

Cato's Letter

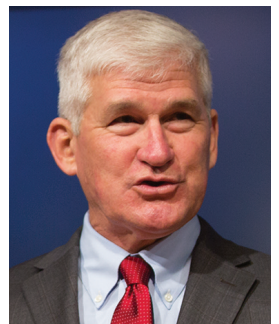
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Endless War in the Middle East

ANDREW J. BACEVICH

Everywhere I talk about the book, I get asked by somebody in the audience, “So, smart guy. What do you recommend we should do about ISIS?” And in some respects, the purpose of this book is to suggest that that is the wrong question. What to do about ISIS is a nontrivial question, but it’s not the most important question. I think it is of far less significance than questions like these: Does waging war across a large swath of the Islamic world make sense? Is that war winnable? If not, why are we there? And for the most powerful country in the world, is there no alternative? Have we no choices? The book suggests that before answering the ISIS question, we should consider how we got where we are today, which necessarily requires evaluating what prior U.S. military efforts in the region have yielded and at what cost. My book tries to tell the story of an immense and ongoing military enterprise—this War for the Greater Middle East.



Retired army colonel and *New York Times* bestselling author **ANDREW J. BACEVICH** is a professor emeritus at Boston University. In April he came to Cato to discuss his new book, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*.

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My story starts in 1980. Why 1980? Because in January of that year, President Jimmy Carter—certainly our least bellicose president in the last half-century—used the occasion of his State of the Union address to designate the Persian Gulf a vital U.S. national security interest. In layperson’s terms, the Persian Gulf now became a place that we would fight for. This Carter Doctrine, as it has subsequently come to be known, touched off the process of militarizing U.S. policy not only in the Persian Gulf but across much of the Islamic world, landing the United States in a condition of open-ended war. The narrative I tell unfolds chronologically: It begins with the failed Iran hostage rescue attempt, which occurred 36 years ago this month, and it concludes with the now-renewed Gulf War—by my count, the fourth Gulf War in which we have been participants over the course of the last four decades. The book does conclude, after about 400 pages, alas, that that war has not ended. And we can certainly expect that there will be more campaigns to come.

The book tries to answer four specific questions: First, what motivated the

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United States to act as it has? Second, what have the civilians responsible for formulating policy and the soldiers responsible for implementing policy sought to accomplish? Third, regardless of their intentions, what actually ensued? And fourth, with what consequences? In short, the book links aims to actions to outcomes. The central theme of my story can be briefly stated: A nation priding itself in having the world’s greatest military—and we do have the world’s greatest military—has misused its military power on an epic scale. It’s not simply that we’ve not prevailed. Obviously we’ve not prevailed. Rather, through a combination of naivety, short-sightedness, and hubris, we have actually made things worse—at very considerable cost to ourselves and to others.

What has this war been about? Well, in a narrow sense it began as a war for oil. Yet even at the outset, much more was at stake than ensuring access to the cheap gas that ensures the American way of life. From day one, the larger purpose of America’s War for the Greater Middle East has been to affirm that we are a people to whom limits do not apply. The advertised purpose has been to liberate, defend, or deter. Yet the actual purpose has been far more ambitious in my view.

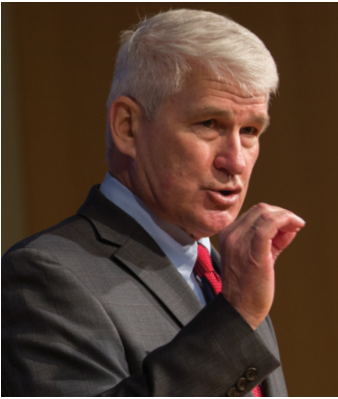
The real mission has been to sustain the claims of American exceptionalism that have long since become central to our self-identity—to bring into compliance with American purposes the revolutionaries, warlords, terrorists, despots, or bad actors of various stripes given to defiance. To employ the kind of jargon that’s popular in this city, back in 1980, the United States set out in willy-nilly fashion to “shape” the greater Middle East. Given the conditions existing there, employing military means to bring the region into conformity with American purposes has resulted in an undertaking of breathtaking scope. Over time, U.S. forces have been in action everywhere from Iran and Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, Somalia and Sudan, Bosnia and Kosovo, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran and Iraq—the list goes on. Indeed, the list keeps on getting longer.

