Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy*
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INSTRUMENTS OF EMPIRE

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, conventional accounts of the worldwide expansion of American power since the outbreak of the Pacific War have been in some disarray. The standard version of US power-projection abroad has held that it was called forth by the overriding need, first to liberate Europe and Japan from Fascism, and then to protect democracies everywhere from the USSR and Communism. Logically, then, once the Free World was no longer threatened either by Fascism or Communism, the global operations of the American state ought to have been scaled back. But in fact they have extended yet further, into regions of the earth of which few in Washington had ever dreamed. As the ideological fog of the Cold War cleared, what was revealed was a special kind of imperial state with huge military and civil bureaucracies, flanked by massive business organizations, jutting out into large zones of Eurasia, South America and other parts of the world. How was this to be explained?

Through much of the 90s, the new landscape was still in part obscured by the vapours of 'globalization', propagated by sociologists and speechwriters of the Western establishment. Since the turn of the century, however, it has become more difficult to ignore, and there is now a growing volume of literature seeking to address it. In this field, *American Empire* strikes a singularly refreshing note. The historian who has written it, Andrew Bacevich, is a former military officer, whose voice retains something of his army background: his picture on the dust-jacket suggests a more amiable and good-looking version of Oliver North. But there is nothing barracks-like about his prose. *American Empire* is a tonic to read: crisp, vivid, pungent, with a dry sense of humour and sharp sense of hypocrisies. Bacevich is a conservative, who explains that he believed in the justice of America's war against Communism, and continues to do so, but once it was over came to the conclusion that US expansionism both preceded and exceeded the logic of the Cold War, and needed to be understood in a longer, more continuous historical *durée*.

The search for an intellectual perspective that could grasp the dynamics of imperial power led this Army colonel to cross political tracks and find answers in two bodies of work associated, in different contexts, with the American Left—the writings of Charles Beard, in the inter-war years, and William Appleman Williams, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Both these historians had insisted that the United States, contrary to official liberal mythology, was an expansionist power—not drawn to generous actions abroad by lofty internationalist ideals, but driven towards ceaseless diplomatic and military interventions across the world by forces deeply rooted within American society at home. In the 1920s Beard, already famous for his economic interpretations of the Constitution and the Civil War, turned his attention to US foreign policy, and concluded—consistently with the general focus of his work—that 'as the domestic market was saturated and capital heaped up for investment, the pressure for the expansion of the American commercial empire rose with corresponding speed'. Fearing the consequences of this dynamic, Beard advocated an alternative route of development, much in the spirit of Hobson in England: the better way forward was to deepen the domestic market by raising the living standards of American workers and investing in social programmes at home.

The great obstacle to such a path lay in the fear of the American business class that such deepening might unleash political forces that would undermine the entrenched privileges of the propertied classes within the United States itself. For this bloc, if domestic prosperity was to be maintained without sacrifice of economic hierarchy, capital accumulation would have to be re-wired to external expansion. War and conquest had to be accepted as the price of social peace at home. 'Nations', said Beard, 'are governed by their interests as their statesmen conceive those interests'. In the United States, the principal business of the state was business. Banks and corporations were the real motors of the foreign policy that had pushed America into the First World War, and were driving it towards a Second, against which Beard passionately warned.

William Appleman Williams, although he shared many of Beard's political instincts, was otherwise a very different kind of historian, who did not so much look at the material interests underlying the dynamic of American expansion, as at the rival ideals whose conflict he took as a guiding thread for understanding the history of the nation. Originally, the Pilgrim Fathers had brought the vision of a Christian Commonwealth to the New World—an egalitarian community of small producers, whose values had never altogether disappeared, taking in later times the form of an ethical socialism. But from the Revolution onwards, an alternative vision of America's future had developed and for the most part dominated: the construction of a vast continental—and eventually overseas—empire, in which big money and hubristic ambition would thrive, under cover of fair-sounding liberal ideals of free trade and competition for all. *The Contours of American History*, Williams's major work, traces a counterpoint between these incompatible outlooks down into the epoch of the Cold War. The global battle against Communism was just the latest way in which America sought to escape abroad from the calling of what Williams believed was its true, moral self at home.

For Bacevich, each historian got the immediate political agenda of his time wrong. Beard was mistaken in opposing US entry into the Second World War, which was necessary to destroy fascism, just as Williams failed to see that it was essential to defeat Communism. But both were right in thinking that something more long-standing was at work in these conflicts. Encompassing these just causes was a larger and less attractive set of objectives, which has outlived them. Bacevich himself, as an heir to Beard and Williams, draws on different sides of their work. His tough-mindedness, of tone and judgement, descends from Beard. But his methodological focus is in many ways closer to Williams. *American Empire* does not dwell much on the nexus between internal social interests and external power-projection. Nor does it explore the mechanics of grand strategy, in the style of Gabriel Kolko, whose name is absent from the genealogy of critics Bacevich invokes, but whose works—from *The Triumph of Conservatism* to *The Politics of War* to *The Limits of Power* and beyond—represent the other major corpus of critical history and theory of imperial America, the largest of all. There could be a cultural reason for this: Kolko, based in Canada, has never shown the same attachment to popular US values as Beard or Williams.

