Origins
Interviewer

Iâ€™m going to ask you a little bit about West Point as we begin. Soâ€”and some of this is just merely what they call tagging to be able toâ€”the cameraâ€™s running nowâ€”to be able to allow the transcriber to set this in a certainâ€”according to certain search mechanisms. So, what class at West Point were you?

Andrew Bacevich

1969.

Interviewer

1. And you wereâ€”you come from where? Where did you grow up?

Andrew Bacevich

Indiana.

Interviewer

Indiana, so did I.

Andrew Bacevich

Oh, really? Where?

Interviewer

Yeah, Indianapolis, where weâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Okay, upstate, Calumet region, around Hammond and Highland and places like that.

Interviewer

And can you tell me just in general terms the various assignments that you had during your career, particularly your career in the military, but even going up to your academic career, just so we list off, and then weâ€™ll get back to it.

Andrew Bacevich

Sure. I served as a commissioned officer for 23 years, short tourâ€” after school, short tour at Fort Riley, deployed to Vietnam in the summer of 1970. Stayed there until the summer of 1971. In Vietnam, I served first with the 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and then the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry. When I came home, I was assigned to the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fort Bliss. The regiment movedâ€”excuse me, at Fort Lewis, Washington, the regiment moved to Fort Bliss, and I moved with it. Thatâ€™s where I commanded K Troop, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry. Then, I went to the Armor [School] Advanced Course and Princeton for graduate school. From Princeton, I came here to the History Department. Taught in the History Department from 1977 to â€™80. â€™80 to â€™81, student at Leavenworth.

Andrew Bacevich

â€™81 to â€™84 in Germany. I was the S-3 of the 3rd Squadron, 2nd ACR and then the S-

3 of the 11th ACR. Came back to the States, was a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Then, went back to Fort Bliss from â€™85 to â€™87, where I commanded the 2nd Squadron, 3rd ACR. Eighty-seven to â€™88, I was a fellow at Harvard at the Kennedy School. â€™88, back to Germany. From â€™88 to â€™90, I was first the G-3 at the 1st Armor Division and then the Chief of Staff at the 1st Armor Division. In 1990, I took command of the 11th ACR in Fulda and commanded that until 1992 when I left the Army. In 1992, I went to the Johns Hopkins SAIS. Thatâ€™s their graduate school of international affairs in Washington. Stayed there six years, until I was moved to Boston University in 1998, and Iâ€™ve been teaching at Boston University ever since.

Interviewer

And what inspired you to come to West Point?

Andrew Bacevich

Hard to remember. You know, thereâ€™s aâ€”was once a relatively well-known series of juvenile novels by Red Reeder. The protagonist was Clint Laneâ€”four volumesâ€”and it followed Clint lane through his cadet career. Friend of mine in grade school owned those and loaned â€™em to me. I think that was my first exposure the Military Academy as a place that one could go to, but beyond that, both my parents were World War II veterans. Grew up in a relatively conservative Catholic household, in which patriotism was a value that you sort of consumed with your corn flakes in the morning. And when I finished high school, I knew I wanted to go out East to school, because I thought out East was where sophisticated people were, and my choices came down to Princeton or the Military Academy. And I canâ€™t really remember why I took the Military Academy. I think part of it was to save money for my parents, but nonetheless, that was the choice I made.

Interviewer

Iâ€™m always curious about peopleâ€™s immigrant background. With the name â€œBacevich,â€ thatâ€™s Eastern European, I wouldâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Lithuanian.

Interviewer

Lithuanian.

Andrew Bacevich

The name was originally Bacevochis, so itâ€™s one of these names that the suffix got changed somewhere along the way, but people, most people think I should be a Serb or a Croat, but itâ€™s Lithuanian.

Interviewer

And on your motherâ€™s side, what was your motherâ€™s maiden name then?

Andrew Bacevich

Her name was Bolfur. It was a sort of a mix of Irish and German and English andâ€”one of those mongrel kind of families.

Interviewer

And how far back are your immigrant roots to this country?

Andrew Bacevich

Myâ€”I donâ€™t know on my motherâ€™s side of the family.Â On my fatherâ€™s side of the family, my grandfather and his wife immigrated from Lithuania probably somewhere around 1910 and settled in northwest Indiana in East Chicago.Â Â

Interviewer

Because of the heavy sort of Eastern European and German and all thatâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Huge, hugeâ€”huge Lithuanian, Polish population around there, and I think thatâ€™sâ€”they were moving to what had already become an established Lithuanian-American enclave.

Ascending the Ranks: An Ethical Gray Area
Interviewer

Tell me a little bit about your experience at West Point. You arrive here, were you surprised? Were you thrilled? Were you disappointed?

