

2006

## Examining the Declining Utility of Military Force

Ali Wyne

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Military and Veterans Studies Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [National Security Law Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

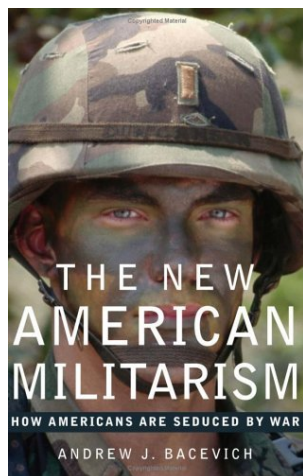
---

### Recommended Citation

Wyne, Ali (2006) "Examining the Declining Utility of Military Force," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol6/iss1/23>

This Review Essays is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).



## Examining the Declining Utility of Military Force

By Ali Wyne

**The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War by Andrew J. Bacevich. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 270pp.**

In this elegantly written and insightfully argued book, Andrew J. Bacevich argues that the United States should reexamine the militarism that has increasingly come to characterize its national security policy. A professional soldier, Bacevich criticizes what he describes as a “marriage of military metaphysics with eschatological ambition” (3). Indeed, he defends the *conservative* credentials of his opposition to militarism—rooted, he argues, in the outlook of the founders—while condemning the radicalism of so-called neoconservatives.

### Resurgent Militarism

Although I am hardly a specialist in security studies, I would argue that a national security strategy that centers on military power makes pragmatic sense (whatever its moral wisdom) when:

- A country’s central objectives are more easily realized through its deployment; or
- A country faces an external threat to its national security or vital interests, the character or gravity of which legitimates a forceful response.

The wave of colonization that the 1884 Berlin Conference sanctioned, for example, meets the first criterion: in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, acquiring foreign territories was an important component of national power projection.<sup>1</sup> For this essay’s purposes, however, it is the second criterion that merits close scrutiny. Indeed, the pressing question now facing American policymakers is whether current threats—in particular, the threat of decentralized terrorist networks, often operating with only nominal affiliations to al-Qaeda—lend themselves to military response (Friedman 2005: 28).

---

<sup>1</sup> From November 1884 to February 1885, amidst the wave of industrialization that was then sweeping through the West, representatives of 14 European countries convened in Berlin to discuss investment prospects in Africa, which possessed an abundance of raw materials. The principal result of their conference, the Berlin Act of 1885, awarded “spheres of influence” to the participants, setting in motion a particularly rapacious period of colonization.

A central irony of the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies is that their assertive character has helped to transform the organization of global terrorist networks and, accordingly, increase the threat that they pose. Namely, while al-Qaeda formerly conformed to a (roughly) centralized, hierarchical terrorist structure, with bulwarks in a few Arab and Muslim countries, it is now thoroughly diffuse, with pockets operating on a global scale. Of note is its remarkable ability to adapt its tactics to the evolving geopolitical environment (Stern 2003; Coll and Glasser 2005).<sup>2</sup> A recent report issued the following appraisal:

*These experts say al-Qaeda, always loosely knit, is mutating into satellites that attract local operatives bound by disenchantment with the Western societies in which they grew up. It is no longer a hierarchy with Usama bin Laden calling the shots, they say.... The diffuse nature of the shape-shifting al-Qaeda is one reason it's hard to fight. Security services may crack one cell but find little connecting it to others... al-Qaeda recruiters are very good at spotting the vulnerable—often young men undergoing personal crises—whether drugs, crime, joblessness, poverty or a spiritual hunger. They are offered an ideology that explains the difficulties and provides a new mind-set (USA Today 2005).*

This assessment has two implications:

It would be prudent to allocate greater counterterrorism funding to human intelligence, police work, and law enforcement than to defense expenditures; and

Unlike American adversaries of the past, the leaders of terrorist organizations derive sustenance from human emotions, as well as the ability to manipulate them with relative ease (Kamarck 2005).

Proceeding from this second point, it is instructive to digress to the United States' defeat in Vietnam. Its loss owed not to military weakness, or to a reluctance to use force, but to a failure to appreciate the humanness of its enemy: its adversary was not a faceless juggernaut, intent on inflicting immense destruction to extend its arc of power, but rather, a people who would not yield. Hence Robert McNamara's observation that, "We underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people to fight and die for their beliefs and values" (Ford 1996: 106).

With some exceptions, nationalism does not animate America's present foes; a deep conviction in and willingness to defend certain principles, however, certainly do. As such, counterterrorism strategies that fail to accord primacy to understanding and, ultimately, mitigating the influence of their beliefs are misguided. Unfortunately, the Bush administration has not marshaled a sustained campaign to counter their spread and penetration in susceptible societies. In 2004, it spent approximately \$1.2 billion on public diplomacy; its expenditures on military spending, by contrast, totaled \$455 billion, accounting for 47 percent of global defense spending (Johnson et al. 2005; Sköns 2005). Bacevich properly notes that this level of spending is incongruous with the nature and scope of the threats that are posed to American national security. He maintains that attaining greater military preponderance for its own sake appears to have become a central imperative:

*Since the end of the Cold War, having come to value military power for its own sake, the United States has abandoned [its historical belief in maintaining as small a military establishment as is necessary,] and is committed as a matter of policy to maintaining military capabilities far in excess of those of any would-be*

---

<sup>2</sup> Also of critical importance is al-Qaeda's and its followers' increasingly sophisticated employment of the Internet to coordinate their operations.

