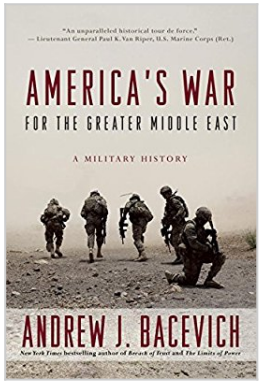

America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History

By Andrew J. Bacevich

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LONGLISTED FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD • A searing reassessment of U.S. military policy in the Middle East over the past four decades from retired army colonel and *New York Times* bestselling author Andrew J. Bacevich

From the end of World War II until 1980, virtually no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in the Greater Middle East. Since 1990, virtually no American soldiers have been killed in action anywhere else. What caused this shift? Andrew J. Bacevich, one of the country's most respected voices on foreign affairs, offers an incisive critical history of this ongoing military enterprise—now more than thirty years old and with no end in sight.

During the 1980s, Bacevich argues, a great transition occurred. As the Cold War wound down, the United States initiated a new conflict—a War for the Greater Middle East—that continues to the present day. The long twilight struggle with the Soviet Union had involved only occasional and sporadic fighting. But as this new war unfolded, hostilities became persistent. From the Balkans and East Africa to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, U.S. forces embarked upon a seemingly endless series of campaigns across the Islamic world. Few achieved anything remotely like conclusive success. Instead, actions undertaken with expectations of promoting peace and stability produced just the opposite. As a consequence, phrases like "permanent war" and "open-ended war" have become part of everyday discourse.

Connecting the dots in a way no other historian has done before, Bacevich weaves a compelling narrative out of episodes as varied as the Beirut bombing of 1983, the Mogadishu firefight of 1993, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the rise of ISIS in the present decade. Understanding what America's costly military exertions have wrought requires seeing these seemingly discrete events as parts of a single war. It also requires identifying the errors of judgment made by political leaders in both parties and by senior military officers who share responsibility for what has become a monumental march to folly. This Bacevich unflinchingly does.

A twenty-year army veteran who served in Vietnam, Andrew J. Bacevich brings the full weight of his expertise to this vitally important subject. *America's War for the Greater Middle East* is a bracing after-action report from the front lines of history. It will fundamentally change the way we view America's engagement in the world's most volatile region.

Praise for *America's War for the Greater Middle East*

"Bacevich is thought-provoking, profane and fearless. . . . [His] call for Americans to rethink their nation's militarized approach to the Middle East is incisive, urgent and essential."***—The New York Times Book Review***

"Bacevich's magnum opus . . . a deft and rhythmic polemic aimed at America's failures in the Middle East from the end of Jimmy Carter's presidency to the present."**—Robert D. Kaplan, *The Wall Street Journal***

"A critical review of American policy and military involvement . . . Those familiar with Bacevich's work will recognize the clarity of expression, the devastating directness and the coruscating wit that characterize the writing of one of the most articulate and incisive living critics of American foreign policy."***—The Washington Post***

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"[A] monumental new work . . . One of the grim and eerie wonders of his book is the way in which just about every wrongheaded thing Washington did in that region in the fourteen-plus years since 9/11 had its surprising precursor in the two decades of American war there before the World Trade Center towers came down."***—The Huffington Post***

"The book reveals a number of critical truths, exposing deep flaws that have persisted for decades in American strategic thinking—flaws that have led successive American presidents to ask the American military to accomplish the impossible, often while barely providing it with the resources to accomplish even the most modest of goals. . . . Read Bacevich—not for the solutions he proposes but to be sobered by the challenge."***—National Review***

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"Andrew Bacevich offers the reader an unparalleled historical tour de force in a book that is certain to affect the formation of future U.S. foreign policy and any consequent decisions to employ military force. He presents sobering evidence that for nearly four decades the nation's leaders have demonstrated ineptitude at nearly every turn as they shaped and attempted to implement Middle East policy. Every citizen aspiring to high office needs not only to read but to study and learn from this important book. This is one of the most serious and essential books I have read in more than half a century of public service."**—Lieutenant General Paul K. Van Riper, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)**