Andrew Bacevich

Oh, I think I wasâ€”I mean, as a general judgment, I didnâ€™t enjoy my four years here. It was a four-year-long trial in which my sense in retrospect was that we were continuously being evaluated in one way or the other, and the game, as it were, was to be sufficiently ready for that next evaluation, which was probably coming either this afternoon or tomorrow, that you could get over that hurdle, and then immediately prepare for what was going to be the next evaluation. So, it was demanding. It was busy. It did not provide, in my judgment, again in retrospectâ€”I wouldnâ€™t have said this at the timeâ€”did not provide a particularly good education from an undergraduate perspective. It did, I think, constitute a very powerful socialization process that was intended to and did imprint a particular set of values, not necessarily the values advertised by the Military Academy. There was more to that socialization process than simply persuading you that duty, honor, and country were values to which one needed to subscribe.

Interviewer

Then, what are those values if youâ€™re saying that they werenâ€™t the ones that were advertised? What did youâ€”how would you characterize the values that were beingâ€”you were being exposed to?

Andrew Bacevich

That although officially duty, honor, and country were the values thatâ€”to which an Academy graduate should subscribe, at the same time, there wasâ€”a second set of messages was one that defined professional value or professional worth in terms of how far you get up the hierarchy in rank and that ascending that hierarchy, in many respects, was the principle sort of vector that should define your sense of self-esteemâ€”

Interviewer

So, hierarchyâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

â€”and so making the next school selection list or being selected early for promotion. Those werenâ€™t simplyâ€”wasnâ€™t simply evidence of a new opportunity. It was an affirmation that you were among the elect.

Interviewer

It was a measure, in other words.

Andrew Bacevich

Right, it was a deeplyâ€”again, I donâ€™tâ€”I say this in retrospect, â€™cause it was not at allâ€”I didnâ€™t have any real conscious awareness of this when I was a serving officer. But, it was deeply corrupting and, I think, contributed to the careerism which I certainly witnessed in the Officer Corps, and I say with some embarrassment probably contributed to a certain amount of careerism that I exhibited in my own behavior.

Interviewer

And you say itâ€™s corrupting â€™cause it was ambition for ambitionâ€™s sake and because it would maybe sacrifice your own values in order to advance, is that right?

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah, I mean, yes, bluntly.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s a leading question of mine, if weâ€™re talking about leading questions, whatâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

No. But, itâ€™s true. I mean, oneâ€”you know, in retrospect, I only say this in retrospect, I mean, the importance of service is in service, and the value of a captainâ€™s service is, in fact, not any less than the value of the four-star generalâ€™s service. Â But, the notions that I absorbed here led me to believe, and quite frankly, I think led most of the rest of my classmates to believe, that a captainâ€™s service had value only to the extent that it was going get the captain to become a major, to become a lieutenant colonel, and continue along that path. And that very insidious idea is one that can lead you to compromise the advertised values of duty, honor, and country, or to subordinate the advertised values of duty, honor, and country to this other definition of what it means to be a professional.

Interviewer

So, it seemed it could confirm a kind of mediocrity then, is that right? Because youâ€™re looking to be judged only in terms of how you can advance, and squash creativity, would you say? Or are theseâ€”are going too far?

Andrew Bacevich

Well, I think itâ€”it discourages independence. It discourages critical thinking. It discourages candor, expression of unwelcome views. It encourages conformity,

encourages you to keep your mouth shut rather than to venture an opinion that may not be welcome. And all of those things, I think, represent a departure from what the professional military ethic demands.

Interviewer

Is this the nature, though, of hierarchical institutions, that theyâ€”that by definition they would have this characteristic?

Andrew Bacevich

I think it is the nature of hierarchical institutions, but the military profession is one that claims to be different from other hierarchical institutions. And the military profession is one that claims that these advertised valuesâ€”duty, honor, and countryâ€”really do permeate the Officer Corps. And again, Iâ€™m notâ€”I donâ€™t want to somehow suggest that they told me it was, pure as driven snow and it turned out to be dark and dirty. I think the reality is that itâ€™s gray. Itâ€™s aâ€”people do struggle to do the right thing. They struggle to be honest. They struggle to take care of the people for whom they are responsible, but that struggle is complicated by the ambitions that are more selfish in their sort ofâ€”in their origins.

Interviewer

You said that you wereâ€”looking back now, you feel that the Academy didnâ€™t provide you with a successful education. What did you mean by that?

Andrew Bacevich

Well, I think things have changed significantly in terms of how the curriculum is organized, but in my day, the vast preponderance of courses were required. There were four electives that you were allowed during four years of studyâ€”two as a second classman, two as a first classman. Every other course was a required course.

Andrew Bacevich

Now, I had a fifth elective because I tested out of English composition or something like that, and the vast majority of the required courses were science and engineering. That was never my strong point. It was not a particular interest. And so, again, as I earlier described, my sense of the experience of just going from one evaluation to another with the substance of the experience simply getting through that next evaluation, thatâ€™s what academics were for me. I mean, going from the WPR in thermodynamics to the paper that had to be turned in in organic chemistry. I had no interest in those subjects and, frankly, sort of did what was necessary to pass and then pretty much dumped the information. Now, I donâ€™t say that proudly, because those are important disciplines, and I couldâ€™ve gotten something out of â€™em, but I wasnâ€™t interested. I wanted toâ€”my interests lay in history and in literature, and those were relatively minor programs at the Military Academy in those days.