*adversary or combination of adversaries.... In 2002, American defense spending exceeded by a factor of twenty-five the combined defense budgets of the seven "rogue states" then comprising the roster of U.S. enemies.... The primary mission of America's far-flung military establishment is global power projection, a reality tacitly understood in all quarters of American society... Indeed, the [armed] services have come to view outright supremacy as merely adequate and any hesitation in efforts to increase the margin of supremacy as evidence of falling behind (16-18).*

Bacevich could easily have extended such analysis to the realm of nuclear weapons, a domain in which the United States, too, seeks dominance. At present, the Bush administration spends 12 times more on efforts to construct new nuclear weapons than it does on nonproliferation efforts (Paine 2004: 8). Since it took office in January 2001, the United States has withdrawn from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and failed to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Neither of these protocols elicits mention in 2002's *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, which asserts only that the United States should "ensure compliance with relevant international agreements" (United States 2002: 2). While its declared adversaries pursue the development of basic nuclear weapons—a regrettable development, to be sure—the United States is spending \$485 million on a "robust nuclear earth penetrating warhead," and between \$2 to \$4 billion on a "modern pit facility" that could annually yield 125 to 450 plutonium "pits," crucial to the manufacture of nuclear weapons (Union of Concerned Scientists 2005).

Furthermore, Bacevich could have directed his attention to the Bush administration's postures on biological chemical weapons, as many scholars have done with rigor (Chevrier 2001; Deller and Burroughs 2003; Wheelis and Dando 2003). The conclusions at which they arrive are distressing, as are those that result from examining the Bush administration's pursuit of futuristic technologies. Within the past year, news items have revealed that the United States military is:

- Interested in manufacturing "green" bullets;
- Constructing weapons that release electromagnetic energy;
- Planning to produce plutonium-238 for the first time since the Cold War; and
- Examining the possibility of militarizing space

Some basic explanations are necessary. First, green bullets contain no lead, but rather, are composed of nylon and tungsten. They were initially hailed as environmentally safer alternatives to their lead-filled counterparts, and, between 1994 and 2001 alone, the army spent \$12 million dollars attempting to perfect them (Giuliano 2001). However, there exists a disparity between their intended and actual effects. Laboratory examinations have revealed that tungsten is insoluble, and actually facilitates the ability of lead to penetrate through ground surfaces (CNN 2005). Second, energy-beam weapons emit highly accurate and virtually infinite beams of electromagnetic energy, which travel at the speed of light and, as such, preclude the possibility of an enemy combatant's escaping—over the past 11 years, the military has spent \$51 million on just one component of this weapons program, which explores how "directed energy" can be used to interdict enemy combatants (*USA Today* 2005). The emergence of logistical difficulties associated with their deployment and the need to allay fears concerning their effects on humans have delayed energy-beam weapons' introduction into combat situations (*USA Today* 2005).

The central question to pose here is whether the benefits that these two technologies confer outweigh their costs. It seems reasonable to suggest that, at a time when the United States is largely shouldering the burden of nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan (while attempting to prosecute a “global war on terrorism”), such investments are superfluous. Indeed, the fiscal constraints that America’s current engagements impose should dissuade the military from pursuing costly endeavors that exhibit little return. The Comanche helicopter program, the Crusader artillery system, and the V-22 Osprey all testify to this principle (Bacevich 216-17).

The first two developments that I noted—the advents of, respectively, green bullets and energy-beam weapons—are of concern because they highlight the military’s tendency to invest in costly and, oftentimes, ineffectual technologies, what Bacevich terms “massive and redundant capabilities” (Bacevich: 17). The latter two developments, for reasons that I presently set forth, are of greater concern: that they have emerged in parallel suggests that they are related. Plutonium-238, a highly radioactive substance, “is used in radioisotope thermoelectric generators to provide electricity for space probes that venture too far from the sun to use solar power” (Gagon 2006). The current production plan will generate 150 kilograms (which translates to approximately 50,000 containers) over the next three decades, at a cost of \$1.5 billion. The Bush administration has allowed only that the plutonium that is eventually stockpiled will be used in “secret missions” (Broad 2005: A1).

However, one can venture a reasonable conjecture as to what such missions might entail. As it looks to consolidate the advantages that the United States military retains on the ground and in the air, the defense establishment has placed growing emphasis on achieving supremacy in space. For the 2006 Fiscal Year, the Department of Defense (DOD) is allocating \$60.9 million to a spacecraft that could assault enemy satellites, as well as \$68 million to a project that would employ infrared technology to intercept and deactivate a target satellite’s transmissions (Pincus 2005: A2). Such initiatives pose two risks: they encourage the very countries that the United States is attempting to deter—ostensibly Russia and China—to pursue similar projects; and, by extension, they realize the hitherto untapped potential of space as a domain for warfare.

As the United States undertakes to project its power into space, little debate has occurred on some basic questions. Would there be any restrictions on the physical boundaries of space warfare? What legal barriers would be erected to govern it? Which country, bloc, or organization, if any, would have the jurisdiction to enforce them? On a more specific note, what would be done to address the destructive capacity of space debris (Hitchens 2005)? And, returning to earlier discussion, how, if at all, does plutonium-238 figure into this new enterprise?

I will comment only on the last of these questions. In 2006, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) intends to request \$600 million to launch a New Horizons Pluto probe that would employ a radioisotope thermal generator, powered by plutonium-238 (Berger 2004). This substance will also play a central role in developing the Jupiter Icy Moons Orbiter (JIMO) probe, to be deployed in 2011. The JIMO mission would inaugurate the use of nuclear reactors for propulsion, thereby establishing an unsettling precedent (Danneskiold 2004).

There is a widespread belief that space warfare would greatly expand the frontiers of destruction that nuclear weapons have, until now, predominantly shaped; and that, accordingly, it would exact massive costs, human and economic, not only on those societies that engaged in warfare, but also, regrettably, on those that did not (Krepon 2005). On August 12, 2003, the United Nations (U.N.)

