. That this national security concept privileges so-called hard power over soft power is self-evident. Indeed, whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, based on what we actually do collectively—not necessarily the way you as an individual think, but the way we behave collectively—we are a people who have become enamored with military power.

The Sacred Trinity of National Security Habits

The terms that we employ for deploying and using our military power are deeply counterproductive. What I want to describe for you is a set of habits that has evolved over the decades since World War II, which have come to constitute the signature of U.S. national security policy. Again, what I'm about to tell you, you already know. This is one of those big truths hidden in plain sight. Then when you finally look at them, you say, holy cow.

With regard to U.S. national security policy, in my most recent book, I called the big truths the “sacred trinity habits.” The sacred trinity consists of the following: First, the claim that the United States and the United States alone needs to maintain a global military presence. I'm not using “global” here in any hyperbolic sense. We slice up the globe into different chunks, and we create headquarters that are responsible for policing those chunks of the globe. We put a four-star general or admiral in charge of it.

The second habit of the sacred trinity is that the United States—and, again, I emphasize, the United States alone—configures its forces not chiefly with an eye toward defending the country. Rather we design our forces in order to provide instruments of power projection. I don't know if you've ever had a chance to visit Fort Hood in Texas. It's one of the most famous U.S. Army posts in the country, and has the biggest concentration of armored vehicles in the world—tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, and self-propelled artillery pieces. If you look up the word “fort” in the dictionary, the definition

will be something like, a fortified place that exists to defend its local environs. Fort Hood doesn't exist to defend Texas. Fort Hood exists to provide a reservoir of combat power that the president of the United States can decide he wants to send off to Iraq or Afghanistan or wherever else. Everything they do at Ft. Hood—training, contingency planning, preparation—is geared toward the prospect that they will be called upon at short notice to go off to some place like Iraq or Afghanistan or Yemen or wherever. That's what the United States does.

The third habit of the sacred trinity is that, again, the United States alone marries together its global military presence and global power projection capabilities to support and sustain policies of global interventionism. Again, I am not telling you anything that you don't already know. That's what we do. That's what we've been doing since 1945. My own considered judgment would be that there may well have been a time when this sacred trinity, along with some other policies, actually kind of worked, when adhering to these habits actually contributed to the safety and well-being of the American people and served to enhance American power.

The problem is that that's no longer the case and probably hasn't been the case for decades. Indeed, I think you can make a strong argument that insistence to adhering to this sacred trinity now, in fact, is contributing to global instability, leading to the squandering of American power, and probably increasing the dangers that we face.

Impressions After a Decade of War

We've been at war for nearly a decade now. Even that—"we have been at war"—is a problematic phrase. *Some* parts of the country, *some* of our fellow citizens, have been at war. What has that decade of conflict produced? That's a question that seems to garner remarkably little attention in Washington, D.C.

Briefly, I'd tick off four important lessons, or impressions, that we could draw from almost a decade of combat.

Impression number one. Fact number one, actually: We're making enormous expenditures with remarkably little return. Defense spending in the United States today is higher in real terms than at any time during the Cold War, or during the Korean or Vietnam wars. The United States is spending roughly as much on our military alone as the rest of the world spends on all of the rest of the militaries combined.

There is considerable argument about how much our wars are costing. Joseph Stiglitz and his collaborator Linda Bilmes

have calculated that the Iraq war, by the time all the bills are paid—meaning when the last veteran is getting his or her last treatment for PTSD—it's probably going to cost something on the order of \$6 trillion. Throw in another trillion or two trillion dollars for Afghanistan.

Second impression: A widespread acceptance, on the part of the American people, that war is a normal condition, that war is not unusual or abnormal or even objectionable. With certain exceptions—a minority of people who carry signs and protest—it's just something that, collectively, the majority of us simply accept as part of everyday normal life.

Third impression, probably something that I'm more acutely aware of as a former officer, particularly a former officer of the Vietnam era: We've seen the collapse of a post-Vietnam military reform effort that attempted to construct a model of what we might call "decision-oriented warfare." My generation of officers came away from Vietnam saying we don't want to do that again; we came away from Vietnam saying that we wanted to reconstitute the military profession in order to try to redeem ourselves in the eyes of a people who had lost confidence in the officer corps. That project led to a whole host of reforms and a concept of warfare premised on expectations that U.S. forces could sally forth, take on the enemy, defeat the enemy in a timely way, and produce a meaningful and affordable political outcome called victory.