Andrew Bacevich

More broadly, it seems to me that a liberal education ought to provide a generous amount of opportunity to explore, to try things out, and that simply was not possible at the Military Academy during the time that I was here. You were told what you needed to take, andâ€”

Interviewer

Do you think that that wasâ€”they wouldâ€™ve viewed it as an antithetical to the discipline they were trying to build among the cadets that too much sort of exploration, too much gray area that history and literature might introduce could be dangerous to the frame of mind of a soldier?

Andrew Bacevich

I donâ€™t know. My guess would be, first of all, that thereâ€”that the curriculum that existed existed because it reflected a curriculum that had existed for the previous century or more. We did what we did because this is the way we do it, and I also suspect that the senior members of the faculty at the time were unlikely to be people who were sufficiently imaginative to want to perhaps draw on what were the existing or emerging ideas in civilian higher education and say, â€œGosh, maybe we should do some of that.â€ I think the tendency was then, and I suspect has always been, to see the Military Academy as a place very much set apart, a unique identity, a unique mission and, therefore, an institution that needs to do things in its own way.

A â€œState of Decayâ€ in Vietnam
Interviewer

When you entered the Academy in â€™65, American presence in Vietnam was fairly small.

Andrew Bacevich

Well, weâ€”that was the summerâ€”I mean, theâ€”I may have the dates slightly wrong. I think that Operation Rolling Thunder and the deployment of the first significant Marine contingents began around March of 1965. In the summer of 1965, the deployment of major U.S. Army combat units was in progress, so the Americanized phase of the war began coincident with my career. And really, that was one of the things that made the whole experience veryâ€”I donâ€™t know if my classmates would share this view, but again, in retrospect, what a weird time to be a cadet. We came in at the time that the major American combat role was beginning. In the spring of 1968, when the Tet Offensive occurred, and that really is, in many respects, the pivot of the war, weâ€™re still here. Â By the time we graduate in 1969, [Lyndon] Johnson has been removed from the scene, Richard Nixon is the president, Vietnamization has begun, and the drawdown and sort of the last phase of the war is now underway.

Andrew Bacevich

During that interval, between â€™65 and â€™69, thatâ€™s really the heart of what we think of as â€œthe â€™60s,â€ the heart of the protest movement of the counter-culture, the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, incredible dissent, the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. So, the countryâ€™s coming apart at the seams, and here we are in our rockbound Highland [Falls] home, remarkably isolated from these powerful currents in American life. And I thinkâ€”again, this is very much in retrospect. I donâ€™t think I wasâ€”hadâ€”I donâ€™t think my political consciousness was sufficiently developed at the time, but here we were, in essence, pretending that nothing was going on. At the same time that the country was experiencing this monumental political and cultural upheaval, and it really was kind of surreal, I think, but that was ourâ€”that was the time we were here.

Interviewer

Did you reflect at all at that moment upon the decision to engage in the War in Vietnam?

Andrew Bacevich

No, Iâ€”again, you hesitate to make a definitive statement about what it was because itâ€™s been so long now. Since Iâ€™ve come back here, a couple times recently, I have to say one of the things Iâ€™m struck in my interaction withâ€”mostly with the young faculty, a little bit with cadetsâ€”Iâ€™m struck by how, at least the faculty today seems very aware of the contentiousness of our policies post-9/11. And theyâ€”these young members of the History Department in particularâ€”seem very comfortable taking in the critical view, taking stock of the critical view and assessing it.

Andrew Bacevich

My recollection of the second half of the 1960s is that that was not the environment at the Military Academy at the time, that there was very little willingness to ask critical questions about U.S. policy, broadly or, more specifically, with regard to Vietnam, that I myself, and I think many of my classmates, maybe not, but I myself, I think, found it easier to avoid asking difficult questions about U.S. policy and the war, to avoid asking whether or not it made sense, to avoid asking whether it was winnable, to avoid asking whether it was moral, because to seriously pose those questions, letâ€™s say, in 1968, when you were in your third here, could yield answers that would really complicate your life. I mean, if you decided in 1968 that the war was stupid or immoral, where did that leave you?

Interviewer

So, you knew in â€™68 that you were going to Vietnam?

Andrew Bacevich

Oh, yes, we all knew. Weâ€”yes, we allâ€”and in terms of the expectation of the personal experience, I donâ€™t think very many of us had any problem with that. Now, I did have a couple of deserters from my class.

Interviewer

Because of Vietnam?Â

Andrew Bacevich

Wellâ€”

Interviewer

You donâ€™t know?

Andrew Bacevich

I donâ€™t know. I mean, because of Vietnam or because of the sort of theâ€”of thatâ€”in the anti-authority kind of environment, I donâ€™tâ€”I wouldnâ€™t want to judge why they did what they did. But, it was just easier not to critically engage with the issues that were absorbing my peers beyond the gates of the Military Academy.

Interviewer

So, you graduate in â€™69.