General Assembly voted 174-0 in opposition to the militarization of space; the United States was one of only four countries that abstained from this vote (Krepon 2005: 4). Today's policymakers should recall that America is party to the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, Article IV of which specifies that all bodies beyond Earth's orbit are to be used for peaceful purposes. The belief that militarizing space could imperil human survival does not appear to be too far removed from reality. It is instructive to recall how close the world came to the precipice of self-destruction in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. labeled it "the most dangerous moment in human history" (Kennedy 1999: 7). Unusual fortune and basic sensibility intervened then, preventing improvident impulses on the part of the United States and the Soviet Union from prevailing. There is no assurance that they would arrest a similar conflict in the heavens.

The above analysis does not posture as an exacting or comprehensive appraisal of the new American militarism, which comprises far too great a litany of topics to be reasonably addressed in one essay. It does, however, attempt to provide a glimpse into the United States' pursuit of "full-spectrum dominance," a pursuit that belies the nature and complexity of the security challenges that this country faces now and will confront in the future (United States 2000: 13).<sup>3</sup> Today's policymakers would be wise to recall the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, hardly one to shirk from bolstering the defense establishment: "There is no way that a country can satisfy the craving for absolute security, but it can bankrupt itself morally and economically in attempting to reach that illusory goal through arms alone" (Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities 2006). The attempt to tailor obsolescent strategies to novel challenges is clearly misguided, as Eisenhower would have concluded.

There are no simple ways of redressing the variant of American militarism that Bacevich discusses, especially as it has progressed well beyond its nascent stages. That being said, however, the recommendations that he proposes offer a prudent foundation upon which to build. Of greatest relevance, at this juncture, is the sixth of them: "devise an appropriate gauge for determining the level of U.S. defense spending" (214). While the construction of such a barometer would not be simple, there should not be much doubt that the current level of military expenditures is excessive.

The other suggestions that constitute his critique, as well as the arguments that form the core of The New American Militarism, are equally sensible. The central flaw of Bacevich's work, then, lies not in its content—which is difficult, if not impossible, to reproach—but in its omissions. One can only hope that he elects to research and publish a revised, expanded edition, which deepens the contentions that he has set forth, and expounds arguments that he has excluded. Foremost among these arguments is that the utility of armed force is declining. To his credit, he does allude to this assertion on a few occasions. Near the end of the seventh chapter, for example, Bacevich issues the following assessment: "Furthermore, the aura that by 2001 had come to suffuse American attitudes towards war, soldiers, and military institutions had dulled the capacity of the American people to

---

<sup>3</sup> While it is true that President Bush and his advisors "have certainly taken up the mantle of this militarism with a verve not seen in years" (Bacevich: 4), fairness dictates that one acknowledge the role of nominally liberal administrations in facilitating its resurgence. Recall, for example, that it was President Carter, whose lasting legacy is that of a pacifist, who perhaps most explicitly articulated the United States' right to employ military force to defend its "vital interests" in the Middle East (181). Furthermore, it was the Clinton administration that advanced the notion of "full-spectrum dominance." That it is perhaps not as explicit about its intentions as its conservative counterpart belies the liberal establishment's contribution to the steady militarization of America's national security policy.

think critically about the actual limits of military power” (202-03). In the beginning of the eighth chapter, furthermore, he speaks of “a century filled to overflowing with evidence pointing to the limited utility of armed force” (208).

What is quite remarkable, in fact, is the level of energy and thought that intellectuals and policymakers have historically devoted not to justifying the deployment of armed force, but rather, more fundamentally, to justifying its *relevance*. In the 1940s and 1950s, as Cold War tensions were growing, nuclear strategists devised the concept of a “limited war,” with the intent of “enhancing the direct political relevance of American military power” (155). In the 1970s, Norman Podhoretz, editor-in-chief of *Commentary*, worked vigorously to refute the notion that armed force had become “obsolete as an instrument of American political purposes” (74). Two decades later, influential neoconservatives strove to redress the “defective appreciation of what power could accomplish” that had apparently prevailed in the wake of the Clinton administration’s mixed record of humanitarian intervention (85).

Other such examples abound, but I will not discuss them here. Bacevich illuminates, perhaps unwittingly, that if planners accorded such great primacy merely to explaining the relevance of armed force, then perhaps these same planners recognized its declining utility. However, he does not explain sufficiently what accounts for force’s increasingly limited value. While such an omission is understandable, considering that the book’s focus is different, it is deserving of elaboration.

### **The Declining Utility of Military Force**

One of the most critical sources of the declining relevance of military power, and the one to which I now direct my attention, is the growing importance of what some scholars have termed “information power.” As the twin revolutions in information and communication progress, the pace at which technological capabilities are expanding is rivaled only by the rate at which technological costs are falling.

These developments, especially the advent of the Internet, have set in motion a democratization of sorts, comparable in scale and impact to the introduction of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Deibert 1997). More specifically, they are allowing people from all corners of the world to access information and, more importantly, participate in vibrant discourse on global issues. Consequently, the United States no longer enjoys asymmetrical control over information and the central organs through which it is transmitted. Historically, states that have wielded disproportionate geopolitical influence have successfully controlled information. In ancient Mesoamerican, Egyptian, Mycenaean Greek, and Chinese societies, for example, elites learned and employed the newly developed system of writing to entrench the power gap between themselves and the uneducated bourgeoisie classes. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century Franco-Belgian anthropologist, once posited that “[writing] seems to favor the exploitation rather than the enlightenment of mankind... the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings” (Diamond 1999: 235)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Examples such as this one are numerous. Consider Nazi Germany’s establishment and fortification of the Propaganda Ministry during the 1930s: see Shirer (1960). Shirer, who lived in Germany during the ascent of the Third Reich, writes

During the Cold War, public officials in both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized that prevailing in the battle of perceptions was of paramount importance, perhaps of even greater strategic value than securing an advantageous position in the arms race. Persuading countries to favor one ideology over another was largely an exercise in the art of public diplomacy. By deploying radio programs such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty, the United States, without resorting to force or employing subversive means (although it certainly engaged in both of these actions), gradually convinced the societies of the Eastern hemisphere that in the epic battle between democratic capitalism and despotic totalitarianism, the former would triumph.<sup>5</sup> With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the attendant removal of (what was then) the most pressing threat to the United States' national security, American policymakers progressively invested less effort in disseminating their messages on critical issues to the global population. Thus between 1994 and 2001, the federal government's expenditures on public diplomacy declined by approximately 53 percent (Epstein 2005: CRS-5). This complacency prevailed at a time when the revolutions in information and communication were beginning to discernibly impact the geopolitical environment.