At all events, it could be argued that the selection of legacies Bacevich has made among his forebears limits the way he stages his analytic narrative. In particular, what is not covered here are what could be called the Achesonian foundations of post-war US imperial strategy. For, as Bruce Cumings and others have shown, the turn to a huge power-projection outwards, fuelled by a very large, permanent defence industry and massive military budget, and codified doctrinally in NSC-68, occurred against the background of a serious recession in the American economy in 1949, and still high levels of union militancy. It was then, as Acheson put it, that 'Korea saved us'. The Cold War delivered a range of key domestic benefits: warfare Keynesianism as a strong alternative to and barrier against welfare Keynesianism; a powerful anti-Communist ideology for use against any form of radical dissent; a means of providing a range of R and D and other supports to a wide spectrum of US industries; and very powerful, cross-class social constituencies in the US with a direct stake in imperial expansion. It is arguable that something similar may have been at work in the steady escalation of US financial, mercantile and military operations since the end of the Cold War. Beginning with the Gulf War under the first Bush, expanding continuously under Clinton, and now speeding up under the second Bush, the combination of American arms and arm-twisting have enforced Washington's writ across ever wider areas of land and life beyond the oceans, at a time when the stresses of enormous social polarization at home might otherwise—with the demise of the Evil Empire—have led to pressures for domestic reform and redistribution.

Bacevich does not pursue this Beardian line of analysis, but focuses instead on the ideology and instruments of the new, post-Cold War imperialism. Following Williams, Bacevich insists that the empire did not just grow like Topsy: it was the outcome of a particular world view and was built by a coherent strategy, which gained support from the American people. The key to both has been the euphemism 'liberal internationalism'—codewords for forcing the world open to American enterprise, backed by American power. But if the terrain is that of Williams, the vision is more caustic. His treatment of 'globalization', one of the great mantras of the current period, is characteristic. While it is probably no exaggeration to say that tens of thousands of academics around the world have treated the latter as a kind of new world-historical dawn, rendering obsolete much of the entire canon of the social sciences, Bacevich suggests that it can be read as both more parochial and more long-standing. The American economic expansionism that used to be expressed as 'interdependence' has been rebaptized: 'globalization' is essentially a radicalized synonym for this older term.

These are concepts that face both inwards and outwards: inwards to convince the American population of the need for economic expansion abroad rather than social transformation at home; and outwards to legitimate the drive to open other territories and markets to American business. 'How near one to the other is every part of the world. Modern inventions have brought into close relation widely separated peoples and made them better acquainted . . . Distances have been effaced . . . The world's products are being exchanged as never before . . . Isolation is no longer possible or desirable'. Anthony Giddens? No, McKinley in September 1901. Or, as Thomas Friedman put it a century later: 'Globalization-is-Us'.

One of the great merits of *American Empire* is that it makes clear how seamlessly continuous the doctrines of American supremacy have been. Those who fondly imagine there has been some major break with the recent past with the arrival of the current Republican incumbent of the White House are in for a shock from these pages. In the course of demonstrating the key organizing concepts of imperial expansion and the discursive codes expressing them, Bacevich brings home with great cumulative force the fact that they have been held in common by Republican and Democrat leaders and presidents. Relentlessly, Bacevich piles quote upon quote from both sides of the party divide on all the key issues to demonstrate that the idea of bipartisanship is, if anything, too weak for the degree of identity between them. The anathemas against the dangers of 'isolationism', the inevitability and irreversibility of globalization, the centrality of market openness, the indispensability of American 'leadership' for the security of the world—all these tropes are repeated indistinguishably by Republicans and Democrats alike.

In this ideology, there is the characteristic slide back and forth between objective and subjective forms of legitimation. Globalization is a historical inevitability that must be accepted. Yet the United States is 'the author of history', as Madeleine Albright explained, without whose protective might it would be at risk. Bacevich is right to stress that, in fact, the most complete and fulsome versions of America's imperial mission in the world were the work of the Clinton regime, which wove its necessary internal and external, economic and military-political dimensions into a smooth whole after the rather lame efforts of its predecessor. He also has no difficulty showing that while the current Bush administration has discarded some of the rhetorical décor of the Clinton years, the basic concepts and goals of American foreign policy remain unchanged.

