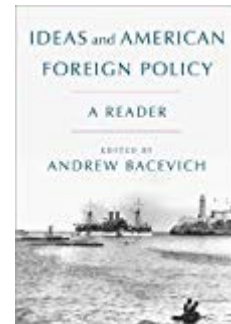




Andrew J. (ed.) Bacevich. *Ideas and American Foreign Policy: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. pages cm. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-064540-3.



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The notion that ideas are a central component of international relations (IR) has grown steadily over time. Survey data shows that constructivist scholarship jumped from 8 percent in the 1980s to 19 percent in the 1990s and respondents also agreed that about 17 percent of the literature in IR (in 2008) was dedicated to the utilization of constructivism.[1] While these are certainly positive trends, more needs to be done to promote alternative approaches to the study of foreign affairs. This is crucial, as evidence suggests that rationalism has an inherent bias in favor of individualistic utilitarianism. Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey data illustrates that “economic libertarians and rationalist IR scholars think about politics in atomistic terms” and that such scholars ideologically skew in a conservative direction.[2]

Satisfyingly, Andrew J. Bacevich’s *Ideas and American Foreign Policy* advances a convincing argument that promotes ideas as an essential element of foreign policy decision-making. From the founding of the Republic to today, Bacevich weaves together major writings to understand the “transformation of the United States from a small and fragile republic into the preeminent power of the present age” (p. 1). Bacevich does not discount the role of rationality and self-interested actors and

understands that institutions, interests, and individual politicians have played a major role in US foreign policy. He unequivocally states that the foremost purpose of his edited volume is to “survey the evolution of those ideas across time as expressed in contemporaneous documents” (p. 1). On the one hand, US politicians have unceasingly deployed a coherent vision of the United States as a “chosen people” who have been called upon to promote global freedom and democracy (p. 1). In contrast, alternative voices have sewed together an anti-utopian narrative. Rather than promoting liberty and democracy, critics contend, the United States has often promoted imperialism and the violation of human rights.

Classic works such as John Withrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), Cotton Mather’s “Theopolis Americana” (1709), and Andrew Jackson’s “On Indian Removal” (1830) began to lay the foundation for a vision of the United States as an inherently Christian nation that has been called upon by God to play a major role in the salvation of mankind. Ezra Stiles’s “The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor” (1783) and Alexander Hamilton’s “Federalist No. 11” (1787) interpreted America’s destiny as one that was to promote liberty through trade and commerce. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) and Alfred Mahan’s “The United States Looking Outward” (1890)

called upon the US to lay the groundwork for expansion. Pushing towards Asia and the Americas, the United States, claimed the authors, had the moral vision and authority to bring domestic and international prosperity.

This expansionist view of the United States' role in the world developed further in the late 1930s. As European powers faded, Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chat of 1940 and Walter Lippman's *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (1943) made the case that the US should push for global dominance. This vision continued with George Kennan's "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (1947) and Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949). Whether Democrat or Republican, US policymakers were determined to dramatically scale up the US military. Citing fear of the Germans and later the Soviets, the case was made that the international order needed to be tamed and that the US was called upon to lead it. W. W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960) and John Foster Dulles's "The Evolution of Foreign Policy" (1954) highlighted American's rising self-confidence in global free markets and military dominance.

Determined and victorious communists in Vietnam eventually shook the confidence of America's leaders. In turn, they stripped themselves of the shackles of détente. To deal with rising threats, a more sophisticated strategy of using local proxies was crafted. President Ronald Reagan's Star Wars speech in 1983 underscored America's new drive to maintain global dominance and establish a unipolar world order. Charles Krauthammer's "The Unipolar Moment" (1990), George Bush's State of the Union address in 2002, and Robert Kagan's "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire" (2014) all unequivocally called for America to exercise global hegemony. If America declined, they warned, revolts and terrorism would spread and the values of freedom and democracy would perish. America's new mission was simply to maintain, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History" (1989).

On the flip side, the dominant narrative of America as the beacon of liberty and democracy has been challenged since its founding. While such voices have usually been ignored or discarded, Bacevich provides a good scope of these classics. William Penn's "Present Crisis in the Condition of the American Indian" (1830), Thomas Corwin's "On the Mexican War" (1847), and Jane Addams's "Democracy or Militarism" (1899) argued that this young nation was committing gross atrocities against Native Americans, perpetuating the continuation of slavery, and engaging in foreign hostility in an imperialist drive to

seize territory. Highlighting the connection between patriarchy and war, Emma Goldman's "Preparedness, the Road to Universal Slaughter" (1915) renounced involvement in the European theater.

Utilization of the state by the ruling class was also underscored by libertarians and socialists, as shown in Randolph Bourne's *The State* (1918) and Eugene Debs's 1918 antiwar speech delivered in Canton, Ohio. Together, they concluded that mainstream conservatives and liberals were bankrolled by those who wanted foreign involvement because it served their interests. This is further corroborated by Smedley Butler's *War is a Racket* (1935). The case against foreign intervention continued in the run-up to World War II with Charles Beard's "Giddy Minds and Foreign Quarrels" (1939). As US leaders positioned the country to become the global hegemon, former US vice president Henry Wallace argued in "My Commitments" (1948) that US behavior towards the Soviets would only empower Soviet hawks. As Wallace's arguments against militarism fell on deaf ears, William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) and William Fulbright's *Fatal Arrogance of Power* (1966) argued that foreign intervention placed America's commitment to liberty into question.

Those who focused on the intersection between domestic and foreign policies made the case that the obsession with national security was curtailing democracy. C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) showed how corporate, military, and elite interests had fused during the Cold War era. Such perspectives lead us into documents from the 1960s. Students for a Democratic Society's Port Huron Statement (1962) highlighted the pervasive racial and economic inequality in the United States. Racism as a component of policy was something that critics believed to be central to the American moment. Dorothy Day's "Catholic Worker Response to Hiroshima" (1945) and Martin Luther King's "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam" (1967) illustrate such perspectives.

Entering the twenty-first century, critics continued to question America's exceptionalism. Susan Sontag's "Tuesday and After" (2001) and Sheldon Wolin's "Inverted Totalitarianism" (2003) contended that the Bush administration was utilizing the war on terrorism as a pretext for global militarism that only served the interests of the military industrial complex and failed to adequately deal with the true causes of global conflict. Unsurprisingly, Immanuel Wallerstein's "The Eagle Has Crash Landed" (2002) argued that these were the actions

of a declining hegemon.

As you can see, Bacevich keeps his promise to promote “two parallel” and compelling stories (p. 1). Operating under the premise that ideas are a central component to IR, one argument suggests that the United States has advanced democracy and prosperity. On the other hand, critics argue that there is a dark side to US history. Citing its actions against the indigenous and African slaves to the Vietnam War and the war on terrorism, detractors suggest that US policymakers have often pushed expansionism and business interests at the cost of human rights. Nothing showcases the ideological divide more than Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations” (1993). Huntington argued that Western civilization is inherently superior because it promotes liberty and democracy, viewing other cultures as threats to the West in the post-Cold War era. To critics, this is a naïve perspective that is immersed in racial fear and the politics of division and is exactly how US elites have maintained their grasp on power.

One of the major strengths of this edited volume is how Bacevich allows the reader to weave together the threads. While he does provide a short summary for each work, he leaves it up to the reader to connect the dots. In so doing, Bacevich clearly intends his students to be subjective interpreters of American history. As a proponent of ideas, Bacevich firmly understands that subjective experiences have major influence. However, while Bacevich makes an honorable attempt to put forth critical perspectives, his selections are still a bit unbalanced. Fierce critics, such as Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, are not included. Antislavery writings by Frederick Douglass and the Pickering Treaty are left out. Moreover, adding in such critical pieces as Gerald Horne’s *Race to Revolution* (2014) and Bernard Baylin’s *The Peopling of British North America* (1986) would have highlighted that the violation of human rights at home has been intrinsically connected to parallel actions abroad. To such critics, the American creed is one of conquest, permeated with racism and fear of the unknown. Some of these arguments are not only advanced by those on the critical left, but also by many on the right. Drawing on the writings

of Antifederalists, many libertarians contend that the rise of the United States gave birth to an aristocratic elite that was determined to put profit above liberty.[3]

After all, many of the works that support the traditional perspective of US foreign policy can actually be tied to the rationalist school of thought, and they usually follow a realist or institutionalist perspective that often ignores moral considerations. Presented as a clash of ideas, it can actually be argued that most constructivist thought is on the side of the critics. Only certain liberals, such as Kantian liberals, are nonrationalists. Therefore, it would have been helpful to mention which ideas delineate from positivism and constructivism.

Altogether, this is a courageous attempt to bring together a variety of key writings and documents to highlight two major perspectives. By engrossing themselves in these works, readers will find common themes and interpretations. Yes, the scales are still tilted in favor of a conservative and positive view of US foreign policy. Moral considerations still takes a back seat as more time and space is allotted to traditional thought. Even so, given the enormous ideological power of American exceptionalism, this is probably the best course to take if you want students to start the process of considering critical perspectives. There is enough critical content in this edited volume to serve as a launchpad for further inquiry. I trust that identity and intersubjective awareness are key factors that will determine one’s understanding and reality.

Notes

[1]. Daniel Maliniak et al., “International Relations in the US Academy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 443.

[2]. Brian Rathbun, “Subvert the Dominant Paradigm: A Critical Analysis of Rationalism’s Status as a Paradigm of International Relations,” *International Relations* 31, no. 4 (2017): 416.

[3]. John Marshall, “Empire or Liberty: The Antifederalists and Foreign Policy, 1787-1788,” *Journal of Libertarian Studies* 4, no. 3 (1980): 233-54.

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