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Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War

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Review Essay by Jeffrey Barlow

Andrew Bacevich is a noted critic of American foreign policy, particularly as it bears upon military issues. And it is Bacevich’s contention that since World War II, U.S. foreign policy bears upon little else but military affairs.

We have recently discussed in successive editorial essays in Interface two works dealing directly with war and the Internet. First was Richard A. Clarke and Robert Knake, Cyber War: The Next Threat to National Security and What to Do About It [1]. We next reviewed Jeffrey Carr’s Inside Cyberwarfare which took quite a different approach to the first work [2].

Bacevich takes yet another and much broader approach than did the first two works. He discusses American military and foreign policy from its beginnings in the American Revolution, to the very recent past. Concentrating upon the period from World War II to the present, Bacevich concludes with a discussion of the “surge” in Iraq. The work closed sometime before the firing of General Stanley McChrystal in late June.

Andrew Bacevich is a Professor of International Relations at Boston University where he specializes in U.S. Foreign Policy. He graduated from West Point, served in Vietnam, [3] and received his Ph.D. from Princeton. He has published a great deal and is, I think, the preeminent commentator on U.S. foreign policy and military planning, though many would disagree with his conclusions [4].

This book adds to our understanding of cyberwar as laid down by, first, Clarke and Knake, then by Carr, because Bacevich details the evolution of American military power from being almost entirely kinetic—dependent upon the application of mechanical force—to the increasing importance of information as an element of military might.
However, to Bacevich, it is not important to closely analyze Cyberwar to understand its special characteristics as the previous authors do. To him, it is just another weapon, appropriate under some circumstances, not useful in others. The critical issue is not the weapon, but rather the larger strategy and the political goals that drive it.

The digitization of information and the many related technologies that it supports had profound military applications as the process developed. An important point of departure, Bacevich believes, followed the August 1990-February 1991 campaign known as “Desert Storm.” As Bacevich puts it:

“Considered from this perspective, Operation Desert Storm signaled not the perfection of industrial-age warfare but its death knell. According to RMA[5] (Revolution in Military Affairs) enthusiasts a new era of Information Age warfare was dawning. Primacy in the cyberworld held the promise of primacy in the real world: This was their conviction.”[6]

This victory was seen at the time as following upon to new advances in digital technology. These were so profoundly a departure that they demanded a new understanding of war, The Revolution in Military Affairs.

The new systems promised several distinct and badly sought advantages. Accordingly, new approaches were quickly integrated into the military structure. These however, according to Bacevich, were not a Revolution in Military Affairs so much as they were the continued pursuit of old goals by new means:

“The expectations generated by RMA theorists—forces optimized for “network centric” warfare providing the foundation for lasting American primacy—grew out of a specific context in which post–Cold War triumphalism blended with a rising faith in the transformative power of technology married to the forces of globalization. In a fast, flat, and wide-open world, this new way of war offered an enticing blueprint for extracting the maximum benefit from the arena in which the United States enjoyed unquestioned superiority. ...Best of all, for the moment at least, the United States owned the RMA franchise. Yet strip away the cyberjargon and the RMA bore more than a passing resemblance to flexible response. The new generation of semiwarriors—Democrats like Madeleine Albright eager to succor the afflicted; Republicans like Donald Rumsfeld, pursuing more overtly imperial ambitions—were, in fact, the heirs of Taylor, McNamara, and Bundy. In the RMA they saw the possibility of fulfilling the promise of flexible response, dashed by Vietnam...