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah.

Interviewer

And you go to Vietnam.

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah, I went to the Army. I went to the Ranger School. I went to the Armor [School] Basic Course. I went to Fort Riley for about six months, and then I deployed. Got married in June of â€™70 and then deployed in July of â€™70.

Interviewer

And tell me about your experience in Vietnam over that summer ofâ€”actually a year, from summer of â€™70 to summer of â€™71.

Andrew Bacevich

You know, I did not have anyâ€”I donâ€™t have any great war stories. Theâ€”my combat experiences were relatively minor. The closest I came to being wounded was when I threw a hand grenade and caught a piece of shrapnel in my own butt from my own hand grenade. The most importantâ€”and this is, of course, during the drawdown. I started in two different units, because the first unit stood down, and so I was transferred to a second unit, and I think the most enduring memory of the war was that I experienced firsthand an army that was in an advanced state of decay. I know some of my classmates served in units that were still very disciplined and very effective. I served in two units in which discipline had eroded badly and in which combat effectiveness was marginal, so we had substantial indiscipline. I had one event whereâ€”a combat refusal. I was supposed to take out an ambush at night, and the soldiers in my own platoon refused to go. The troop commander sorted that out.

Andrew Bacevich

We had, in both units, rampant drug abuse, mostly heroin. Weâ€™d find these little plastic capsules lying around the base camp. We had just the most vicious racial climate: antagonism between whites and blacks, antagonism between the so-called lifers and the draftees who provided the preponderance of the soldiers in the ranks. It was a horrifying circumstance. I have to say I was not prepared for it. Canâ€™t say that I responded to itâ€”

Interviewer

As an officer, how do you respond to both thoseâ€”the drug abuse and theâ€”well, three things, drug abuse, the racial antagonism, and the refusal to take orders?

Andrew Bacevich

Iâ€”well, I mean, the combat refusal, I went to get my troop commander, and I said, â€œBoss, we got a problem here,â€ and he came over and basically just administered a tongue lashing. And weâ€”the troops thenâ€”we went out and did our mission. I donâ€™tâ€”I canâ€™t give you a good answer to the question, though, about race and drugs. It wasnâ€™t as if we were going to set the black soldiers and the white soldiers around a table and say, â€œHey, gang, letâ€™s talk this thing out.â€ That didnâ€™t happen. It was moreâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

I think it was more that if you pretended it wasnâ€™t really as bad as it was that you could manage it, you could keepâ€”donâ€™t acknowledge it. Donâ€™t acknowledge it. Try to sustain the fiction that we are all comrades in this enterprise together and hope that things donâ€™t blow up. The drugs, I donâ€™t really remember. I mean, we certainly were not, at thatâ€”the culture of drug testing, urinalysis and that kind of thing, if I remember correctly, only emerged after I came back from Vietnam, â€™cause there was a significant drug problem in the Army more broadly. And it was after I came back from Vietnam that I became much more conscious of a fairly concerted institutional effort to get that under control. Â I donâ€™t remember in Vietnam what the heck we were doing. Again, it was toâ€”letâ€™s try to get through this year without humiliating ourselves.

Interviewer

The widelyâ€”itâ€™s widely described, the experience in Vietnam was that we won the war there, lost the war at home.

Andrew Bacevich

No, we lost the war there. I mean, we lost the war thereâ€”Iâ€™m not sure the war was ever winnable, actually, but we lost the war there because winning wouldâ€™ve required to establish the government of Vietnam, the government of the Republic of Vietnam as fully legitimate and able to command the loyalty of the Vietnamese people and also possessing institutions, in particular, an army that had the capacity to provide for the security of the people of Vietnam. And we were not able to establish, to create legitimate institutions. We were not able to establish an effective army of the Republic of Vietnam, and we were not able to persuade the people of South Vietnam to give their loyalty to that government. And it may well be true that in the vast majority of contexts there were more VC and NVA who were killed than Americans, but thatâ€™s aâ€”if that is a fact, it is a fact of very little relevance to explaining the outcome of the war.

Interviewer

So, I guess what youâ€™re saying is that as far as the Army engaged in combat experiences in Vietnam, it may have been a victory, but the Army is only part of the story of a war, and the persuasion of the people never occurred. Is that right?

Andrew Bacevich

I donâ€™t think itâ€”theâ€”I donâ€™t think we can claim that the Army won in Vietnam in any respect. I mean, Clausewitz is right. War is a continuation of politics. We failed utterly to achieve our political purposes, and anything else, I think, is incidental. Not to make a crass and ugly comparison, but I remember when I was young I had this fascination, brief fascination with German generals of World War II who wrote self-glorifying memoirs, and I mean, Erich von Mansteinâ€™s memoir is called Lost Victories, and basically the argument of the book is that brilliant generals like Erich von Manstein were winning all these victories and then success was thrown away by the stupidity and blundering of Adolph Hitler. It was his fault we all did it. Well, thatâ€™s nonsense. I mean, the victories, such as they were, that the German Army won, whether on the western front or on the eastern front, were without any meaning whatsoever. And I think something of the same can be said about the conduct of the United States Army in Vietnam. Technical victories meant nothing.