Indeed, with the rise of alternative news networks such as al-Jazeera, and especially with the growth of the Internet, the United States' messages on terrorism and democracy promotion do not resonate as widely or with as much power as they once did. As poll after poll reveals, even the people of countries that the United States counts among its closet allies view its statements with skepticism and, quite often, hostility. In the past, when the world's primary sources of information were based in the United States, the world was, naturally, more inclined to accept the legitimacy of its viewpoints. Now, however, that members of the global community have access to sources of information that often contradict the United States' and possess media that allow them to exchange information with others, they are more incredulous and capable of offering independent analyses of American foreign policy.

One can gauge how powerful global public opinion has become by juxtaposing global reactions to the United States' two engagements in Iraq. Both were predicated on the danger that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction posed, and the desire to spread democracy in the Middle East. In both 1991 and 2003, public officials offered disingenuous or dubious evidence to support their claims that Saddam Hussein's regime posed a grave threat. In 1991, for example, President George H. W. Bush cited Iraq's gassing of 5,000 Kurds in Halabja in 1988, although it is believed that the United States supplied the helicopters that were used to spray the poison gas (Dickey and Thomas 2002: 37). More generally, declassified documents reveal an extensive symbiosis between the United States and Hussein's Iraq during the 1980s and early 1990s (Byrne 2003). Today, many of the Bush

---

that "the radio became by far the regime's most effective means of propaganda, doing far more than any other single instrument of communication to shape the German people to Hitler's ends...No one who has not lived for years in a totalitarian land can possibly conceive how difficult it is to escape the dread consequences of a regime's calculated and incessant propaganda" (Shirer 1960: 341-42).

<sup>5</sup> Intuition would suggest that such programs, which proved so influential in effecting the Soviet Union's implosion, would figure more prominently in the United States' diplomatic arsenal, especially at a time when the international community receives its messages on critical issues with skepticism and, oftentimes, disdain. Regrettably, however, they have been neglected. See, for example, Sanford J. Ungar, "Pitch Imperfect," *Foreign Affairs* (May / June 2005: 2-13).



administration's claims about Iraq's purported biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs have either been invalidated or revealed to have been based on biased information.

What, then, accounts for global public opinion's general support for the First Gulf War, but widespread opposition to the Second Gulf War?<sup>6</sup> In the former instance, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait certainly proved to be a galvanizing factor. Furthermore, the United States more earnestly pursued multilateral diplomacy in 1991, thereby imparting greater legitimacy to its endeavor. Another explanatory factor, however, which is often neglected, is information power. In 1991, when the United States still dominated the major channels of communications, and few people had even heard of the Internet, the truthfulness of the United States' statements was often presumed. Twelve years later, empowered by access to and the ability to disseminate information on America's past and present foreign policies, a network of bloggers and activists deconstructed the Bush administration's rationales for invading Iraq. With few exceptions, global public opinion emboldened those leaders who consciously chose to oppose the United States' invasion, while it impugned the reputation of those leaders who decided to support the war. That British Prime Minister Tony Blair's approval ratings are as low as they are affirms this assertion.

Although global public opinion cannot prevent a superpower from implementing a particular policy, it can make the consequences of implementing a particular policy quite unpleasant. In 1991, coalition members underwrote nearly 90 percent of the United States' wartime costs (Kosiak 2003: 3). Today, America's economy sags under the weight of enormous nation-building costs: as America attempts to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, it struggles to solicit continued international assistance. The war of 1991 did not greatly impair American credibility; the war of 2003 may have done lasting damage to it.

To its credit, the *2004 Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy* recognized the role of global public opinion: "Extraordinary changes in world communication have made international public opinion a key aspect to achieving American foreign policy objectives.... The global communications revolution necessitates a cohesive strategy for America's international broadcasting, educational and cultural endeavors, and public affairs initiatives to directly support the nation's foreign policy" (United States 2004a). Although such assessments are, by now, staples of mainstream discourse, the United States is still largely removed from the forums in which global public opinion is shaped. The Council on Foreign Relations, for example, issued a report in which it criticizes the State Department for insufficiently "engaging foreign societies and explaining to them America's positions and viewpoints" (Metzl and Carlucci 2001: 10).<sup>7</sup>

While global public opinion is not a wholly cohesive force, it nonetheless presents the United States with a formidable challenge: it is transnational, and largely operates independently of state dictates. This assertion is not tantamount to predicting the disappearance of the nation-state as a

---

<sup>6</sup> Most of the United States' principal European allies, as well as many countries in the Arab and Muslim world, supported the First Gulf War, which the U.N. authorized. By contrast, there was global opposition to America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, with the general population in most countries believing that its failure to receive U.N. approval rendered its actions illegitimate.

