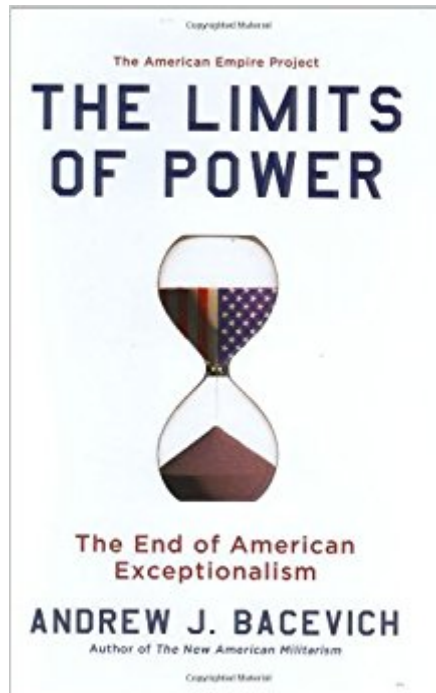


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# The Limits Of Power: The End Of American Exceptionalism (American Empire Project)



## Synopsis

From an acclaimed conservative historian and former military officer, a bracing call for a pragmatic confrontation with the nation's problems. *The Limits of Power* identifies a profound triple crisis facing America: the economy, in remarkable disarray, can no longer be fixed by relying on expansion abroad; the government, transformed by an imperial presidency, is a democracy in form only; U.S. involvement in endless wars, driven by a deep infatuation with military power, has been a catastrophe for the body politic. These pressing problems threaten all of us, Republicans and Democrats. If the nation is to solve its predicament, it will need the revival of a distinctly American approach: the neglected tradition of realism. Andrew J. Bacevich, uniquely respected across the political spectrum, offers a historical perspective on the illusions that have governed American policy since 1945. The realism he proposes includes respect for power and its limits; sensitivity to unintended consequences; aversion to claims of exceptionalism; skepticism of easy solutions, especially those involving force; and a conviction that the books will have to balance. Only a return to such principles, Bacevich argues, can provide common ground for fixing America's urgent problems before the damage becomes irreparable.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is the bluntest, toughest, most scathing critique of American imperialism as it has become totally unmoored after the demise of the Soviet Communist empire and taken to a new level by the

Bush administration. Even the brevity of this book - 182 pages - gives it a particular wallop since every page "concentrates the mind". In the event a reader knows of the prophetic work of the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, you will further appreciate this book. Bacevich is a Niebuhr scholar and this book essentially channels Niebuhr's prophetic warnings from his 1952 book, "The Irony of American History". The latter has just been reissued by University of Chicago Press thanks to Andrew Bacevich who also contributed an introduction. In essence, American idealism as particularly reflected in Bush's illusory goal to "rid the world of evil" and to bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East or wherever people are being tyrannized, is doomed to failure by the tides of history. Niebuhr warned against this and Bacevich updates the history from the Cold War to the present. Now our problems have reached crisis proportions and Bacevich focuses on the three essential elements of the crisis: American profligacy; the political debasing of government; and the crisis in the military. What renders Bacevich's critique particularly stinging, aside from the historical context he gives it (Bush has simply taken an enduring American exceptionalism to a new level), is that he lays these problems on the doorstep of American citizens. It is we who have elected the governments that have driven us toward near collapse. It is we who have participated willingly in the consumption frenzy in which both individual citizens and the government live beyond their means. Credit card debt is undermining both government and citizenry. This pathway is unsustainable and this book serves up a direct and meaningful warning to this effect. Niebuhrian "realism" sees through the illusions that fuel our own individual behavior and that of our government. There are limits to American power and limits to our own individual living standards and, of course, there are limits to what the globe can sustain as is becoming evident from climate changes. American exceptionalism is coming to an end and it will be painful for both individual citizens and our democracy and government to get beyond it. But we have no choice. Things will get worse before they get better. Bacevich suggests some of the basic ways that we need to go to reverse the path to folly. He holds out no illusions that one political party or the other, one presidential candidate or the other, has the will or the leadership qualities to change directions. It is up to American citizens to demand different policies as well as to govern our own appetites. While this is a sobering book, it is not warning of doomsday. Our worst problems are essentially of our own making and we can begin to unmake them. But we first have to come to terms with our own exceptionalism. We cannot manage history and there are no real global problems that can be solved by military means, or certainly not by military means alone. Fellow citizen, you need to read this book!