Well, after 10 years of war, that model has now collapsed. There's no question the U.S. military knows how to fight. I think there's no question that the U.S. military knows how to fight better than anybody else knows how to fight. There's also no question that the U.S. military doesn't know how to win. We can start wars, but we don't know how to end them.

Secretary Gates recently finished his final and 12th visit to Afghanistan. He was talking to the troops, speaking off the cuff to some soldiers. He said something along the lines of, if you guys and everybody keep the pressure on, we can hang onto everything we've gained over the last year to 18 months. We can expand the security bubble. Then he said he sees the potential, toward the end of the year, of the Taliban being on their back foot, and maybe their being willing to open reconciliation talks on terms acceptable to us and to the Afghan government becomes a greater possibility.

Now, we've been at this war for 10 years. It is currently costing something on the order of \$120 billion per year. And there's a *possibility* that by the end of the year we may have the Taliban on their back foot, and then we can have reconciliation



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talks with them. Is it unfair to ask if we're getting our money's worth? But that's what we're left with in terms of expectations of outcomes once we no longer know how to win.

Finally, my fourth impression is something that's gaining some traction, but that deserves a lot more attention, and that's the emergence of what I'd call a cult of the soldier. That cult allows citizens to express their warm regard and affection—heartfelt, I think—for those who serve. It allows them to do so in a way that is emotionally satisfying. It really makes



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me feel good when I go to Mass on Sunday and we always remember to pray for the troops. It's emotionally satisfying, while at the same time, in effect, it relieves us as citizens of any real obligation to attend to what it is they are being asked to do, at what cost and with what consequences. Because, hell, we all support the troops, don't we?

Conclusion

Continued adherence to this paradigm, this sacred trinity I've described, is contributing to instability, especially in the greater Middle East. And while it's not the sole explanation, it's also obviously contributing to our economic problems. Yet, despite the failures and disappointments of the past decade, this sacred trinity for all practical purposes remains untouched and intact in Washington.

Except for people on the far left, like Dennis Kucinich, or on the far right, like Ron Paul—two individuals, by the way, who for all practical purposes, are treated as unserious—there is very little evidence of willingness to engage in a critical reassessment of this basic approach to national security policy.

Granted, the obstacles to promoting a real debate are considerable. Few politicians, including our president, are willing to risk the charge of being weak on national defense. And few Americans are willing to take a stance in which they will open themselves to the charge of failing to support the troops—especially if that might actually entail some obligations.

One aspect the relationship between the armed forces and American society that tends to capture attention

is, who's doing the fighting and dying? The answer is, it's roughly 0.5 percent of us, while the other 99.5 percent of us are not. And there's another angle to come in at this, that is, who's paying for these wars that are being conducted in our name? Again the answer is not us. Our taxes have not gone up to cover the annual \$120 billion cost. We're not insisting that our taxes should go up. So the civic failure, it seems to me, is twofold.

It's difficult to promote a debate about these things because the status quo more or less prevails by default. No doubt a different approach to national security policy will not, in and of itself, ensure that the United States can play a useful role in facilitating the emergence of a stable, 21st century multipolar order—yet. Absent a different approach to national security, however, the prospects of that multipolar stability are reduced and the possibility of real U.S. decline is increased. Further, the national security establishment itself—and, more broadly, policymakers in Washington—are ill-equipped to provide the necessary critique and reassessment. Why? Because they benefit from the status quo.

What does this have to do with the academy? It seems to me that there is a great opportunity for the academy to undertake an effort to promote that debate. In a very self-serving way, I might say that that could be done by providing a larger space for security studies, military history, and the like in your curricula. Military history and the history discipline, of which I am a member, is not particularly well thought of at the present moment. I think there could be other ways to take that on as well. I encourage you to think about that and hope that you can become part of an effort to bring that much-needed critical assessment about.