American Empire does more than offer an extraordinary granary of the ruling discourse, which anyone interested in the ideology of US power should read. In chapter after chapter Bacevich documents the twin tracks of expansionism in the 1990s: on one side, the opening of overseas economies and refashioning of financial institutions to US advantage, with the requisite cultural trappings; on the other, the projection of military force to keep or restore order abroad, accompanied by diplomatic strategies to discipline the other main power centres of the world. But in laying out this overall design, Bacevich devotes special attention to the area of his own professional expertise. His most original and valuable contribution to our understanding of the *modus operandi* of the Empire lies in his analysis of its military apparatus and the purposes to which this is now put.

In a striking account, Bacevich argues that the Pentagon's principal task today is closer to British gunboat diplomacy of the 19th century than to the conventional land wars of continental—principally Franco-German—descent. For what are essentially policing operations in peripheral zones, the Department of Defence has developed 21st century equivalents of both 'gunboats and Gurkhas'—that is, a combination of overwhelming air power with surrogate or mercenary forces on the ground: missiles, drones and

B-1s above, and the KLA, Northern Alliance and Kurds below. Designed to minimize American casualties, which might unsettle domestic opinion, this two-pronged strategy does not exclude the use of US infantry, where needed: an imperial armed force that has absolutely no capacity to die is hardly adequate even for the clinical operations of a post-modern Empire.

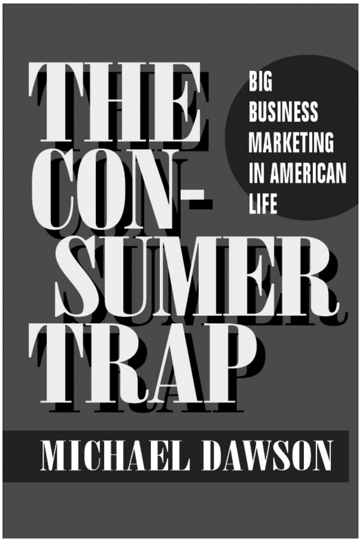
It is worth remembering that the gap in military technology between the US army and Iraqi resistance has been greater than that between the British military and the Zulus at the end of the 19th century. A handful of losses suffered in such unequal combat can even serve a purpose, since it is in the American state's interest to resocialize its population into accepting some level of battlefield casualties. In cases where these risk breaching a low ceiling, air power can always be called in to flatten the landscape instead. To date, the limitation of this kind of empire lies in its unwillingness to shoulder direct colonial administration of conquered territories for any length of time. Here it has so far needed the help of satrapies, in UN or Allied guise, to carry out routine duties, confining its own role to strategic control and direction. Such delegation is the more necessary, the greater the frequency of gunboat operations. In 1999, Bacevich points out, the US Commission on National Security reported that 'since the end of the Cold War, the United States has embarked upon nearly four dozen military interventions . . . as opposed to only 16 during the entire period of the Cold War'.

Gunboat diplomacy is not, of course, the only role for the American military. They must also maintain 'full spectrum dominance'—that is, decisive strategic superiority over all other major powers, to deter them from seeking to balance against the United States. Armed vigilance on this scale has spawned an intercontinental network of what Bacevich terms 'proconsular' powers, located in the four great regional commands, 'each presiding over vast swathes of earth, sky and water': CINCPAC (East Asia) headquartered in Hawaii; CINCSOUTH (Latin America) in Miami; CINCEUR (Europe, Africa, Israel) in Brussels; and CINCENT (Middle East, Central Asia, the Horn) in Tampa.

The commanders-in-chief of these theatres typically wield, Bacevich shows, far more political and diplomatic power than any corresponding civilian functionaries of the American state, and expect to be treated as what they are—proconsuls of a global empire, invested with vast resources and powers. 'The staffs of the European, Central and Pacific Commands each exceed the size of the Executive Office of the President. At Southern Command, the smallest of the four, the staff consists of approximately 1,100', while over the 1990s 'their combined budgets rose from $190 million to $381 million, with figures adjusted for inflation'. This militarization of the US outreach into the world, whose long-term effects on the shaping of American policy towards it have yet to be seen, is not exempt from its own contradictions.

Bacevich shows the way in which the loquacious and incompetent CINCEUR commander in charge of the Balkan War, Wesley Clark, had to be sidelined by his superiors in Washington, before retiring to the obsequious attentions of Michael Ignatieff and the honours of studio commentary on CNN.

Bacevich's book is a level-headed, disciplined exercise. It does not attempt, in the fashion of so much current literature on US foreign policy, to offer half-cocked theories of international relations, the world economy, popular culture, the wonders of electronic technology, or the vagaries of the domestic political system. It sets itself a carefully limited brief: to show the practical and ideological continuities of American imperial power, and the novel military dispositions it has developed since the Cold War. In these aims, it succeeds admirably. Coolly and succinctly, it dismantles most of the mystifications currently surrounding the US imperium. It is to be hoped there will be a rapid translation into Arabic.



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