The initial victories of the next war, the invasion of Iraq, seemed initially to demonstrate the superiority of the digitally-driven RMA. Bacevich quotes Lt. Gen. Robert Wagner on the future of warfare, during this optimistic phase of the war:

“We envision the future from an information age perspective where operations are conducted
in a battlespace, not a battlefield.... We are now able to create decision superiority that is enabled by networked systems, new sensors and command and control capabilities that are producing near real-time situational awareness....Our operations in Afghanistan and Iraq [have demonstrated the] operational attributes that an adaptive joint force must possess in the modern Battlespace. To dominate this battlespace, the joint force must be “knowledge centric,” “coherently joint,” “fully networked and collaborative” interdependent in organization and employment and uniquely designed for “Effects-Based Operations.” [7]

It was then, this overweening confidence in American digital superiority that lead to what Bacevich sees as the quagmires of Iraq and of Afghanistan.

Not everybody will endorse Bacevich’s overall conclusions. He believes that the U.S. has entered a state of permanent warfare beginning with the victories of World War II. He argues that an almost religious conviction (religious because it’s dependant on faith and hence impossible to prove) rests on what he calls “the credo and the trinity.” These are: “In the simplest terms, the credo summons the United States—and the United States alone—to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world.” [8]

The trinity is somewhat more complex, but amount to the means by which the end of the credo are to be realized:

“Yes an examination of the past sixty years of U.S. military policy and practice does reveal important elements of continuity. Call them the sacred trinity: 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. Together, credo and trinity—the one defining purpose, the other practice—constitute the essence of the way that Washington has attempted to govern and police the American Century...Together they provide the basis for an enduring consensus that imparts a consistency to U.S. policy regardless of which political party may hold the upper hand or who may be occupying the White House. From the era of Harry Truman to the age of Barack Obama, that consensus has remained intact.” [9]

This is a shockingly critical stance and could easily be taken for a left-wing rant. Bacevich’s argument, however, is much more embedded in American political and military history than that. He sometimes refers to himself as being from the “non-interventionist right”. [10] Simply put, Bacevich sees the undeniable interventionism of American post-war policy as a cynical departure from the intentions of not only the Founders, but also from American traditions. He thinks that what he calls the credo and the trinity are inappropriate, even deadly, to the American democracy.

So what does all this mean for our understanding of Cyberwar? It seems to me that if Bacevich’s position has any merit then several profound implications follow. Perhaps the first of these is that...
we are wrong to focus too much upon Cyberwar as more than just another type of war.

In this, Bacevich differs profoundly from Clarke and Knake, who see Cyberwar as threatening to unbalance a world in which violence has been restrained by appropriate policies and the challenge is simply to find new policies to contain this new threat. Carr, on the other hand, sees—along with many of his Realist sources—a world that is always unbalanced and in which the best hope for stability is the power of the United States. Under these circumstances, Cyberwarfare techniques could and should be used preemptively.

Where Bacevich departs from both of the other works is that he sees a United States, which is not threatened by violence—including Cyberwar, so much as it is perpetuating it in the interests of limited sectors of the American society [11].

It is difficult to recommend Andrew Bacevich’s *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* as simply a book on cyberwar. We are free, of course, to disagree with Bacevich about the forces that have driven its adoption or the purposes to which it may one day be put. But to fail to grasp his perspective is to leave Cyberwar out of its military context, and hence to fail to fully understand it.

**Endnotes**


[3] Bacevich also, though it is not mentioned in this work, lost a son who was killed by an IUD in Iraq. For his thoughts on that issue see: "I Lost My Son to a War I Oppose. We Were Both Doing Our Duty," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2007, at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/25/AR2007052502032.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/25/AR2007052502032.html)


[5] While Bacevich discusses the rise and application of this concept, he does not give it full explication. For a useful site see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolution_in_Military_Affairs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolution_in_Military_Affairs) This site is heavily documented and I judge it to be reliable.


[7] Bacevich, Loc. 2641-60


[11] It is not my intention to reproduce Bacevich’s argument in entirety here. It suffices to say that he thinks that a citizenry obsessed with individualistic gratifications has abrogated control over the powers of government, which have then been wielded by selfish special interests from a broad range of such groups in American society. At bottom, Bacevich believes that the American democracy has been hijacked, and the citizenry has chosen to party on rather than to deal with the problem.

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