

History Access Reading Group

Meet with PROFESSOR NIKHIL SINGH
to discuss

The New American Militarism,
by Andrew Bacevich
(New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Wednesday, February 20, 2008
1:30–3:00, Smith 306

At the end of WWII, the United States never made a transition to peace. The Cold War, which began in 1947, inaugurated an era of permanent war that contained Soviet power, but also led to the misguided, deeply destructive war in Vietnam. In this provocative new book, historian Andrew Bacevich argues that the political reaction to the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War, rather than tempering US militarism, helped to forge new proclivities and constituencies in support of the use of military power as a solution to social ills, and as a way of imposing US norms upon an intractable and complex world. “Americans in our own time,” he writes, “have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force” (p.2). With roots in the recent American past, and broadly supported by conservatives and liberals alike, the new American militarism, today threatens to hollow out our democratic institutions, to tear our social fabric, and to isolate the US in the world.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by contacting History Undergraduate Advising:

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A graduate of West Point and self-described political conservative, Bacevich seeks to restore a sense of realism, proportion and ethical balance to US national security policy. Militarism, he suggests, should not be viewed (as it sometimes is on the political left) as some ineluctable expression of the American national character, but as a powerful distortion of an American political tradition deeply suspicious of messianic ambition and misbegotten crusades, and vigilant about the threats posed to liberty by what George Washington called “overgrown military establishments” (p.224-25).

Study Questions

1. How does Bacevich define the “new American militarism”? Is it primarily a matter of foreign policies, government institutions, cultural assumptions, or all of the above?
2. Bacevich sees the “new American militarism” as part of a broad political reaction to the cultural and political legacies of the 1960s. What are the principle groups and constituencies that have supported its development, and why have they done so?
3. How does Bacevich define “neo-conservatism”? What role have self-styled, neo-conservative intellectuals and policy makers played in fashioning justifications for the “new American militarism”?
4. To what extent is the “new American militarism” an outgrowth of Cold War foreign policy? To what extent does it represent a departure from Cold War norms, assumptions and practices?
5. How does Bacevich historically situate the events of 9/11? How do you assess his argument that the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are actually an outgrowth of the late Cold War, and expressly related to the rise of the “new American militarism”?
6. Bacevich insists that militarism of the political scope, spatial and financial scale that now defines US society, culture and global interaction, is an anathema to the American political tradition. But, how “new” is the “new American militarism”? Where should we locate its historical, political and institutional origins?