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"Andrew Bacevich lays out in excruciating detail the disasters orchestrated over decades by the architects of

the American empire in the Middle East. Blunder after blunder, fed by hubris along with cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious illiteracy, has shattered cohesion within the Middle East. The wars we have waged have given birth to a frightening nihilistic violence embodied in radical jihadism. They have engendered an inchoate rage among the dispossessed and left in their wake a series of failed and disintegrating states. These wars have, as Bacevich writes, laid bare the folly of attempting to use military force as a form of political, economic, and social control. Bacevich is one of our finest chroniclers of the decline of empire, and *America's War for the Greater Middle East* is an essential addition to his remarkable body of work."**—Chris Hedges, former Middle East bureau chief for *The New York Times* and author of *Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt***

"Andrew Bacevich's thoughtful, persuasive critique of America's crusade for the Greater Middle East should be compulsory reading for anyone charged with making policy for the region. We cannot afford to repeat the past misjudgments on the area. As Bacevich wisely argues, the stakes are nothing less than the future well-being of the United States."**—Robert Dallek, author of *Camelot's Court: Inside the Kennedy White House***

About the Author

Andrew J. Bacevich is a retired professor of history and international relations at Boston University. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he served for twenty-three years as a commissioned officer in the United States Army. He received his PhD in American diplomatic history from Princeton. Before joining the faculty of Boston University in 1998, he taught at West Point and at Johns Hopkins University. His three most recent books—*Breach of Trust, Washington Rules,* and *The Limits of Power*—all hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. A winner of the Lannan Notable Book Award, he lectures frequently at universities around the country. He lives with his wife, Nancy, in Walpole, Massachusetts.

1

War of Choice

From the outset, America's War for the Greater Middle East was a war to preserve the American way of life, rooted in a specific understanding of freedom and requiring an abundance of cheap energy. In that sense, just as the American Revolution was about independence and the Civil War was about slavery, oil has always defined the raison d'être of the War for the Greater Middle East. Over time, other considerations intruded and complicated the war's conduct, but oil as a prerequisite of freedom was from day one an abiding consideration.

As a young man I required no instruction in that relationship, whose sweetness I had tasted at first hand. In June 1969, a newly commissioned shavetail fresh out of West Point, I was home on leave courting the girl who was to become my wife. She lived on Chicago's South Side. My mother lived in northwest Indiana.

Every evening I drove my brand--new Mustang Mach I—-candy--apple red with black piping—-into Chicago to see my beloved and then in the early morning hours returned home. Before each trip, I stopped at

a service station to top off. Ten gallons at 29.9 cents per gallon usually sufficed. The three bucks weren't trivial—-a second lieutenant's pay came to $343 per month before taxes (more importantly, before the monthly car payment)—-but the expense took a backseat to romance. I do not recall wondering where the gas came from—-Texas? California?—-nor about how much more there was. Like most Americans, I took it for granted that the supply was inexhaustible. All I knew for sure was that with four years of West Point behind me and Vietnam just ahead, life behind the wheel of a pony car in the summer of 1969 was pretty good.

It is easy to disparage this version of freedom, as postwar social critics from C. Wright Mills and David Riesman to William Whyte and Vance Packard had already done and others would do. For the ostensibly alienated and apathetic citizens of postwar America, trapped in a soul--deadening "new universe of management and manipulation," as Mills put it, freedom had become little more than "synthetic excitement."1

Maybe so. Yet whatever the merit of that critique, it never made much of a dent in the average American's aspirations. The American way of life may have been shallow and materialistic, its foundation a bland conformity. But even for people of modest means, the exercise of American--style freedom did not lack for pleasures and satisfactions.

As with the smell of a new car, those pleasures tended to be transitory. But an unspoken premise underlying that way of life was that there was more still to come, Americans preferring to measure freedom quantitatively. More implied bigger and better. Yet few of those driving (or coveting) the latest made--in--Detroit gas--guzzler appreciated just how precarious such expectations might be.

