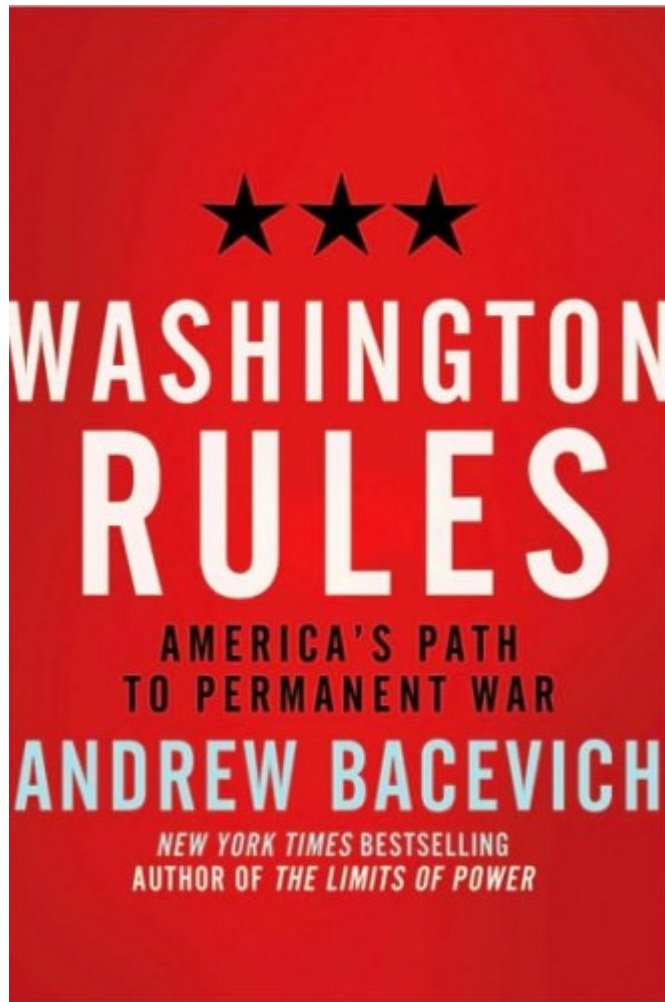


# A review of Washington Rules

reviewed by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## Washington Rules

By Andrew J. Bacevich  
Metropolitan

No one has anatomized the misadventures of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with greater historical perspective or critical acuity than Andrew Bacevich. He is among

our indispensable intellectuals, all the more so now that the cartoonish figure of George W. Bush has been removed from the equation.

Bacevich brings to the task of flaying American global ambitions a backstory that makes it hard for his critics to dismiss him or lump him with the ranks of what Barack Obama's shill-in-chief Robert Gibbs snidely derided as the "professional left."

Born in Normal, Illinois, Bacevich graduated from West Point in 1969 and served in Vietnam, Germany and the Persian Gulf before retiring from the army with the rank of colonel. He then earned a Ph.D. in diplomatic history from Princeton, and since 1998 he has taught at Boston University. In the last decade, with books such as *American Empire* (2002) and *The New American Militarism* (2005), Bacevich has established himself among professional historians as the heir to Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams—fellow Midwesterners and talented scholars who brought their learning to bear critically on the making of modern American empire in the 20th century.

Even more so than Beard and Williams, Bacevich escapes conventional political categories. He writes for the *Nation*, the *New Republic* and the *American Conservative*. Though Bacevich describes himself as a "Catholic conservative," many of his most incisive essays have appeared in the liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal*. He combines an almost visceral recoil from libertine consumer culture and rights-obsessed liberalism with an equally fervent distaste for the pieties of the imperial and corporate right. Speaking about one of his heroes, Reinhold Niebuhr, he has said that "truth tellers transcend partisan affiliations." The same could be said of Bacevich.

In the spring of 2007, Bacevich's son, Lieutenant Andrew Bacevich Jr., was killed by an improvised explosive device in Iraq. In a *Washington Post* op-ed that he wrote shortly thereafter, Bacevich responded to the ghoulish people who accused him of aiding and abetting his son's killers by denouncing the war in which he served. "In joining the Army," he said, "my son was following in his father's footsteps: before he was born, I had served in Vietnam. As military officers, we shared an ironic kinship of sorts, each of us demonstrating a peculiar knack for picking the wrong war at the wrong time. . . . I know that my son did his best to serve our country. Through my own opposition to a profoundly misguided war, I thought I was doing the same."

One should not have to lose a child to earn the respect of one's adversaries, but this tragedy, combined with Bacevich's exceptional biography, may insulate him to a degree from the knee-jerk, ad hominem attacks that pass for political dialogue in this country. And this renders him all the more indispensable.

Of late, Bacevich has sought to boil his scholarly work down into short books aimed at popular audiences. His new offering, *Washington Rules*, follows close on the heels of *The Limits of Power* (2008), which it echoes and extends. Both are part of the American Empire Project, an admirable series published by Metropolitan Books.

"Washington rules" has a double meaning: it refers to both the centralization of power in Washington, D.C., and the norms governing the exercise of that power abroad. The latter is Bacevich's focus, though he has an eye on the former.