Progress in Iraq Takes More Than One â€œGreat Manâ€
Interviewer

Can we make aâ€”and since we are talking about this in 2009, can we make any comparison thatâ€™s legitimate between Iraq and Vietnam? I know youâ€™ve studied the war in depth.

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah, well, I think that theâ€”weâ€™re a long way from seeing how the Iraq War is going to come out. I personally believe that the Iraq War was completely unnecessary, and it certainly was mismanaged through its first four years or so. But, I have to, I think, give credit to the Officer Corps of the present moment in at least one respect, and that is that they have demonstrated a capacity to learn that the Officer Corps in my day lacked. If the Vietnam Warâ€”the Vietnam War from ourâ€”from the point of view of our participation begins in 1965 and then finally ends in, what, January of 1973, at the time of the Peaceâ€”Paris Peace Accord being signed, Iâ€™m not sure we ever really figured out the nature of that warâ€”accurately ascertained the nature of the war.

Andrew Bacevich

Itâ€™s clear that inâ€”during the command tenures of Ricardo Sanchez in Iraq and George Casey in Iraq, the senior leadership struggled to ascertain the nature of the war. But it does seem that, by the time Petraeus comes, armed with a rediscovered counterinsurgency doctrine that is seriously applied to the ground that there are major changes made in at least the physical security of the population. I happen to be a skeptic about whether or not thatâ€™s going produce a political resolution of the type that we want, but nonetheless, I mean, inâ€”between the end of 2006 and the middle of 2007, an army that was going in that direction suddenly made a 180-degree turn and went in this other direction in embracing a fairly effective counterinsurgency doctrine. Thatâ€™s a remarkable achievement.

Interviewer

To what do we owe that, the leadership skills of General Petraeus or the doctrine itself?

Andrew Bacevich

Well, he deserves a lot of the credit. I think he had a bunch of smart people working for him, and heâ€”my sense isâ€”I donâ€™t know General Petraeusâ€”my sense is he is not afraid of hiring smart people to work for him. So, he surrounded himself with a bunch of very smart folks, like Peter Mansoor and H.R. McMaster and David Kilcullen, and I think that this brain trust that he assembled probably was of great assistance to him, both in understanding the nature of the war, revising the doctrine, and then implementing the doctrine. Soâ€”but, heâ€™s the commander, and he deserves great credit. I think thereâ€™s aâ€”the story becomes more complicated still in recognizing that there are people in Washington, some retired like General Keane, some not in uniform, some in government, some outside of government, all of whom were (a) supporters of the invasion, which I was not, (b) were people who hadâ€”were appalled by the way [Ricardo] Sanchez and Casey had run the war and (c) themselves came to believe that a different approach could potentially turn things around. So, Petraeus had allies in Washington that were helping to create the climate that would see President Bush making the key decision. The key decision is fire Rumsfeld, install [Robert] Gates, pull Casey out, send Petraeus over there and provide the additional resources that the surge required.

Andrew Bacevich

So, Petraeus had lots of help, which is not to take it away from him, but itâ€™sâ€”I think

itâ€™sâ€”you know, one of the things that, again, Iâ€™ve come to believe about this institution that is misleading is thisâ€”itâ€™s kind of like the cult of the commanding general thatâ€” Eisenhower wins the war in Europe, that MacArthur won the war in the Pacific, that â€œBlack Jackâ€ Pershing won World War I, that U.S. Grant won the Civil War. And I think that that approach to explaining history oversimplifies and doesnâ€™t give sufficient credit to a wide variety of other actors.

Interviewer

Well, itâ€™s the â€œGreat Man Theory,â€ right, thatâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah. And so, I thinkâ€”I just think the cult of the commanding general is one that gives us a distorted view of warfare and needs to be resisted.

Policy Implications of 9/11: Radical Departure or Genealogy?
Interviewer

Where were you on 9/11?

Andrew Bacevich

Teaching class at Boston University.

Interviewer

Do you remember about that day?

Andrew Bacevich

I was not in class. I was in the office, and I canâ€™t remember who told me or how Iâ€”but, somebody told me thatâ€”what was going on. And so, I got to a television and watched it. I donâ€™t believe I was watching when either of the jets hit the World Trade Center. I think I was watching when at least one of the World Trade Center towers collapsed. But, I went to class, and if I remember correctly, some in the class knew what was going on, some didnâ€™t. I think it was a 9:30 class. And so we spent the hour trying to talk about what had happened and what it might mean. The whole campus was horrified and frightened. It was aâ€”and you know whatâ€™s more remarkable is the way it affected people that day or how quickly they got over it and basically, all but forgotten 9/11, which the country at large, at this point has done, I think.