<sup>7</sup> Again, although much of my essay has centered on criticism of the Bush administration's range of domestic and foreign policies, I would be remiss to absolve the Clinton administration of fault. It was, after all, his that imprudently dissolved the United States Information Agency in 1999.

meaningful identity in global politics; to the contrary, it will remain the central pillar upon which the international order is structured through the foreseeable future. However, “virtual” opinion networks will almost assuredly grow in importance (United States 2004b).<sup>8</sup>

Returning to the earlier discussion, how does global public opinion bear on the utility of military power? Simply, it frowns upon those states that consolidate and apply what it judges as unreasonable levels of force. More importantly, it rewards those individuals, organizations, and states that contribute to the resolution of global issues through peaceful avenues.<sup>9</sup> At present, then, the United States faces a vexing dilemma. The events of September 11, 2001 gave unprecedented urgency to the imperative of ensuring its own security. Even so, as the world’s great power, America is uniquely capable of and responsible for bequeathing to posterity a more peaceful and prosperous future. At present, many countries of the developing world, and even many industrialized democracies whom we count as allies, judge that the United States has become too preoccupied with fighting terrorism to offer leadership on other global issues, such as poverty and disease (Zakaria 2004: 41).

Indeed, the world’s increasing opposition to the use of armed force is concomitant with growing acceptance of and respect for militarism as a central instrument of statecraft here in the United States. Bacevich argues that, by the 1980s, with the Reagan administration touting the resuscitation of America’s armed forces, “military might” had “become the preferred measure for gauging the nation’s strength” (Bacevich 109). Divergence of domestic and international opinion on the accretion and use of military force has arisen at a particularly inopportune time, especially as the challenges that are posed to the continued exercise of American leadership grow in number and complexity.

What factor or factors could permit the emergence of this chasm? Bacevich’s most compelling response to this question centers on the role that leading intellectuals have played since the 1960s. In particular, he emphasizes the crucial distinction between today’s generation of conservative thinkers and its predecessor—a contrast that, in cavalier fashion, is often ignored in contemporary analysis:

*Unlike their elders, second-generation neoconservatives did not define themselves in opposition—to Communism, to the New Left, or to the sixties. Theirs was no longer an “ideology of anti-ideology.” Rather, they were themselves advocates of a positive ideological agenda, a theology that brought fully into view the radical implications... embedded within the neoconservative insurgency from the outset... the second generation went a step further, promulgating the notion that the moment was now ripe for the United States to use that power—especially military power—to achieve the final triumph of American ideals (82-83).*

That is to say, today’s neoconservatives have adopted a far more proactive stance than those of earlier decades. They seek not only to change ideology, but also, more importantly, to exert influence

---

<sup>8</sup> According to the National Intelligence Council’s report, cited below, “Growing connectivity will be accompanied by the proliferation of virtual communities of interest, complicating the ability of states to govern. The Internet in particular will spur the creation of even more global movements that may emerge as a robust force in international affairs.” (12)

<sup>9</sup> I judge it necessary to set forth two qualifications, considering that the United States’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 was, in many respects, unique. Global public opinion approves of (1) careful and proportionate military response to unprovoked attack: thus, it largely assented to the United States’ decision to invade Afghanistan in October 2001. Furthermore, it (2) supports the deployment of force on humanitarian grounds: thus, a multilateral military presence in, say, Sudan or Uganda would surely be welcomed. It does not, however, approve of the use of force when such an action is seen as part of a broader attempt to project power.

on policy. In addition to occupying key positions in conservative Administrations, they have published numerous books, established new periodicals, launched policy organizations, and utilized broadcast media to the fullest extent, accruing significant dividends in the process (89). Indeed, at present, neoconservatives concurrently wield clout in two critical domains: public opinion and policy formation. I would be remiss to assert, as some do, that they dominate with little substantive opposition; it would be equally fallacious, however, to deny the scope and depth of their influence. Above all, they have instilled a measure of provincialism into mainstream discourse, arguing that formerly or presently warring states and regions, far from opposing, actually embrace the United States' military posture. They have succeeded, in effect, in converting a highly tendentious posture into an assumption that is generally internalized in mainstream debate.

I have already discussed some of the important consequences of this intellectual triumph, but have neglected, until now, to highlight their ramifications for human rights. Bacevich does not argue that the new American militarism encourages abuses. He does, however, maintain that the mindset to which it gives rise often sanctions, understates the significance of, or exhibits insouciance towards, them, to ill effect (Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs 2005). As such, rather than viewing human rights abuses as improper deviations from the United States' standard mode of conduct, proponents of more forceful American foreign policy regard them as unfortunate but inevitable byproducts. That is to say, growing militarism appears to have transferred considerations of human rights from the realm of ethics to that of efficacy. Where their preservation does not interfere with the defense of national security, they are largely safeguarded; otherwise, as recent history demonstrates, they are compromised without great hesitation.

Consider the policy of "extrajudicial rendition," whereby America renders suspected terrorists to countries that are known to practice torture. Originally sanctioned during the Clinton administration, this policy has gained widespread currency in recent years, especially as the imperative of capturing known or suspected terrorists has become more urgent. In reading the text of international charters, legal opinions, and human rights documentation, however, one is left with considerable doubt as to this practice's legal standing. *The New Yorker* published a highly illuminating, if unsettling, investigative report on this issue, concluding that the increasing employment of rendition constitutes one part of a novel policy framework:

*The Bush Administration, however, has argued that the threat posed by stateless terrorists who draw no distinction between military and civilian targets is so dire that it requires tough new rules of engagement. This shift in perspective, labeled the New Paradigm... giv[es] less weight to the rights of suspects. It also questions many international laws of war... The most common destinations for rendered suspects are Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Jordan, all of which have been cited for human-rights violations by the State Department, and are known to torture suspects (Mayer 2005: 107).*

Indeed, the most worrisome characteristic of current practices is that, far from being quarantined, they appear to be widespread. It is now known, for example, that American military abuses at Abu Ghraib were actually commonplace. On April 30, 2004, Amnesty International issued a press release stating that torture in Iraq was "not isolated," and one year later, Human Rights Watch followed suit, alleging that prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib was "only the 'tip of the iceberg'" (Amnesty International 2004; Human Rights Watch 2005). Their suspicions proved to be correct. In recent weeks, it has been revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency has been operating a "global

internment network,” and that, up until last year, it was running a secret prison in Kabul (Priest 2005: A1).

