



2014-004

Andrew J. Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013. Pp. 238. ISBN 978-0-8050-8296-8.

Review by Thomas G. Palaima, The University of Texas (tpalaima@austin.utexas.edu)

The approach this nation has taken to waging war since Vietnam (absolving the people from meaningful involvement), along with the way it organizes its army (relying on professionals), has altered the relationship between the military and society in ways that too few Americans seem willing to acknowledge. Since 9/11, that relationship has been heavy on symbolism and light on substance, with assurances of admiration for soldiers displacing serious consideration of what they are sent to do or what consequences ensue. (14)

In *Breach of Trust*, Andrew Bacevich (Boston Univ.)¹ asks how and why the current American military system came to be, “who benefits and who suffers as a consequence” (14), and what should be done about it. He contrasts how the United States has “gone to war” in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan with the country’s responses to calls to war in 1861, 1917, and 1941 (98), and suggests what features of America’s past war-making should never have been abandoned and need to be revived. He is especially concerned with the packaging of and commentary on more recent wars² by public intellectuals, politicians, media pundits, and military leaders, including officers who have retired into lucrative positions as consultants (effectively lobbyists) for military contractors.³ He defines the standards to which he holds such influential men and women in a democracy in an opening epigraph taken from Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “In the purer ages of the commonwealth, the use of arms was reserved for ... citizens who had a country to love, a property to defend, and some share in enacting those laws which it was in their interest, as well as duty, to maintain” (ix).

Bacevich believes the United States’ wars over the last twenty years have been inspired neither by patriotism nor the need to protect property and loved ones from enemy threats. In the same period, Americans have shown no great desire to preserve their civic freedoms by meaningful involvement in the processes of government. John and Jane Q. Public live as the policies of their leaders have encouraged them to: committed to what Bacevich calls the three no’s: “we will not change ... we will not pay ... we will not bleed” (190–91). The reason is that, in former general Stanley McChrystal’s phrase, they have no “skin in the game” (122). They lack the sense of either compelling self-interest or devotion to the common good of society (115–96) that might inspire “shared sacrifice” (19) in time of war. Bacevich identifies a missing moral sensibility: Americans simply do not see the wars their country wages as *their* wars.

Since World War II, the author argues, American military actions have not been “people’s wars” (17–27). Sadly missing has been the moral imperative summed up in 1944 by then Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson, himself a veteran of World War I: “In a democracy, all citizens have equal rights and equal obligations. When the nation is in peril, the obligation of saving it should be shared by all, not foisted on a small percentage” (19). Up through World War II, the United States was well served by two kinds of soldiers: armed citizen-soldiers like the “embattled farmers” who won the war for national independence and long-service regulars who “between big wars fought small ones while enforcing America’s writ throughout an ever expanding imperium.” These regulars invaded Mexico, seized California, tamed the American West,

1. A US Military Academy graduate, he served as an Army officer from 1969 to 1992.

2. More precisely, congressionally authorized presidential uses of military force.

3. These include Smedley Butler, Franklin Roosevelt, George C. Marshall, William Westmoreland, Richard Nixon, Creighton Abrams, George H.W. Bush, H.R. McMaster, William Jefferson Clinton, Gordon R. Sullivan, Lee Butler, George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Eric Shinseki, Tommy Franks, William G. Boykin, David Petraeus, Barack Obama, Stanley McChrystal, Randolph Bourne, John Keegan, Richard Cohen, and David Brooks.

“put paid to Spain’s crumbling empire” in Cuba and in the Philippines, and “helped suppress the Boxer Rebellion” (48–49).

The definitive turning point, Bacevich writes, was “Dick’s trick,” a characteristically Nixonian political maneuver during the social and political unrest of the late 1960s, when “questions regarding the army’s nature and purpose along with the ordinary soldier’s relationship to American society had acquired unusual urgency” (56). While campaigning for the presidency in 1968, Nixon opposed the draft and stressed that the arbitrary nature of the lottery system then being used to provide troops for the Vietnam War could not “be squared with our whole concept of liberty, justice and equality under law” (56). Once Nixon was elected, the so-called Gates Commission report (204n21) gave him the political cover to end the draft in December 1972.

Joseph Califano, a former special assistant to President Lyndon Johnson, warned that “by removing the middle class from even the threat of conscription, we remove perhaps the greatest inhibition on a President’s decision to wage war” (57–58). (Note the assumption that the president, not Congress, decides whether the United States goes to war.) General William Westmoreland likewise insisted that “deeply embedded in the American ethos is the idea that every citizen is a soldier.” But, as Bacevich sees it, “Vietnam had destroyed whatever remained of that ethos along with whatever credibility the general had once possessed” (57–58). Senior officers at the time traced the indiscipline and reduced fighting effectiveness caused by, in historian Robert Griffith’s words, “imports from society” like drug and alcohol abuse, as well as divisiveness and dissent among soldiers, to draftees and “unwilling draft-motivated volunteers” (58).