Interviewer

Were youâ€”Iâ€™m sure you were surprised by the event, but were you surprised by the shift of American foreign policy, the definition of an international enemy? Hadâ€”you were a student of foreign policy, andâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Well, itâ€™s hard to remember exactly what I thought, but I was, at the time, I was working on a book, it was published in 2002, and the book was called American Empire, and it was intended to be kind of a first-cut history of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. And the argument in the book stresses the extent to which, at least in my judgment, the continuities in American foreign policy from one decade to the next or one administration to the next are far more important than the discontinuities, and that this tendency toward continuity had

expressed itself in spades in this post-Cold War decade of the 1990s. So, I was, in a sense, inclined to look for continuities in the reaction to 9/11, and to my mind, thatâ€™s what we got.

Interviewer

Explain that. Iâ€™m not sure I understand.

Andrew Bacevich

Well, the bookâ€™s called American Empire because in my judgment we have long had an imperial foreign policy, and the imperial foreign policy sees the expansion of American power abroad as a prerequisite for sustaining American prosperity at home, and further believes that sustaining American prosperity at home is a prerequisite for American freedom. And my interpretation of the global War on Terror initiated by President Bush is that it should be seen as an effort atâ€”as redoubling an already existing effort to assert American hegemony in what we now call the greater Middle East. I think that effort to assert hegemony or dominance or control began in 1980 when President Carter declared the Carter Doctrine, and it proceeded in fits and starts through the 1980s.

Interviewer

Can you describe the Carter Doctrine for a moment, justâ€”?

Andrew Bacevich

Sure. The Carter Doctrine was a statement that Carter made at the time of his January 1980 State of the Union Address in which he declared that the Persian Gulf was a vital national security interest to the United States and that the United States would use whatever means necessary to ensure that no power gained control of the Persian Gulf. And that statement began the process of militarizing U.S. policy in the region. The militarization of U.S. policy gained a major boost in 1990 and 1991, at the time of the first Iraq War, but in part because of the ambiguous outcome of that war, it continued through the 1990s.

Andrew Bacevich

We haveâ€”we Americans have tended to forget the sanctions imposed on Iraq during the entire decade of the 1990s, sanctions enforced by daily combat overflights coming out of Turkey and coming outâ€”mostly out of Saudi Arabia. So, with all that as background, when President Bush declared that we were now embarked upon a project to liberate the people of the greater Middle East and provide them with the benefits of freedom and democracy and that, first, a military thrust into Afghanistan, but second, and more importantly from his point of view, the military thrust into Iraq, which, of course, had nothing to do with 9/11, I saw that as expressing less a departure from the past pattern of U.S. foreign policy than an affirmation of that past pattern of U.S. foreign policy.

Andrew Bacevich

Now, the one thing that the president, President Bush, did that I think, did represent the departure from past practice was in enunciating the Bush Doctrine of preventive war that we would no longer even make a pretense that we were responding to actual acts of aggression but that we were claiming the prerogative to intervene, to use force in anticipation of conditions that might have produced acts of aggressionâ€”

Interviewer

Is there a historical antecedent to that in American foreign policy?

Andrew Bacevich

Well, thereâ€™s a book written by a guy named John Gaddis, who is a very famous historian at Yale, that claims that there are antecedents. I find the argument to be laughable and wrong.

Interviewer

The book was very popular among the Bush administration.

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah, I think it was. Yeah, it was. Yeah, yeah, I think it was. So, anyway, there was little that happened that didnâ€™t fit with my evolving interpretation of U.S. national security policy. Now, my own view was that the Iraq War was unnecessary and a deeply, deeply, deeply regrettable decision.

Interviewer

But, it sounds like if you feel it was unnecessary even within the goals of theâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Well, the goals were not realistic. I mean, the notion thatâ€”I mean, if we take Bushâ€™s rhetoric at face value, and I donâ€™t question, frankly, his sincerity, I think itâ€”you know, President Bush prior to 9/11 was kind of a soft realist who expressed great skepticism about nation building. As a candidate, he had said that we needed to have a humble foreign policy. 9/11 swept all those notions aside, and after 9/11, he became Woodrow Wilson reborn, and I think that his conversion to Wilsonianism was an authentic conversion, but I alsoâ€”

Interviewer

Driven by 9/11?

Andrew Bacevich

Driven byâ€”triggered by 9/11. But, nonetheless, he really believed that we had a mission to free the oppressed and spread freedom and to eliminate tyranny, and he really believed that with Afghanistan supposedly taken care ofâ€”it was notâ€”that Iraq was the right place to launch this crusade. I am confident that he really believed that this had becomeâ€”or this continued to be Americaâ€™s purpose. My own judgment is that we should not see that as Americaâ€™s purpose, and the notion that we have the wisdom, the capacity to democratize the greater Middle East is simply preposterous. Itâ€™s just utterly preposterous and has yielded the results that we have today.

Andrew Bacevich

Weâ€™ve been at this war now forâ€”if we cut Afghanistan and Iraq together, weâ€™ve been at it for going on eight years. Weâ€™ve spent a trillion dollars. Weâ€™ve lost over 5,000 American soldiers, and weâ€™ve got our fingers crossed that somehow we can extricate ourselves from Iraq without doing too much more damage, and we find ourselves with a war in Afghanistan that almost eight years after we invaded it is going very badly. This was a fundamentally flawed response to 9/11.