Discussion

Q: To what extent do you think the shift to an all-volunteer military is what really has made what you described possible?

Mr. Bacevich: It's a great irony, I think. Many of you know the history. The conscription system basically had collapsed by the latter part of the Vietnam War. It had become one of the real drivers of protest. When Richard Nixon became president, with his "secret" plan to end the war, what he really wanted to do was to buy time in order to implement his Vietnamization program. In order to buy time he made the decision to end conscription and move to an all-volunteer force. Let me emphasize that this decision back around 1971 was not driven by any consideration of what was best for the country. It was driven by a cynical and calculating politician who thought, how can I get BU students off the streets and back in the classroom?

Nixon made that decision over the objections of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who, understandably given the climate

of the times, had real doubts about their ability to attract sufficient numbers of capable young people who would want to join of their own volition. It was Nixon who made the decision.

The all-volunteer force had some rough times early on. It was difficult to fill the force with able people. By the time we got to the 1980s, though, it began to turn around. I think it turned around in part because of tough economic times in the 1970s. It turned around, too, because in some ways there was a cultural shift that more or less coincided with the election of Ronald Reagan that began to create a different perspective on service and soldiers.

By the time we got to 1991—Operation Desert Storm, the war we thought we won—the American people had concluded that the all-volunteer force was the greatest federal innovation since the self-adhesive postage stamp. In 1991, we had the greatest army ever seen by mankind. It seemingly won wars at a very low cost, with few casualties. And the Germans, the Japanese, and the Saudis all paid for it. What more could we want? We, the people, applauded and it doesn't cost us anything.

And so in the 1990s, I think we really did have a consensus that the all-volunteer force was a good thing. The senior military leadership had also bought into the notion that long-service regulars are to be preferred far more than poorly motivated conscripts.

Fast forward to 9/11 and the so-called global war on terror, and suddenly it doesn't look that way. One problem with the all-volunteer force is, unlike the conscript force, you can't just spin the dial and make the force bigger. You can't just increase your draft calls, the way they were increased in 1950 or 1965-66. And when the global war on terror became a bigger and longer war than anybody expected, we ended up with too much war and not enough warriors. That opened the door to the whole private security firm/mercenary phenomenon, which doesn't work and costs a lot of money.

Further, the people who don't like the global war on terror, who in particular didn't like the notion of the United States invading Iraq, found out that we the people don't own the Army any longer. It was President Bush's Army, and he was going to do anything he damn well pleased with it. I do think that today there are some reservations about whether or not the all-volunteer force still makes sense.

BU has all three ROTC programs—Army, Navy and Marine Corps, and Air Force. We commission about a dozen to 15 students in each of those programs every spring. The kids are well-respected, I think, and well-regarded. Once a week they wear uniforms to work, and it's not controversial in any way. But this is a generation that values choice: If you want to go

join the Marine Corps, god bless you, have a good time. If I don't want to go join the Marine Corps, that's OK too, right?

I also have a sense that the parents of these kids are not keen on conscription. While to some degree us oldsters might look back on that part of the American military experience and wonder if we have lost something, I think politically and culturally it's just not in the cards—we're not going to get there. And therefore we need to be more creative about finding ways to address the issue.

There was a piece in *Time* recently, in which Admiral Mullen, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was interviewed. It's always good to interview these guys right before retirement because they finally say something. Basically what Mullen said is, if the gap between the American military and American people becomes any wider, the consequences will be catastrophic. That's the word he used, "catastrophic." He's right, but he hasn't done anything to close that gap. But the gap is real, and the gap is problematic.

Q: You mentioned that the military doesn't know how to end the war. I guess they're trying to win the war and they're leaving or withdrawing, which seems like the same thing to us. Do you think the inability to clearly win the war is a military failure, or is it political?

Mr. Bacevich: I don't know that I'd separate the two. I think one should be very wary of drawing sharp lines between politics and war. Clausewitz's famous dictum is correct: War is a continuation of politics by other means. And I think there's plenty of blame to be shared by both the generals and the civilian decision-makers.