In the two decades between the Gates Commission report (1970) and Operation Desert Storm (1991), the US military establishment transformed “the last vestiges of ‘Elvis’s army’—the draftee force that had deployed to Southeast Asia” into a professional army that would have pleased the late General Creighton Abrams, that is, one controlled by its own high-ranking officers, who were determined to avoid “long, drawn-out, inconclusive conflicts” in “some Third World Country” (82), and to fight the kinds of war they had been trained for (82).

The perceived ongoing threat posed by the USSR and the Warsaw Pact countries enabled the Pentagon to convince Congress and the American people of the need to maintain military appropriations, force levels, and preparedness at high levels (82–83). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Army leaders, under chief of staff General Gordon R. Sullivan (1991–95), lobbied to take “the best army in the world and make it the best army in a different world” (85). In Sullivan’s words, this new best army would participate in a global strategic mandate as the United States’ “principal instrument for the projection of carefully modulated military force.... [C]apable of decisive victory, [it would meet] national objectives quickly and with minimal expenditure of national wealth and resources” (89, 210nn25–26, 28–29).

Just as Josef Goebbels proved how well the big lie could work, General Sullivan’s goals for the US Army demonstrated that “As for aspirations, bigger is always better” (92). The new model army required no national mobilization, no sacrifices of loved ones, no changes of life pursuits, not even (I will add) a second thought. Such was the fairy tale spun by army officers and political leaders and readily believed by those few Americans who were even paying attention.

So it was that, shortly after 9/11, President George W. Bush could urge his countrymen to “enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed” (30). As Bacevich laments, this was a far cry from the national mobilization of citizens and soldiers in World War II or John F. Kennedy’s “stern inaugural charge” (“ask not ...”) in 1961, when the Cold War was about to heat up in Cuba, Berlin, and southeast Asia.

During the first Gulf War, too, Bacevich trenchantly notes, President George H.W. Bush had also advised Americans to go on enjoying their lives and leave waging war to the experts. He likens the claim that US ground forces in 1991 had defeated “the fourth largest army in the world in 100 hours” to the pitches of car salesmen: “careful selection and sculpting determine the facts that count.... Treating assertions as if they were facts enhances their persuasiveness” (92) The facile 100-hour calculation omits the “weeks of uncon-

tested aerial bombardment” of Iraqi forces before the ground attack was launched and the fact that “the war didn’t really end when George H.W. Bush ordered coalition forces to cease operations” (93).

Indeed, not till 2011, twenty years after Desert Storm and eight after George W. Bush had declared “mission accomplished,” were US forces finally leaving Iraq, as President Barack Obama proclaimed, “with their heads held high, proud of their success, and knowing that the American people stand united in support of our troops.” Bacevich scathingly comments: “Apart from a handful of deluded neoconservatives, no one believes that the United States accomplished its objectives in Iraq, unless the main objective was to commit mayhem, apply a tourniquet to staunch the bleeding, and then declare the patient stable while hastily leaving the scene of the crime” (94).

General Sullivan’s post-Cold-War force has evolved into the instrument of America’s open-ended global war on terrorism, entailing brief doses of “shock and awe” followed by protracted commitments of US forces to Vietnam-like fighting conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The manpower limitations of the all-volunteer forces have necessitated the regular use of private security contractors (PSCs), “aka mercenaries and war profiteers” (126). The statistics Bacevich provides on costs to our government and profits for the PSC firms (127–29)—twenty-two of which won over 50 percent of all contracts from government agencies—prove that, alongside Joseph Heller’s Yossarian, Milo Minderbinder is alive and prospering as amorally or immorally as ever.⁴

Bacevich pillories “the odd military officer stricken in retirement with Smedley’s syndrome” (190), that is, who spent his entire career implementing policies he then criticizes in retirement. He applies essayist Randolph Bourne’s criticisms of intellectuals during World War I to those commenting on today’s operations in Iraq and Afghanistan: “For a particular category of intellectuals, entranced by the aphrodisiac of power, independence is a pose willingly abandoned when the prospect of ‘relevance’ beckons” (151). Bacevich’s fullest case studies are of Stanley McChrystal (115–23), columnist David Brooks (142–48), and eminent British military historian John Keegan (187–88).

Since Vietnam, matters have now devolved to the point where “All it takes to bomb Belgrade, invade Iraq, or send Navy SEALs into Pakistan is concurrence among a half dozen people and a nod from the president” (125). When their elected representatives fail even to deliberate whether to declare war, it can be no surprise that American citizens are unprecedentedly disengaged from the political process.

Bacevich sometimes idealizes the sense of duty and self-sacrifice for the greater good in Americans of the World War II era (Tom Brokaw’s “Greatest Generation”). As he himself notes, Franklin Roosevelt and his advisers set limits on what could be asked of the American people. As General George C. Marshall flatly put it, “A democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War” (23). Nor were people in 1941–45 eager to send their able-bodied fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and cousins off to places as unknown to them as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Syria are to most US citizens today. And, too, the people of other nations had it worse than Americans: after the Great Depression of the 1930s, came steady employment for millions of US citizens in the war industries of the 1940s. “The war that exhausted other belligerents and left untold millions in want around the world found Americans becoming not only wealthier but also more equal” (24–25).