Interviewer

But, your point of view of this also has some historical line in American history, the isolationism or the sense that whatever we venture abroad we end up in a larger mess than the mess that we arrived to clean up.

Andrew Bacevich

No, I think thatâ€™s too sharp a judgment. Iâ€”you bring up the notion of isolationism. I think itâ€™s a myth. The story of the United Statesâ€”let us remember that at the time we won our independence in 1783 we were this little, loosely organized republic clustered along the eastern seaboard of North America. By 1945, we are this global superpower with a mammoth amount of territory in North America. Where is the isolationism? A story of U.S. foreign policy is a story of expansionism, and at least through about the 1960s, it is a story of extraordinary success: success in acquiring territory, success in opening markets, success in expanding our influence, success in acquiring power, success in achieving a level of prosperity that made us the envy of the world. To say that somehow this is a period of isolationism strikes me as completely wrongheaded. The notion of isolationism survives because it is a politically useful club to bludgeon anybody who questions whether this tradition of expansionism may no longer be useful and may no longer make sense.

A Personal Loss in Iraq
Interviewer

Your son was deployed to Iraq duringâ€”and we have about 15 minutes, I think. Tell me about the conversations that you mustâ€™ve had withâ€”this is not a new attitude of yours, I take it, so when theâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Well, I didnâ€™tâ€”well, my son and I didnâ€™t talk about politics, and I didnâ€™t want to talk about politics because I didnâ€™t want to complicate his life. I mean, he volunteered to serve, andâ€”

Interviewer

After 9/11?

Andrew Bacevich

Oh, yeah, yeah. After he graduated from college, he, as a college student, heâ€”

Interviewer

Which was where? Where was he in college?

Andrew Bacevich

He was in BU. He was enrolled in ROTC and got washed out of ROTC because theyâ€™veâ€”he was about to go to Jump School down at Fort Benning, and they reviewed his medical records to make sure he was medically qualified to go to jump school, and they discoveredâ€”and itâ€™s not like we were trying to conceal itâ€”that he had had childhood asthma. And unbeknownst to me, unbeknownst to him, childhood asthma was a disqualifying condition, so not only did he not go to jump school at Fort Benning, they said, â€œOops, youâ€™re out of ROTC,â€ which was a bitter pill for him to swallow. After he

graduated from BU, heâ€”we learned from a friend thatâ€”a friend in the Army, my old adjutant at Fuldaâ€”that this disqualifying condition had been removed and that therefore, he was eligible to serve. So he enlisted and went through basic training and went through OCS and got a commission in Armor, and after some time at Fort Hood, deployed in the fall ofâ€”

Interviewer

But, he mustâ€™ve known of your attitude about American expansionism and yourâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Oh, Iâ€™m sure he did, but again, heâ€”I view service to the country as a worthy thing, and I didnâ€™t tell my son to serve, didnâ€™t tell my son not to serve. My son was his own man, andâ€”but, I was very proud when he chose to serve, â€™cause itâ€™s a good thing to do, but I wasnâ€™t going to burden him with my political views, â€™cause I thought that was simply inappropriate and unfair, so we didnâ€™t talk about the politics of the thing. Iâ€™m sure he knew, but Iâ€”and frankly, I believe that he probably, just as I felt a profound respect for his willingness to serve at a difficult time, I hope and believe that he respected the fact that I was going to speak my piece and express my understanding of truth to the best of my ability. That was my responsibility as a citizen and as a teacher and, to some degree, as a writer, just as he chose to have his responsibility be to serve loyally and bravely as a soldier. So, I donâ€™t think he and I had any problems with that.

Interviewer

So, heâ€™s deployed to Iraq.

Andrew Bacevich

Yeah.

Interviewer

And thatâ€™s 2003?

Andrew Bacevich

No, no, he deployed inâ€”

Interviewer

When?

Andrew Bacevich

â€”the fall of 2006, and was killed in May of 2007.

Interviewer

As heâ€™s deployed to a war that you do not support, that must have been a complicatedâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

It wasnâ€™t. I mean, it wasnâ€™t to me. I mean, I would e-mail him every day and tell him that I loved him and just keptâ€”tried to keep him up on the news of the family, what was

going on, so that he would know that he was constantly in our thoughts. And he was able to call, once a month or something like that, so we talked to him from time to time.

Final Thoughts
Interviewer

You were stationed at Fulda, you saidâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Yep.

Interviewer

â€”in the 1970s, is that right?

Andrew Bacevich

No.

Interviewer

1980s?

Andrew Bacevich

â€™80s and then early â€™90s.

Interviewer

And Fulda isâ€”was the sort of always traditionally thought of as the lightning spot for Central Europe?

Andrew Bacevich

Right, right.

Interviewer

Talk to me about Fulda and your experience there.