As I sped off to Chicago each evening, with radio and AC blasting, the gasoline in my tank was increasingly likely to come from somewhere other than a stateside oilfield. In 1969, imports already accounted for 20 percent of the 15 million barrels that Americans consumed daily. The very next year U.S. domestic oil production peaked at nearly 12 million barrels per day, thereafter beginning a decline that continued through the remainder of the century and appeared irreversible. The proportion of oil coming from abroad increased accordingly. Within a decade, imports of foreign oil had reached 8 million barrels per day.2

By 1973, even I was obliged to take notice. That fall, in retaliation for the U.S. supporting Israel in the October War, Arabs suspended oil exports to the United States and the West. The impact of the embargo was immediate and severe. The resulting oil shortage all but paralyzed the U.S. economy and produced widespread alarm among Americans suddenly deprived of the mobility that they now considered their birthright. Oil had become a weapon, wielded by foreigners intent on harming Americans. Here, it seemed, coming out of nowhere, was a direct existential threat to the United States.

With the crisis inducing another eyeball--to--eyeball confrontation between the United States and the Soviet

Union, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger announced that U.S. forces were on alert, pending their possible deployment to the Middle East. At the time, I was a captain, stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, alongside El Paso and just across from Mexico. The regiment in which I served had war plans to deploy to West Germany to participate in NATO's defense of Western Europe. If required, we probably could have occupied Juarez. But we had no plans to fight in the Persian Gulf, whether to thwart a threatened Soviet intervention there or to seize Arab oil fields.3 The very notion seemed preposterous. At the time it was. Not for long, however.

Fortunately, no such deployment occurred, the immediate emergency passed, and oil imports from the Persian Gulf eventually resumed. Yet the availability and price of gasoline had now become and thereafter remained a matter of national concern. Even as Americans were learning to live with nuclear weapons—-the prospect of a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union now appearing more theoretical than real—-they were also learning that they could not live without oil. Ever so subtly, the hierarchy of national security priorities was beginning to shift.

As an immediate response to the crisis, the Nixon administration hastily cobbled together a plan that promised, in the president's words, "to insure that by the end of this decade, Americans will not have to rely on any source of energy beyond our own." Project Independence, Nixon called it. The immediate emphasis was on conservation. Details of what the government intended beyond urging Americans to save were vague, Nixon simply vowing that "we will once again have plentiful supplies of energy," with the energy crisis "resolved not only for our time but for all time."4

This did not occur, of course, but Nixon's vision persisted. The nation's political agenda now incorporated the goal of energy independence as one of those "must--do" items that somehow never get done, like simplifying the tax code or reducing cost overruns on Pentagon weapons programs.

The idea persisted because it had broad popular appeal. Yet in some quarters, the larger policy implications of pursuing energy independence did not sit well. The very effort implied retrenchment or giving in. This was not the way the world was supposed to work in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rather than the United States accom-modating others—-in this case, the newly empowered Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), with its largely Arab membership—-others were expected to accommodate the United States.

As an outgrowth of this dissatisfaction, the notion that American military muscle might provide a suitable corrective began to insinuate itself into the policy debate. Writing in the January 1975 issue of *Commentary,* for example, the noted political scientist Robert W. Tucker bemoaned Washington's apparent unwillingness even to consider the possibility of armed intervention in the Arab world. "If the present situation goes on unaltered," Tucker warned, "a disaster resembling the 1930s" beckoned. To "insist that before using force one must exhaust all other remedies, when the exhaustion of all other remedies is little more than the functional equivalent of accepting chaos" was therefore the height of folly. When it came to something as important as oil, the putative lessons of the recently concluded Vietnam War simply didn't apply. Tucker wanted policymakers to get serious about the possibility of using force in the Middle East.5

Two months later, in *Harper's*, the pseudonymous but apparently well--connected Miles Ignotus went a step further, outlining in detail a plan to seize Saudi oil fields outright. Four divisions plus an air force contingent, with Israel generously pitching in to help, would do the trick, he argued. Echoing Tucker, Ignotus categorized spineless American leaders alongside "the craven men of Munich." Allowing OPEC to dictate the price of oil amounted to "a futile policy of appeasement" and would inevitably lead to further disasters.6 In contrast, forceful military action promised an easy and nearly risk--free solution.