Breach of Trust describes the era from the 1840s into the early twentieth century, when long-service regular soldiers expanded the US imperium in the American West, Mexico, the Philippines, Cuba, and China. However, its author nowhere mentions that this aggressive exertion of power required the passive acquiescence of American citizens, even as some prominent congressmen strongly objected to such abuses as “the murder of Mexicans on their own soil” and the president’s “usurping the war-making power.”

* * *

Bacevich dedicates his book to two Army officers. One was killed by a private in Vietnam. The other, Col. Theodore (Ted) Westhusing, a former student and close friend of mine, died apparently by his own hand in Iraq.

4. The Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2011 documented that contractor fraud alone cost the US government “\$12 million every day for the past ten years” and that the “backlog of unaudited incurred costs” would “exceed \$1 trillion by 2016” (128, 218nn8–9, 11).

The forty-four-year-old Westhusing, a senior faculty member (English and Philosophy) at the US Military Academy and a married father of three young children, was serving a six-month stint with the Multinational Security Transition Command overseeing the training of Iraqi police officers. His death on 5 June 2005 made him the highest-ranking officer to die in Iraq to that date. “[His] conception of honor [had] collided with a radically discordant reality” (131).⁵

On 20 December 2004, Ted wrote me from West Point:

Twice good news from the Westhusing front: Department of the Army selected me for promotion to colonel (thus proving again that every dog has its day)... I’m deploying to Iraq for six months to serve on the team of a former boss of mine, Lieutenant General P[e]traeus. We’ll be continuing the effort to get the Iraqi forces capable of killing the bad guys themselves and of securing their own country. Hooyah! I’m very excited about both.

While Ted’s death certainly relates to the themes of *Breach of Trust* (129–37), it would be simplistic to reduce his story to a moral tale of a truly good man unable to act in an obscenely immoral environment. Individual Americans are not directly responsible for the congressionally authorized presidential uses of armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; these are not “people’s wars.” Seldom in history have citizens en masse controlled their own destinies. For the people to possess such control would require those wielding political, economic, military, and legal authority to act honorably and selflessly within self-perpetuating systems of power. Like Homer’s *Iliad* or Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, *Breach of Trust* is a reminder that such individuals are almighty scarce.

General Petraeus, the man who recruited Ted Westhusing, had much earlier judged him to be a high achiever—a thoroughly ethical and honorable officer, teacher, and human being. Petraeus then effectively placed him in a moral wasteland, where he was compelled to deal with contractors over whom he had little authority.

Westhusing was informed by an anonymous letter that the contractors training Iraqis to perform their own policing and security operations were not doing their jobs, that equipment that could be used against American troops had gone missing, and that contract soldiers had joined in killing Iraqi civilians. The sender further alleged that Westhusing had himself been remiss in his oversight and easily duped by former SEALs among the contractors. Ted knew the charges were true. When he then informed his superiors, generals Petraeus and Joseph Fil, of the facts, they dismissed the reported problems as insignificant within the chaos of Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁶

Ted was due to return home on 9 July, but there was some doubt that a replacement officer could be found by then. The almost defiantly perfunctory tone of his 28 May letter clearing the contractors and by extension those in charge of them suggests that it was a quid pro quo for his ticket home. Not only the contents of the letter, but its less than official format suggest a kind of “I’ll do this, but it is not what I want to do” mindset. Given Ted Westhusing’s impeccable moral standards, the letter would have been, to his own mind, the sole self-serving and dishonorable act he ever intentionally committed. This may help to explain his apparent suicide on 5 June (his dear mother’s birthday), five weeks before he was to return to the States. I think Ted felt he had lost his “belief in the cause” and joined in the “lies and selfishness” decried in his suicide note.

Who, finally, is guilty of the most serious breach of trust? The American people? Decent military men like Ted Westhusing? Or those leaders who covet and abuse power to manipulate those under their authority? The evidence and arguments that Andrew Bacevich provides in *Breach of Trust* make the answer still more obvious and more painful.

5. See T. Christian Miller, “A Journey That Ended in Anguish,” *LA Times* (27 Nov 2005) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1401.htm, and chapter 14, “Cost of War,” in *Blood Money: Wasted Billions, Lost Lives, and Corporate Greed in Iraq* (NY: Little, Brown, 2006), and Robert Bryce, “I Am Sullied No More,” *Texas Observer* (9 Mar 2007) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1402.htm.

6. Bacevich (132) misleads in implying that Westhusing first informed Petraeus and Fil of the alleged contractor misconduct in a letter of 28 May 2005 and that he believed the accusations were unfounded. In fact, he had discussed the matter with his superiors weeks earlier. He also wrote to his mother and talked to his wife about his growing disillusionment, his lack of support from above and below, and the absence of true brothers in arms in whom he might confide. He was even contemplating quitting his assignment.