The rules in question constitute "the package of assumptions, habits, and precepts that have defined the tradition of statecraft to which the United States has adhered since the end of World War II." The first and foremost of these assumptions, clearly stated in Henry Luce's signal 1941 *Life* magazine essay "The American Century," is that the United States bears the responsibility for a global leadership that will "lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world." This conviction has led to a second assumption—a breathtakingly expansive conception of American national security that has obliged the U.S. to "maintain military capabilities staggeringly in excess of those required for self-defense."

These two assumptions have grounded what Bacevich labels the "sacred trinity" of U.S. military policy: "an abiding conviction that the minimum essentials of international peace and order 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*."

Bacevich traces the establishment of the Washington rules to the early cold war, centering his attention on the proponents of "semiwar" (the term is that of the first secretary of defense, James Forrestal), such as Allen Dulles of the CIA and Curtis LeMay of the Strategic Air Command, who, more than anyone else in the 1950s, cofathered the sacred trinity of military policy, which ensured that "peace," when accomplished, would take the shape of preparation for the next war.

The past half century, as Bacevich sees it, has been one of remarkable continuity. Seldom have the underlying principles of the national security credo been

challenged. Policy makers have argued about the means of implementing the Washington rules, but not about the rules themselves. Above all, they have repeatedly sought out various military means of "flexible response" lying somewhere between covert action (Dulles) and nuclear holocaust (LeMay). The flavors of such response have ranged from tactical nuclear warfare to limited conventional wars, counterinsurgency campaigns and surrogate struggles on Third World frontiers to a global "war on terror" that would transform semiwar into endless war.

Bacevich acknowledges that these debates over the means to American hegemony are not insignificant. The Bush II doctrine seeking to legitimate preventive war, for example, is "a codicil to the Washington consensus with massive (although largely unexamined) moral, political, and strategic implications." But important and terrifying as this codicil is, contesting it does not go to the heart of the matter, which lies in the dubious underpinnings of the Washington rules themselves. Again and again since World War II, policy-making elites and the American public have come up against "teachable moments"—the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis and especially the war in Vietnam—in which little was learned and the Washington rules survived and sometimes were embraced with renewed conviction. The course of foreign-policy debate has been "the equivalent of investigating a bridge collapse without bothering to assess the structural integrity of the basic engineering design."

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars—and Barack Obama—have been no less disappointing to Bacevich in this respect. Rather than call forth an interrogation of fundamentals, these wars have provoked a revival of an "urge to counterinsurge." They have also turned the spotlight on General David Petraeus, a military commander ("King David") for whom Bacevich's bitter contempt is palpable.

Whatever hope Bacevich held out for Obama rapidly dissipated. The then-Illinois senator and presidential candidate wrote a blurb for a new edition of Niebuhr's *Irony of American History* (2008), to which Bacevich contributed an admiring introduction. And Bacevich urged conservatives to support Obama's candidacy. But, he now says, if Obama is the Niebuhrian he claims to be, a leader determined to contest and counter the hubris that has guided the nation's foreign policy for two generations, then his hopeless nation-building project in Afghanistan is the work of a gutless, politically calculating cynic. On the other hand, if Obama believes in this war, then he is not the Niebuhrian he advertised himself to be. If he does not believe in this war, then he merits not less but more censure than his predecessor. "Who is more deserving of contempt? The commander-in-chief who sends young Americans to die

for a cause, however misguided, in which he sincerely believes? Or the commander-in-chief who sends young Americans to die for a cause in which he manifestly does not believe and yet refuses to forsake?"

Bacevich briefly offers an alternative to the Washington rules, one centered in the anti-interventionist tradition of George Washington, John Quincy Adams, William James, Mark Twain, Randolph Bourne, George Kennan and J. William Fulbright. From the perspective of this adversarial tradition, the U.S. should strive to be an exemplary republic, not a meddlesome empire: "If the United States has a saving mission, it is, first and foremost, to save itself"—that is, to "model freedom," not attempt to impose it on others. Bacevich would counter the sacred trinity of present military doctrine with a competing trinity, one that limits military power to the demands of national self-defense narrowly construed, dismantles the far-flung network of American military bases and repudiates the doctrine of preventive war in favor of the principles of just war that it flouts. He is well aware that such a proposal invites "the incantatory words meant to deflect all serious criticism: *appeasement*, *isolationism*, and the ever present danger of *insufficient vigilance*." And he is undeterred.

A deep strain of pessimism, even fatalism, runs through Bacevich's work. He repeatedly laments the futility of dissent, even as he exercises it ("Although nonconformists always exist, they rarely matter"). He holds out no hope for change at the top: "To imagine that Washington will ever tolerate second thoughts about the Washington rules is to engage in willful self-deception." And he is no less gloomy about reconstruction from the bottom up: "If 'they' routinely promulgate ill-advised national security policies, it's because 'we' let them."

It is difficult to argue with this dark view, especially if one devotes more attention than Bacevich does to the manner in which the blinding credo that he attacks has become tightly imbricated with material interests that will resist the scaling back of American international ambitions with every ounce of self-concern at their disposal, whatever the merits of the argument.

Yet it is equally hard not to be moved by Bacevich's example, in spite of himself. In his eulogy to his son, he upbraided himself for failing young Andrew by persuading so few of the folly of the war that killed him. "While he was giving his all, I was doing nothing." Not so. He did what intellectuals at their best do best: he enlisted in a politics of truth. We may be grateful that he has resisted the temptation to silence and retreat that his grief bespoke three years ago, and that he has remained in the

front ranks of that politics of truth.