In light of these, and myriad other such allegations, it is not surprising that advocates of the Bush administration’s policies have committed significant time, energy, and resources to undermining those individuals and organizations that criticize them. In recent years, even highly respected organizations, such as Amnesty International, have become central targets of this oftentimes severe campaign. Unfortunately, this reproach effectively condones those policies that undermine the United States’ ability to dismantle terrorist networks. In particular, they further the widespread conviction that there exists a relationship between the emergence of the new American militarism and the perpetration of human rights abuses. Such a perception, whether or not it is correct, will likely further the opposition of global public opinion to the United States’ deployment of military power. Ultimately, then, its current national security policy is increasing the irrelevance of American armed force, a seeming paradox that, upon closer scrutiny, is not altogether surprising.

### Looking into the Future

So what lessons does the above analysis yield? Certainly, America’s leadership must recognize that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the achievement of its objectives will increasingly depend on convincing other countries that its best interests are also theirs.<sup>10</sup> There are, unfortunately, many who are dismissive and oftentimes contemptuous of such a posture: they believe that, at most, global public opinion is a nuisance, and more often that it is wholly irrelevant (Krauthammer 2003; Rice 2000: 62).<sup>11</sup> An attendant stance is that the international community’s current dislike of American foreign policy is a passing phenomenon, similar to that which gripped Europe during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. A January 2005 study conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project suggests that such a belief is simplistic:

*But anti-Americanism is deeper and broader now than at any time in modern history. It is most acute in the Muslim world, but it spans the globe—from Europe to Asia, from South America to Africa. And while much of the animus is aimed directly at President Bush and his policies, especially the war in Iraq, this new global hardening of attitudes amounts to something larger than a thumbs down on the current occupant of the White House. Simply put, the rest of the world both fears and resents the unrivaled power that the United States has amassed since the Cold War ended. In the eyes of others, the U.S. is a worrisome colossus: It is too*

---

<sup>10</sup> An elegantly constructed and objectively argued affirmation of this principle is Joseph S. Nye, Jr.’s work, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), in particular, pp. 18 – 21. Nye contends that “However, in a global economy even the United States must consider how the use of force might jeopardize its economic objectives” (20). He could have reasonably extended his argument: namely, in an information age, the deployment of military power also imperils the United States’ cultural, social, and geopolitical ambitions. For broader refutation of the notion that possessing disproportionate military power is uniquely capable of achieving a country’s objectives, see Nye’s earlier book, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (2002). There, he asserts that “Fewer issues that [the United States] care[s] about will prove susceptible to solution through our dominant military power” (76).

<sup>11</sup> In his piece, Krauthammer remarks that “the international community is a fiction.” Rice conveys the same argument, albeit more diplomatically. Writing about one year before she would assume the position of National Security Advisor, Rice concludes her essay by issuing the following assessment: “Foreign policy in a Republican administration will...not [proceed] from the interests of an illusory international community” (2003: 62).

*quick to act unilaterally, it doesn't do a good job of addressing the world's problems, and it widens the global gulf between rich and poor. On matters of international security, the rest of the world has become deeply suspicious of U.S. motives and openly skeptical of its word. People abroad are more likely to believe that the U.S.-led war on terror has been about controlling Mideast oil and dominating the world than they are to take at face value America's stated objectives of self-defense and global democratization (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2005).<sup>12</sup>*

Bacevich would argue that this perception is more grounded in reality than Americans might like to admit. Indeed, he maintains that the global war on terrorism, far from representing a novel chapter in American foreign policy, serves to continue a “gigantic project” whose origins date to the Carter Doctrine: namely, the quest to secure dominance over the Persian Gulf’s petroleum reserves (182, 191). I would argue that Bacevich actually understates the scale of this endeavor. The United States’ ambition to acquire control of Middle Eastern oil supplies dates back to at least the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when the State Department famously described the Middle East as “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history” (Richman 1985). Nonetheless, his basic argument is sound.

After all, strategic European and Muslim countries are concerned not only with America’s ambitious pursuit of military power, but also, more broadly, with its quest to achieve hegemony. Although Bacevich centers his analysis on the former of these endeavors, he properly notes that militarism is representative of a more entrenched predicament:

*Out of defeat, that is, emerged ideas, attitudes, and myths conducive to militarism. But this militaristic predisposition alone cannot explain the rising tide of American bellicosity that culminated in March 2003 with the invasion of Iraq. For that we must look also to interests, and, indeed, to the ultimate in U.S. national interests, that is the removal of any obstacles or encumbrances that might hinder the American people in their pursuit of happiness ever more expansively defined (176).*

The belief that impregnable defenses can guarantee American primacy is increasingly being challenged in mainstream literature, although there are still a number of deeply influential intellectuals and policymakers with whom it finds favor (Cordesman 2001).<sup>13</sup> Bacevich has mastered the work of a number of respected conservative thinkers who are of this persuasion, and offers an impressive litany of illustrations. For example, he cites Robert Kagan’s argument that “Military strength alone will not avail if we do not use it actively to maintain a world order that both supports and rests upon American hegemony” (85).

There are myriad books that, with varying degrees of clarity and effectiveness, refute such notions, but The New American Militarism is among the most exhaustively researched, sophisticatedly constructed, and, ultimately, powerfully argued. Perhaps the most original

---

<sup>12</sup> For even more insightful commentary, see Kull (2005) 36-37. He concludes that “People around the world are not only turning away from the United States; they are starting to embrace the leadership of other major powers” (36).