“No administration has ever devised a plausible strategy for achieving these ambitious American aims.”

Along the way, we tried overwhelming force, and shock and awe. We invaded, occupied, and took a stab at nation-building. We experimented with counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, regime change and decapitation, peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, retaliatory strikes and preventive attack, even something that the Air Force called “air occupation.” U.S. forces operated overtly, covertly, and through proxies. Almost certainly, they went places and did things about which we, the American public, today remain in the dark. Unfortunately, no administration, from Carter’s to the present, ever devised a plausible strategy for achieving these ambitious American aims. Each in turn has simply reacted to situations it confronted. Nor has any administration made available the means needed to make good on the grandiose ambitions that it entertained. Indeed, on the U.S. side, one of this conflict’s abiding qualities has actually been its paltriness.

Today the problems besetting the greater Middle East are substantially greater than they were when substantial numbers of U.S. forces first began venturing into that region. Indeed, ISIS offers but one example of the results. We may argue and we may disagree regarding the underlying sources of these problems, but there is no arguing with the fact that U.S. military efforts to alleviate the dysfunction so much in evidence have failed. It seems to me there are really two plausible ways to employ American power: The first is basically to wait things out, insulating yourself from the problem’s worst effects while promoting a nonviolent solution from within. This approach requires patience, and comes with no guarantee of ultimate

success. And with all the usual caveats attached, this is the approach that the United States took during the Cold War: wait them out. The second approach is more direct: It aims to eliminate the problem through sustained and relentless military action. This approach entails less patience, but it incurs greater near-term costs. And after a certain amount of shillyshallying, it was this head-on approach that the Union adopted during the Civil War in crushing the Confederacy. In its War for the Greater Middle East, however, the United States chose neither to contain nor to crush. Instead, it chartered a course midway in between—in effect the United States chose aggravation. With politicians and generals too quick to declare victory,



and the American public too quick to throw in the towel when faced with adversity, U.S. forces rarely stayed long enough to actually finish the job. Instead of intimidating, U.S. military efforts have annoyed, incited, and generally communicated a lack of both competence and resolve. In the ultimate irony, the circumstances ostensibly making the Persian Gulf worth fighting for in the first place have ceased to pertain. If today the

American way of life still depends, whether for better or worse, on having access to plentiful reserves of oil and natural gas, then defending Canada and Venezuela should take precedent over defending Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Even so, short of its initial rationale, the War for the Greater Middle East continues as if on autopilot. That the ongoing enterprise may someday end, that the troops will finally come home, appears so unlikely as to be unworthy of discussion. Strikingly, in the middle of a presidential campaign, the prospect of the troops ever coming home goes unmentioned. Like the War on Drugs, or the War on Poverty, the War for the Greater Middle East has become a fixture in American life and is accepted as such. Among the factors contributing to the lack of any serious challenge to the war's perpetuation, it seems to me four stand out: One is the absence of an anti-war or anti-interventionist political party worthy of the name. The ongoing war has long since acquired a perfidious seal of bipartisan approval. And as such, the two major parties are equally disinclined to probe too deeply into this war's origins, conduct, or prospects.

The second reason for the war's perpetuation is that politicians aspiring to high office find it more expedient to declare their support for the troops than to question the war's efficacy. So candidates in every election system since 1980—emphatically in the present election cycle—have avoided anything like a serious

debate regarding U.S. military policy in the Islamic world. Yes, a particular military campaign gone awry, like Somalia or Iraq, or Libya in 2011, might attract some attention—but never the context in which that campaign was undertaken. So the War for the Greater Middle East awaits its Eugene McCarthy or its George McGovern. The third reason for the war’s perpetuation is that, sadly, some individuals and some institutions actually benefit from an armed conflict that drags on and on. Those benefits are immediate and tangible. They come in the form of profits, jobs, and campaign contributions. For the military-industrial complex, and for its beneficiaries, perpetual war is not necessarily bad news.