This is one of those books you might find yourself sitting down to read chapter and verse over and

over again, only because the writing is so intelligent and so profound. "The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism," by Andrew Bacevich, is one of those works that will enthrall the reader with its insight and analysis. According to the author, the US has reached its limit to project its power in the world. His rationale for this conclusion are three central crises we now face: economic and cultural, political, and military, all of which are our own making. The first crisis is one of profligacy. Americans want more, whether it is wealth, credit, markets, or oil, without consideration for cost or how these things are acquired. There is complete apathy in what policies are being produced as long as they provide plenty. The political crisis was born of our mobilization in World War II to meet the threat of tyranny, and from the Cold War to meet the challenge of the Soviet Union. Both gave rise to unprecedented presidential power, an ineffectual Congress, and a disastrous foreign policy. Bacevich contends that our legislature no longer serves their constituents or the common good "but themselves through gerrymandering, doling out prodigious amounts of political pork, seeing to the protection of certain vested interests" with the paramount concern of being re-elected. Our presidents have been willing accomplices in keeping the American dream or greed alive by using our military as part of a coercive diplomatic tool to feed and fuel the first crisis. Bacevich traces the end of the republic to the start of both wars, which gave rise to the "ideology of national security." The mission of the new Department of Defense is not defense, but to project power globally where we will view any nation as a threat that tries to match us in military might. At the same time, the largest intelligence agencies in the world are created to afford us more security, but after seventy years are unable to defend our cities and buildings in the US while it worries about intrigues worldwide. Competition and rivalry lead to a lack of cooperation, intelligence, and security when it was needed most. The third crisis is our military which has been employed to satisfy the neuroses of the first and second crises. The author puts much of the blame squarely at the feet of inept military leadership, which he believes has confused strategy with operations. Content with the resilience of the American fighting man or woman, he is scathing in his critique of their leadership finding them "guilty of flagrant professional malpractice, if not outright fraud." He illustrates how improvised explosive devices that cost no more than a pizza have checked a military that is designed for speed and maneuver--that was considered invincible. Andrew Bacevich contends that nothing will change as long as Americans are told to go to Disney World instead of making sacrifices, as long as the same one half percent of our population continue to populate the military that the president sees as his personal army, as long as an apathetic public and an ineffectual Congress continue to make periodic, grand gestures of curbing presidential power, the United States will have reached the limits of its power and exceptionalism. This book profoundly

moved me, and I was impressed by the insight that Professor Bacevich could bring in such few pages. Passages of this book should be plastered in the halls and offices of Congress, as well as the West Wing. This book really stands out as a jewel in a sea of mediocre publications by radio and TV personalities who think they know what they are talking about when it comes to economics or geopolitics. The difference is that Andrew Bacevich does--without exception. Also

Recommended: Mayer, Jane, "The Dark Side, The Inside Story How The War on Terror Turned into a War on America's Ideals." Schlesinger, Arthur, "War and the American Presidency." Mann, Thomas & Ornstein, Norman, "The Broken Branch: How Congress is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track." Zinni, Tony (Gen. Ret.), "The Battle for Peace: A Frontline Vision of America's Power and Purpose." Niebuhr, Reinhold, "The Irony of American History." Anything else by this author. One hundred seventeen days and a wake-up until someone else's power is thankfully limited forever.

It's amazing how much PALEO-conservatives, like Col. Bacevich (and Pat Buchanan), have in common with progressives, especially when it comes to foreign policy. My wife and I are very progressive (I'm a Democrat; my wife's a Green), but after watching Moyers' interview with Col. Bacevich, we were blown away. We agreed that if Bacevich was running for president as a Republican, we could see ourselves crossing party-lines to vote for him: that's how profound his effect was. I hope both sides of the aisle listen to him, because Bacevich is absolutely dead-on in what he's saying. I'm buying this book and telling everyone I know to read it, or at least watch the Moyers interview.

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