Endless War
Andrew J. Bacevich denounces 60 years of American militarism.

BY GARY J. BASS

IN 1947, Hanson W. Baldwin, the hawkish military correspondent of this newspaper, warned that the demands of preparing America for a possible war would “wrench and distort and twist the body politic and the body economic . . . prior to war.” He wondered whether America could confront the Soviet Union “without becoming a ‘garrison state’ and destroying the very qualities and virtues and principles we originally set about to save.”

It is that same dread of a martial America that drives Andrew J. Bacevich today. Bacevich forcefully denounces the militarization that he says has already become a routine, unremarked-upon part of our daily lives — and will only get worse as America fights on in Afghanistan and beyond. He rips into what he calls a postwar American dogma “so deeply engrafted in the American collective consciousness as to have all but disappeared from view.” “Washington Rules” is a tough-minded, bracing and intelligent polemic against some 60 years of American militarism.

This outrage at a warlike America has special bite coming from Bacevich. No critic of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could have brighter conservative credentials. He is a blunt-talking Midwesterner, a West Point graduate who served for 23 years in the United States Army, a Vietnam veteran who retired as a colonel, and a sometime contributor to National Review. “By temperament and upbringing, I had always taken comfort in orthodoxy,” he writes. But George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Bacevich says, “pushed me fully into opposition. Claims that once seemed elementary — above all, claims relating to the essentially benign purposes of American power — now appeared preposterous.”

From Harry S. Truman’s presidency to today, Bacevich argues, Americans have trumpeted the credo that they alone must “lead, save, liberate and ultimately transform the world.” That crusading mission is implemented by what Bacevich caustically calls “the sacred trinity”: “U.S. military power, the Pentagon’s global footprint and an American penchant for intervention.” This “blessing” might have made some sense in 1945, he says, but it is catastrophic today. It relegates America to “a condition of permanent national security crisis.”

Bacevich has two main targets in his sights. The first are the commissioners of the national security establishment, who perpetuate these “Washington rules” of global domination. By Washington, he means not just the federal government, but also a host of satraps who gain power, cash or prestige from this perpetual state of emergency: defense contractors, corporations, big banks, interest groups, think tanks, universities, television networks and The New York Times. He complains that an unthinking Washington consensus on global belligerence is just as strong among mainstream Democrats as among mainstream Republicans. Those who step outside this monolithic view, like Dennis Kucinich or Ron Paul, are quickly dismissed as crackpots, Bacevich says. This leaves no serious course of national security policy.”

Bacevich’s second target is the sleepwalking American public. He says that they notice foreign policy only in the depths of a disaster that, like Vietnam or Iraq, is too colossal to ignore. As he puts it, “The citizens of the United States have essentially forfeited any capacity to ask first-order questions about the fundamentals of national security policy.”

Bacevich is singularly withering on the American public willingness to ignore those who do their fighting for them. He warns of “the evisceration of civic culture that results when a small praetorian guard shoulders the burden of waging perpetual war, while the great majority of citizens purport to revere its members, even as they ignore or profit from their service.” Here he has a particular right to be heard: on May 13, 2007, his son Andrew J. Bacevich Jr., an Army first lieutenant, was killed on combat patrol in Iraq. Bacevich does not discuss his tragic loss here, but wrote devastatingly about it at the time in The Washington Post: “Memorial Day orators will say that a G.I.’s life is priceless. Don’t believe it. I know what value the U.S. government as-signs to a soldier’s life: I’ve been handed the check.”

BACEVICH is less interested in foreign policy here (he offers only cursory remarks about the objectives and capabilities of countries like China, Russia, North Korea and Iran) than in the way he thinks militarism has corrupt-ed America. In his acid account of the inexorable growth of the national security state, he emphasizes not presidents, who come and go, but the architects of the system that envelops them: Allen W. Dulles, who built up the C.I.A., and Curtis E. LeMay, who did the same for the Strategic Air Command. Both of them, Bacevich says, would get memorials on the Mall in Washington if we were honest about how the capital really works.

The mandarins thrived under John F. Kennedy, whose administration “was fixating on Fidel Castro with the same feverish intensity as the Bush administration exactly 40 years later was to fixate on Saddam Hussein — and with as little strategic logic.” The Washington consen-sualists were thrown badly off balance by defeat in Vietnam but, Bacevich says, soon regained their stride under Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton — setting the stage for George W. Bush. Barack Obama campaigned on change and getting out of Iraq, but when it comes to the war in Afghanistan or military budgets, he is, Bacevich insists, just another cat’s-paw for the Washington establishment: “Obama would not challenge the tradition that Curtis LeMay and Allen Dulles had done so much to erect.”

Bacevich sometimes overdoes the high dudgeon. He writes, “The folly and hubris of the policy makers who heedlessly thrust the nation into an ill-defined and open-ended ‘global war on terror’ without the foggiest notion of what victory would look like, how it would be won and what it might cost approached standards hither-to achieved only by slightly mad German warlords.” Which slightly mad German warlords exactly? Bacevich, an erudite historian, could mean some princelings or perhaps Kaiser Wilhelm II, but the standard reading will be Hitler.

And he underplays some of the ways in which Americans have resisted militarism. The all-volunteer force, for all its deep inequities, is a testament to American horror at conscription. He never mentions Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the great New York senator who fought government secrecy and quixotically tried to abolish the C.I.A. after the end of the cold war. Although Bacevich admires Dwight D. Eisenhower for his farewell address warning against the forces of the “military-industrial complex,” he slams Eisenhower for enabling those same forces as president. Yet the political scientist Aaron L. Friedberg and other scholars credit Eisenhower for resisting demands for huge boosts in defense spending.

Bacevich, in his own populist way, sees himself as updating a tradition — from George Washington and John Quincy Adams to J. William Fulbright and Martin Luther King Jr. — that calls on America to exemplify freedom but not actively to spread it. It isn’t every American’s tradition (and it offers pretty cold comfort to Poles, Rwandans and Congolese), but it’s one that’s necessary to keep the country from going off the rails. As foreign policy debates in the run-up to the November elections degenerate into Muslim-bashing bombast, the country is lucky to have a fierce, smart peacemaker like Bacevich.