<sup>13</sup> Cordesman contends that “There is no other region where regional coalition partners are likely to create military capabilities that can greatly reduce the strain on U.S. forces. This creates a strong prospect that the United States will find itself remaining the world’s only superpower, largely because no peer will emerge to expose the limits of its military capabilities” (401). Admittedly, Cordesman’s formulation here is among the more explicit ones that one will find. Far more common is the belief that the accretion of military power is the surest way to assure that the United States retains its ability to project power on a global scale. See, for example, the Project for a New American Century’s “Statement of Principles,” published on June 3, 1997.

contribution that it makes to the existing literature on resurgent American militarism is its exploration of the disparate elements that, consciously or not, collaborated to facilitate its rise. Bacevich is of a rare breed of scholars who recognize that to blame one individual or Administration for this phenomenon is an exercise in intellectual sloth: “Although as human beings they may be interesting, very few [presidents] can claim more than marginal historical significance. So while the account that follows discusses various personalities—not only politicians, but also soldiers, intellectuals, and religious leaders—it uses them as vehicles to highlight the larger processes that are afoot” (xii – xiii).

Like any great work, Bacevich’s, too, is not without deficiencies in need of redress, some more critical than others. An appraisal of its stylistic merits would reveal that it is replete with instances of stark prose and hyperbolic rhetoric that, on occasion, detract from his otherwise complex and sober argumentation. The effect of such stylistic stridency is to leave the reader with the impression that there are almost no subtleties involved with the issues that he discusses, even as, of course, these nuances figure prominently in his arguments. As for the content of the book, Bacevich does not sufficiently illuminate the interconnectivity of the groups that he believes have contributed to the new American militarism. Furthermore, the attention that he bestows upon particular individuals, such as Albert Wohlstetter and Norman Podhoretz, while indicative of their influence, can, at times, appear to suffer from the same tendency that he criticizes—namely, the proclivity to foist more attention than is warranted on a given individual, rather than on the larger processes to which that individual contributes.

Certainly, though, The New American Militarism, for whatever minor deficiencies it might otherwise possess, is an innovative and courageous work of scholarship. Although the public is properly leery of Republicans endorsing Democrats or Democrats’ causes (and vice versa) in today’s highly partisan climate, Bacevich is neither engaging in an about-face nor attempting to garner publicity. Indeed, the themes that he sets forth in the text under review derive from arguments that he has been articulating for quite some time now—his previous two books, American Empire (2002) and The Imperial Tense (2003), as well, urge American policymakers not to succumb to militaristic impulses when confronted with security threats.

It is encouraging that, in response to developments in Iran and North Korea, the Bush administration has not been as intent on formulating or implementing a military response, even though one could well argue that each country’s nuclear regime poses a far greater challenge to American security than did Iraq’s. That being said, however, its fundamental belief that military preponderance is the most expedient guarantor of national security does not appear to have wavered. Looking forward, it is investments in the various aspects of human welfare—as ensconced in, for example, the Millennium Development Goals—that will advance American interests above all others. As interdependence deepens, feelings of humiliation and resentment in the developing world will more readily manifest in violence. Militarism, far from mitigating or eliminating them, ensures that they will endanger the United States, in ways that are yet unknown.

**References**

- Amnesty International. (2004). "Iraq: Torture not isolated—independent investigations vital." Website: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140172004>.
- Bacevich, Andrew J. (2002). *American Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2003). *The Imperial Tense*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Berger, Brian. (2004). "New Horizons Set To Launch With Minimum Amount of Plutonium." *Space News*. Website: [http://www.space.com/spacenews/businessmonday\\_041004.html](http://www.space.com/spacenews/businessmonday_041004.html).
- Broad, William J. (2005). "U.S. Has Plans To Again Make Own Plutonium." *The New York Times* (June 27): A1.
- Byrne, Malcom. (2003). "Saddam Hussein: More Secret History." Website: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB107/index.htm>.
- Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities. (2006). "The FY 2005 Budget: Defense Spending Out of Control." Website: [http://www.sensiblepriorities.org/budget\\_analysis.htm](http://www.sensiblepriorities.org/budget_analysis.htm).
- Chevrier, Marie. (2001). "The Biological Weapons Convention: the protocol that almost was," in Trevor Findley and Oliver Meier (eds.), *Verification Yearbook 2001*. London: The Verification Research, Training and Information Centre.
- CNN. (2005). "Military probes 'green' bullets." Website: <http://us.cnn.com/2005/TECH/science/07/29/green.bullets.ap/>.
- Coll, Steve and Susan B. Glasser. (2005). "Attacks Bear Earmarks of Evolving Al Qaeda." *The Washington Post* (July 8): A20.
- Cordesman, Anthony. (2001). "The Military in a New Era: Living with Complexity," in Richard L. Kugler and Ellen L. Frost (eds.), *The Global Century: Globalization and National Security*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press.
- Council on Ethics and International Affairs. (2005). "The New American Militarism: Conversation with Andrew Bacevich." Carnegie Website: <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/viewMedia.php/prmTemplateID/8/prmID/5171>.
- Danneskiold, Jim. (2004). "Los Alamos leading fast-paced reactor research to power planned journey to Jupiter's icy moons." Los Alamos National Laboratory. Website: [http://www.lanl.gov/news/index.php?fuseaction=home.story&story\\_id=1527](http://www.lanl.gov/news/index.php?fuseaction=home.story&story_id=1527).
- Deibert, Ronald J. (1997). *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia: Communication in World Order Transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deller, Nicole and John Burroughs. (Summer 2003). "Arms Control Abandoned: The Case of Biological Weapons." *World Policy Journal* 20(2): 37-42.