Andrew Bacevich

Well, right Fulda is the city that sits astride the Fulda Gap, and the Fulda Gap was theâ€”sort of the canonical scenario of how the Warsaw Pact was going to attack, presume that they would focus a main effort coming through the Fulda Gap. Fulda Gap described the region in Hesse, the state of Hesse that was to be defended by 5th Corps, and my unit was part of 5th Corps. In retrospect, there wasnâ€™t a chance in hell that the Warsaw Pact was going to attack. And in retrospect, had there been any inclination in that regard, I feel confident there wouldâ€™ve been sufficient warning of preparations for attack on the other side that there wouldâ€™ve been ample time to react and set the 5th Corps defense.

Andrew Bacevich

But, the ethos of theâ€”of really both of the border regiments, and I served in both of them, the 11th ACR and the 2nd ACR, was that the attack could come out of the blue, with no warning and that as the two forward-most deployed units in U.S. Army Europe, the 11th

ACR and the 2nd ACR, needed to be prepared at a momentâ€™s notice to fend off the attacker. And this had a couple effects. One effect was to create a great sense of urgency about everything that we did so that we worked very, very hard. It was a seven-day-a-week job, 12, 14 hours a day, to try to maintain that level of readiness that presumably was required because the red hordes might appear ten minutes form now.

Andrew Bacevich

And it also created a kind of a obsession with what was called the GDPâ€”the General Defense Plan, the war planâ€”of constantly tweaking it and rehearsing it and going through exercises intended to make sure we had the necessary skills to go do all that was needed to do. I have to say, in retrospect, there was a great air of unreality about the whole thing. We know that any plan doesnâ€™t survive the first contact, and yet theâ€”this GDP culture was one in which we somehow imagined that we were going to be able to maneuver our wayâ€”and this is a defensive battle, but nonethelessâ€”maneuver our way in a sense through six or seven or eight different steps. It never wouldâ€™ve worked out that way.

Andrew Bacevich

And again, in retrospect, I wonder if one of the reasons why it took as long as it did to react to Iraq was that we had created a mindsetâ€”in the post-Vietnam [War] period, we have created a mindset in the Officer Corps that was rigidly doctrinaire and wasâ€”an Officer Corps in which critical thinking really was not very welcome. And again, as I, here in 2009, when I talk to, for example, to the young officers in the History Department, I am struck by and very pleasantly struck by what seems to beâ€”theyâ€™ve shed that doctrinaire-ness, if thatâ€™s a word, that there does seem to beâ€”in my very limited exposure to the Officer Corps todayâ€”a capacity for critical thinking that we did not have in my day. And I attribute it all, really, to the Officer Corpsâ€™ response to Vietnam, which was wrongheaded in retrospect.

Interviewer

And thatâ€™s because the attitude wouldâ€™ve been that we didnâ€™t have a successfully planned out doctrine for Vietnam, therefore, we needed to prepare?

Andrew Bacevich

More than that. More than that. I mean, I think it wasâ€”and I talk about this in my book, The New American Militarism. The Officer Corpsâ€™ big lessonâ€”the big lesson that the Officer Corps took away from Vietnam is weâ€™re never going to do this again. Weâ€™re never going to get involved in a protracted, indecisive war that inflicts such horrible damage to the institution of the Army. And yet, the Officer Corps came out of Vietnam determined to repair that institutional damage and to restore its standing politically and in the eyes of the American people. And the vehicle, the vehicle to achieve that was to redefine, was to re-imagine the next war along lines that would be convenient to the Army.Â

Andrew Bacevich

And what the Army did was it imagined that the next war was going to be a conventional warâ€”emphasize a conventional war, not a nuclear warâ€”a conventional war to defend Western Europe. And a series of very senior officers embarked upon a program of doctrinal reform, first yielding something calledâ€”what was it called? The flexâ€”it wasnâ€™t called flexible defense. I canâ€™t rememberâ€”subsequently yielding the doctrine called AirLand Battle, which described thisâ€”which provided a template for how the Army was

going to fight, how the Army was going to fight a conventional war to defend Western Europe against the Warsaw Pact. And mastering that template was theâ€”became the intellectual agenda of the Army. I mean, if you go look at the history of the Nationalâ€”the famous National Training Center out in Fort Irwin, California, it was really to discipline units so that they would conform to this template that was seen to be necessary to fight this envisioned war, which was assumed to be something that would endâ€”well, it was assumed to be neverâ€”it was never going to be fought, but if it was fought, it was going to end decisively and brieflyâ€”

Interviewer

But, donâ€™t armies have to do this? They have to prepare for the war they imagine theyâ€™re going to fight, and if thisâ€”

Andrew Bacevich

Well, no, I know. They can doâ€”armies can do whatever they want to do, but armies ought to prepare for the wars that the nation is likely to confront, and given the ambitions of the United States and, from my point of view, the imperial foreign policy of the United States, that brief conventional war wouldnâ€™t necessarily define everything that the Army was going to be called upon to do. Iâ€™m going to have to go. I have to give a talk in a couple minutes.

Interviewer
Weâ€™ll end here. I hope we can pick it up again.