To my mind, American generalship over the past 10 years or so has been indifferent at best. To some degree, we have a cult of Petraeus to go along with the cult of the soldier. I think the cult of Petraeus distracts attention from the extent to which the senior military leadership, carefully selected and developed at great cost to the American taxpayer, has not shown any particularly astute understanding of the conflicts in which we've become involved.

When I say we don't know how to win, believe me, I'm not trying to say, why don't they just ask me and I'll give them the four-step recipe for victory. I think the Afghanistan War is unwinnable in any military sense. And beyond that, I think the Afghanistan War is unnecessary and ill-advised. To some degree, the original sin of this period of history we are living through was President Bush's decision in the immediate wake of 9/11 to declare that open-ended global war was the appropriate response to this anti-Western, violent jihadism that we call terrorism.

Global war, or even simply war, was not the correct way to go—I can say that now, but there were also people who

were saying that in 2001. Despite the magnitude of the atrocity that happened on 9/11, we're never going to expunge terrorism—which is merely a tactic. War was not the appropriate approach to dealing with this threat. Instead, treating it as an international criminal conspiracy, where the appropriate response would have been a well-resourced, ruthless and intensive international police effort, would have probably gotten us further, at far less cost, than we've gotten today.

Q: You indicated that the draft was one of the sources of some of the hurt of the Vietnam War. When people hurt enough they were angry. The draft is not likely to come back. So how about the second factor you talked about, which is that we haven't had to pay for the wars we're waging. If we had something that required that we pay for war, that could get people's attention.

Mr. Bacevich: You bet it would. Let's tell seniors, for example, that we're going to decrement their Social Security by 10 percent so that our young men and women in uniform will be able to continue to fight the fight in Afghanistan. What would be the impact on support for the Afghanistan War?

Q: Or do it on the other side, and have an absolute requirement that revenues need to increase to pay for war.

Mr. Bacevich: I'm for it. And I have to say that frankly, I don't think my cynicism about the Congress is out of the mainstream. There is not a chance in hell that a majority of the members in either house would sign on to that proposition, especially during election season. I may very well be mistaken, but to my recollection, the last presidential candidate who actually articulated a case for raising taxes was Walter Mondale in 1984. I think the specific proposal was a 50 cent increase in taxes on a gallon of gas. He was hooted out of town.

Q: Do you think we may be at a pivotal moment with the end of "don't ask, don't tell" and the very visible acceptance of ROTC back onto a number of prominent campuses?

Mr. Bacevich: I do. That has not been my issue, but it's clearly been huge, to some degree symbolic, but certainly to some degree substantive. I think it will help remove obstacles to initiating programs that would encourage the kind of discussions that we need to be having on campuses.

There's a program at Tufts called ALLIES, out of the Institute for Global Leadership there that Sherman Teichman directs. The purpose of that program is to encourage conversations between civilian students and service academy cadets. They have service academy cadets go to Tufts every year for a seminar, where I've spoken. A student at BU approached me

last spring; she wants to start an ALLIES chapter at BU, which probably would be a good thing.

These sorts of programs don't have an agenda in the sense that anybody is trying to militarize or civilianize, but instead are based on a genuine conviction that an absence of exchange of ideas is bad for the country. People are attempting to find ways to bring the academy into contact with those who serve.

Q: I'm a Navy reservist, and I've had students who were veterans in my classes. My impression, from my own experience with my students, is that colleges and universities aren't particularly good at dealing with issues that current students, faculty and staff who are called to service or returning from service face, such as helping to diagnose their problems, or helping to streamline their transitions. It is a very challenging time for the families. So, in addition to having seminars and cadets and veterans coming to campus, one good place to start would be with your own students who come back Iraq or Afghanistan.

Mr. Bacevich: Right. I believe, at BU, we're somewhere in the vicinity of around 260 undergraduates who are veterans. That's not a trivial number. I've been encouraging a former Marine who's in one of my classes to organize a veterans' club. We've got clubs at BU for everything, you name it. But we've got this particular subset of the population—not that I would want them to be segregated—that has shared an important common experience. If they had an opportunity or were encouraged to get together, they could probably help one another in whatever process of adjustment they were trying to deal with. You may not be able to do that if you only have two or three or four veterans on your campus, but at some point, probably some sort of organization like that could serve a useful purpose.

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