- Diamond, Jared. (1999). *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Dickey, Christopher and Evan Thomas. (2002). "How the U.S. Helped Create Saddam Hussein." *Newsweek* (September 23): 34-40.
- Epstein, Susan B. (2005). "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations." Website: <http://www.usembassy.it/pdf/other/RL32607.pdf>.
- Ford, Harold P. (1996). "Revisiting Vietnam: Thoughts Engendered by Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect*." *Studies in Intelligence* 39(5): 95-109.
- Friedman, Benjamin. (July/August 2005). "Think Again: Homeland Security." *Foreign Policy* 149: 22-28.
- Gagon, Steve. (2006). "It's Elemental—The Element Plutonium." Department of Energy. Website: <http://education.jlab.org/itselemental/ele094.html>.
- Giuliano, Jackie Alan. (2001). "Missing the Target—Green Bullets." Environment News Service. Website: <http://ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2001/2001-06-27g.asp>.
- Hitchens, Theresa. (2005). "CDI Fact Sheet: Space Debris." Center for Defense Information. Website: [http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=3106&from\\_page=../index.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=3106&from_page=../index.cfm).
- Human Rights Watch.. (2005). "U.S.: Abu Ghraib Only the 'Tip of the Iceberg.'" Website: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/27/usint10545.htm>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2005). "U.S. Operated Secret 'Dark Prison' in Kabul." Website: <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2005/12/19/afghan12319.htm>.
- Johnson, Stephen, Helle C. Dale and Patrick Cronin. (2005). "Strengthening U.S. Public Diplomacy Requires Organization, Coordination, and Strategy." Heritage Foundation. Website: <http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1875.cfm>.
- Kamarck, Elaine. (2005). "Best Defense Against Terror is the Cop on the Beat." *Newsday* (July 22): A47.
- Kennedy Jr., Robert F. (1999). *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Kosiak, Steven M. (2003). "Potential Cost of a War with Iraq and its Post-War Occupation." Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Website: [http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/Archive/B.20030225.Potential Costs of/B.20030225.Potential Costs of.pdf](http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/Archive/B.20030225.Potential%20Costs%20of/B.20030225.Potential%20Costs%20of.pdf).
- Krauthammer, Charles. (2003). "Mr. President, walk away from the U.N." Website: <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/charleskrauthammer/ck20030312.shtml>.



- Krepon, Michael. (2005). "Seven Questions: Space Weapons," Website: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=3119](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3119).
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2005). "Space Security Or Space Weapons?" Henry L. Stimson Center. Website: <http://www.stimson.org/space/pdf/issueguide.pdf>.
- Kull, Steven. (July/August 2005). "It's Lonely at the Top," *Foreign Policy*.
- Mayer, Jane. 2005. "Outsourcing Torture." *The New Yorker* (February 14 – 21): 106-23.
- Metzl, Jamie F. and Frank C. Carlucci. (2001). "State Department Reform." The Council on Foreign Relations. Website: [http://www.cfr.org/pub3890/frank\\_c\\_carlucci\\_jamie\\_f\\_metzl/state\\_department\\_reform.php](http://www.cfr.org/pub3890/frank_c_carlucci_jamie_f_metzl/state_department_reform.php).
- Nye, Joseph S. (2002). The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Public Affairs.
- Paine, Christopher E. (2004). "Weaponers of Waste." National Resources Defense Council. Website: <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/weaponers/weaponers.pdf>.
- Pew Global Attitudes Project. (2005). "Global Opinion: The Spread of Anti-Americanism" Website: <http://pewresearch.org/assets/files/trends2005-global.pdf>.
- Pincus, Walter. (2005). "Plans by U.S. to Dominate Space Raising Concerns." *The Washington Post* (March 29): A2.
- Priest, Dana. (2005). "CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons," *The Washington Post* (November 2): A1.
- Rice, Condoleeza. (January/February 2000). "Promoting the National Interest." *Foreign Affairs* 79(1): 45-62.
- Richman, Sheldon L. (1985). "Policy Analysis: The United States and the Persian Gulf." The Cato Institute. Website: <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa046.html>.
- Shirer, William. (1960). The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany. New York: Ballantine.
- Sköns, Elisabeth, Wuyi Omitoogun, Catalina Perdomo, and Petter Stålenheim. (2005). "Military expenditure." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Website: <http://yearbook2005.sipri.org/ch8/ch8>.
- Stern, Jessica. (July/August 2003). "The Protean Enemy." *Foreign Affairs* 82(4): 27-40.
- Ungar, Sanford J. (Many/June 2005). "Pitch Imperfect," *Foreign Affairs*. 2-13.

- Union of Concerned Scientists. (2004). "Nuclear Weapons Budget Request for FY 2005." Website: [http://www.ucsusa.org/global\\_security/archive/page.cfm?pageID=1384](http://www.ucsusa.org/global_security/archive/page.cfm?pageID=1384).
- United States of America. (2000). *Conduct of Joint Operations*. Department of Defense. Website: <http://www.dtic.mil/jointvision/jv2020b.pdf>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2002). *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*. The White House. 2.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004a). *2004 Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy*. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. Website: <http://www.state.gov/r/adcompd/rls/36275.htm#transmittal>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2004b). "Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project." National Intelligence Council. Website: [http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC\\_globaltrend2020\\_es.html](http://www.cia.gov/nic/NIC_globaltrend2020_es.html).
- USA Today*. (2005). "Experts say al-Qaeda evolved into local organizations." Website: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-08-07-alqaedageneration\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-08-07-alqaedageneration_x.htm).
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2005). "Military's energy-beam weapons delayed." Website: [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2005-07-09-army-weapons\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2005-07-09-army-weapons_x.htm).
- Wheelis, Mark and Malcom Dando. (January/February 2003). "Back to bioweapons." *Bulleting of the Atomic Scientists* 59(1): 40-46.
- Zakaria, Fareed. (2004). "The One-Note Superpower." *Newsweek* (February 2): 41.

---

*Ali Wyne is an undergraduate in his third year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he is pursuing dual degrees in Management and Political Science, as well as minors in Economics and Philosophy. He is author of "Questioning Hegemonic Continuum," which was recently published in American Diplomacy, and has published widely on foreign affairs and political economy. He serves as a book reviewer for The Internationalist, as well as Founder and Executive Editor of MIT International Review, MIT's first student-run journal of international relations.*

© 2006, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver.