

*The Limits of Power :
The End of American Exceptionalism*

By Andrew J. Bacevich

The Limits of Power by Andrew J. Bacevich is a most distressing book even if you adhere to the old adage that “you can’t believe everything you read.” He evenhandedly, I think, lays blame for how power has become concentrated in the executive branch which he refers to as the imperial presidency on a whole line of past presidents and their administrations. Much of his criticism falls on the government-military complex and the ever-growing sentiment in Washington that military power is always the key to the resolution of nearly any issue. Interestingly enough, the president that he does not include in this imperial presidency and the movement toward the use of military power is Eisenhower.

However, in his analysis, Bacevich calls us, the American people, to account because we don’t pay attention or ask the difficult questions. He faults Reagan for convincing us that spending should never be curtailed, personally or at the government level. Rarely, after that, did any president raise questions about our profligate spending. Carter was the exception, but we know how well his cautionary tale was received.

Increasingly, Bacevich sees that the major decisions are being made in secret with a group he refers to (ironically, I assume) as the Wise Men. This group changes with each president, as each brings in people he trusts, usually people who share his views. In the author’s view, the Wise Men have apparently nothing but disdain for the rest of us and our knowledge and understanding of issues. Possibly they are right, and most

decisions can't be made by all of us. However, we invest that decision-making in our elected representatives in a Congress that has become increasingly ineffective and essentially powerless which leaves the executive branch in control. More than one commentator has suggested that even after the midterm election and power in Congress shifted, nothing has really changed because the Democrats just want to stay in power. I think it was former Senator Hollings who said that the real business of Congressmen and women is to get re-elected.

So we are left with our "president/emperor" which Bacevich does not think will change no matter who is elected. We are left with wars that will go on for generations, and foreign policies based on expanding American power anywhere and everywhere, using military force to achieve that. Bacevich does not present a comforting picture, but he does provide a viewpoint that is worth consideration. (Metropolitan Press, \$24.00)