Ignotus was actually Edward Luttwak, well--known national security gadfly and Pentagon consultant. In positing a U.S. attack on Saudi oil fields, he was pursuing an agenda that looked far beyond mere energy security. Luttwak was part of group seeking to "revolutionize warfare." Saudi Arabia, he and his like-minded colleagues believed, offered the prospect of demonstrating the feasibility of using "fast, light forces to penetrate the enemy's vital centers," thereby providing a shortcut to victory. This was an early version of what twenty years later became known as the Revolution in Military Affairs. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, Luttwak would later claim, signified "the accomplishment of that revolution."7

Along with a strikingly strident tone, a strong sense of entitlement pervaded both essays. That Americans might submit to "the political blackmail of the kings and dictators of Araby," Ignotus wrote, in order to ensure access to "a product [Arabs] had neither made nor found" represented an affront. Sure, the vast petroleum reserves were located on "their" territory. But for Tucker and Ignotus, that fact qualified as incidental at best. Middle East oil properly belonged to those who had discovered, developed, and actually needed it. By all rights, therefore, it was "ours," a perspective that resonated with many ordinary Americans. All that was required to affirm those rights was the vigorous use of U.S. military power.

Notably absent from this analysis, however, was any appreciation for context. Tucker and Ignotus alike showed no interest in the recent history of the Middle East. They ignored the dubious legacy of previous Western interventionism, especially by Great Britain, until recently the region's imperial overlord. That the United States was willy--nilly supplanting the British as the dominant power in the Arab world and more broadly in the Greater Middle East ought to have given Americans pause. After all, the lessons to be taken from the British experience were almost entirely cautionary ones. That was not a baton that the Americans were grasping but a can of worms.

More astonishingly still, neither Tucker nor Ignotus showed any interest in religion or its political implications. Theirs was a thoroughly secular perspective. Islam, therefore, simply went unmentioned. Once having asserted direct control over Arab oil, Tucker and Ignotus took it for granted that U.S. troops would remain for years to come. Yet they were oblivious to the possibility that a protracted military occupation might encounter unforeseen snags, whether by violating local sensitivities or enmeshing the United States in ancient sectarian or ethnic disputes. In contemplating action, the United States routinely took into account the potential response of powerful adversaries like the Soviet Union. More often than not, it factored in the concerns of valued allies like West Germany or Japan. That a lesser country like Iran or Iraq or Saudi Arabia could obstruct or stymie a superpower was not a proposition that many Americans at this juncture were prepared to entertain. The policy prescriptions offered by Tucker and Ignotus reflected this view—-even if

the North Vietnamese had only recently exposed it as false.

This first round of proposals to militarize U.S. policy in the Middle East found little favor in the Pentagon. Ever since World War II, apart from the brief intervention in Lebanon that Dwight D. Eisenhower had ordered back in 1958—-a virtually bloodless comma inserted between Korea and Vietnam—-America's military had by and large steered clear of the region, leaving it in the hands of diplomats and spooks.8

Now, in the early 1970s, U.S. forces had their hands full with other concerns. The just--concluded American war in Vietnam had left the armed services, especially the U.S. Army, battered in body and spirit. Recovering from that unhappy ordeal was the order of the day. This meant re--equipping and adjusting to the end of the draft, priorities addressed with the Soviet threat very much in mind. The prospect of intervening in the Persian Gulf figured as exceedingly improbable. The idea of sending U.S. forces elsewhere in the wider Islamic world, to Afghanistan, say, or Somalia, appeared absurd.

So when Secretary of Defense Elliott Richardson released his annual report to Congress in April 1973, he evinced little interest in the Middle East and only perfunctory concern about energy security. The 126--page document devoted exactly one anodyne paragraph to each.

In the first, Richardson expressed his hope for an end to "the potentially explosive Arab--Israeli conflict." He cited U.S. arms sales and its "limited military presence" as intended "to produce stability" and to encourage negotiations. Yet Richardson also made it clear that the core problem wasn't Washington's to solve: "Peace and stability will be possible only if all the parties involved develop a mutual interest in accommodation and restraint."

In the second paragraph, while noting that the Persian Gulf contained "approximately one--half of the world's proven oil reserves," Richardson emphasized that the United States would look "primarily to the states in the area to maintain peace and stability."9 Pentagon priorities lay elsewhere.

A year later, in the wake of the October War and with Americans still reeling from the first oil shock, Richardson's successor James R. Schlesinger made it clear that those priorities had not changed. The Pentagon remained fixated on the U.S.--Soviet competition. When the United States evaluated threats to national security, Schlesinger wrote, "We do so primarily with the Soviet Union in mind."

His 237--page report reflected that priority. Apart from a brief reference to the lessons of the most recent Arab--Israeli conflict, which merely "confirmed prior judgments" about war, Schlesinger ignored the Middle East altogether. Under the heading of "planning contingencies," the defense secretary identified Europe, Northeast Asia, and (surprisingly) Southeast Asia as places where U.S. forces could potentially fight. The oil--rich lands touched by the waters of the Persian Gulf didn't make the cut.10

The passing of a year brought yet another defense secretary but no real change in perspective. In November 1975 Donald Rumsfeld ascended to the post of Pentagon chief, which he held for only fourteen months, his tenure curtailed when Gerald Ford lost the 1976 presidential election. In January 1977, Rumsfeld's annual report, issued as eight years of Republican rule were coming to an end, claimed credit over the course of more than three hundred pages for vastly improving U.S. military capabilities while simultaneously issuing dire warnings about the ever--increasing Soviet threat. In its competition with the Soviet Union, the United States was getting stronger and stronger while falling further and further behind.

For Rumsfeld too, therefore, the Middle East remained an afterthought. The United States had a "fundamental interest in uninterrupted access to Middle East oil and gas," he acknowledged. But satisfying that interest was not going to entail the commitment of U.S. forces and was not going to absorb any substantial part of the Pentagon's budget. The troops and the dollars were needed elsewhere. So Rumsfeld affirmed Washington's preference for outsourcing the problem to "reliable friendly forces (for example Iran, Saudi Arabia, Morocco) capable of contributing to regional order." Arming "friendly, important governments" that were themselves "striving to maintain peace and stability in the region" promised to suffice.11

Through the mid--1970s, in other words, Pentagon strategic priorities remained unaffected by developments in and around the Persian Gulf. To hawkish observers like Robert Tucker, growing U.S. energy dependence along with the rise of OPEC might signify a "radical shift in power" and therefore require drastic action.12 Those actually responsible for formulating U.S. national security policy didn't see it that way. They shied away from addressing the implications of any such shift. All that was now about to change as Jimmy Carter became president.

In a world of nation--states, good will and good intentions will not suffice to achieve peace. Simply avoiding war—-the minimalist definition of peace—-implies a meeting of devious minds. In statecraft, calculation necessarily precedes concurrence.

Jimmy Carter saw himself as a peacemaker. On that score, there is no doubting the sincerity of his aspirations. He meant well—-by no means the least among his many admirable qualities. Yet when it came to the exercise of power, Carter was insufficiently devious. He suffered from a want of that instinctive cunning that every successful statesman possesses in great abundance. Carter could be vain, petty, and thin--skinned—-none of these posed a fatal defect. But he lacked guile, a vulnerability that, once discovered, his adversaries at home and abroad did not hesitate to exploit.

One direct consequence was to trigger a full--scale reordering of U.S. strategic interests. From a national security perspective, as never before, the Greater Middle East began to matter. From the end of World War II to 1980, virtually no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in that region.13 Within a decade, a great shift occurred. Since 1990, virtually no American soldiers have been killed in action anywhere *except*

in the Greater Middle East. President Carter neither intended nor foresaw that transformation—-any more than European statesmen in the summer of 1914 intended or foresaw the horrors they were unleashing. But he, like they, can hardly be absolved of responsibility for what was to follow.

When Carter moved into the Oval Office in late January 1977, he inherited a mess. The previous decade and a half, punctuated by assassinations, racial unrest, cultural upheaval, the forced resignation of a president, and a costly, divisive war, had left Americans in something of a funk. That the economy was in a shambles didn't help matters. U.S. power and influence seemed to be waning. The amoral machinations of Richard Nixon and his chief lieutenant Henry Kissinger—-cutting deals with the Kremlin, toasting Red China's murderous leaders, and abandoning the South Vietnamese to their fate—-mocked the ideals that America ostensibly represented.

Like every new president, Carter promised to turn things around. He would be the un--Nixon. On the stump, he had repeatedly assured Americans, "I'll never lie to you." At a time when Washington seemed especially thick with liars, cheats, and thieves, this constituted a radical commitment. Carter took it upon himself to repair the nation's moral compass. This defined what history had summoned him to do. In foreign policy, that meant aligning actions with words. The United States would once more stand for freedom. It would promote peace. It would advance the cause of universal human rights.

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