Finally, however, there is this: thus far at least, Americans themselves appear oblivious to what is occurring, policymakers having successfully insulated the public from the war’s negative effects. In a fundamental sense, the war is not our concern. But here’s the rub: In the 21st century, the prerequisites of freedom, abundance, and security are changing. Geopolitically, Asia is eclipsing in impor-

“The War for the Greater Middle East continues as if on autopilot.”

tance all the other regions of the world, apart perhaps from North America itself. The afflictions besetting large portions of the Islamic world will undoubtedly persist, but their relative importance to the United States as determinants of American well-being will diminish. In this context, the War for the Greater Middle East has become a diversion that Americans can ill afford. To fancy at this point that the U.S. military possesses the capacity to shape the course of events there is an absurdity, and indulging that absurdity further serves chiefly to impede the ability of the United States to attend to far more pressing concerns.

Ultimately, the game that matters will play out here at home rather than in some far-off place like Iraq or Afghanistan. Whether the United States is able to shape the greater Middle East will matter less than whether it can reshape itself, restoring effectiveness to self-government, providing for sustainable and equitable prosperity, and extracting from a vastly diverse culture something to hold in common of greater moment than shallow digital enthusiasms and the worship of celebrity. Perpetuating the War for the Greater Middle East is not enhancing American freedom, abundance, and security. If anything, it is having the opposite effect. And one day, the American people may awaken to this reality. Then and only then will the war end. When that awakening will occur however, is impossible to say. For now, sadly, Americans remain deep in slumber. ■



SCHOLAR PROFILE

Marian L. Tupy

MARIAN L. TUPY is the editor of *HumanProgress.org* and a senior policy analyst at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. He specializes in globalization and global well-being. Tupy received his BA in international relations and classics from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and his PhD in international relations from the University of St. Andrews in Great Britain.

How did your upbringing lead you to libertarianism?

I was born in communist Czechoslovakia, which pretty much destroyed any illusions that I may have had, as a young person, about the desirability of socialism and central planning. But it was only after I went to college and read *Atlas Shrugged* that I realized that capitalism is not only an efficient economic system, in the sense that it creates more wealth than any other economic system known to humanity, but also a moral one, because it is based on voluntary interaction between people and allows the market to reward those who create value. After Rand I quickly progressed to Hayek, Friedman, Kirzner, and Bauer, and made libertarianism a subject of my doctoral studies. My thesis on libertarianism and globalization made me a good fit for a position that opened up in 2002 in what was then Cato's Project on Global Economic Liberty.

You worked on economic development in Africa and other countries—what did that teach you, and how did it inspire *HumanProgress.org*?

My work on ex-communist countries and Africa taught me to appreciate the importance of policies and institutions for economic development. Civil and economic freedoms allow people to do what comes naturally to them—improving their well-being and that of their families. Concomitantly, if people understand and appreciate that the world is actually getting better, which is the goal of *HumanProgress.org*, they may also more strongly support markets and liberal democracy.

What are some of the most interesting ways we know the world is getting better?

Compared to the past, we live longer, healthier, and more comfortable lives on a cleaner and safer planet. Most of our remaining problems, such as pollution and over-fishing, are restricted to the “commons” or areas where property rights are not clearly established. Human ingenuity has found solutions to many problems and can resolve the challenges that remain. But, progress is neither linear nor guaranteed. A return of protectionism or international conflict could reverse many of the gains we have made since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

Recently you wrote that “American students interested in ‘socialism’ today are too young to remember what the world actually looked like the last time socialism held sway.” As someone who grew up under communism, what should modern fans of socialism realize?

They should read Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* and realize that socialism is not only an incredibly inefficient system—just look at the economies of Venezuela and Cuba—but is also inimical to political and personal freedom. As socialist failures become more pronounced, the state must usurp ever more power over the lives of ordinary people and use ever more force to silence dissent. It concerns me greatly that the public education monopoly in my adoptive country not only fails to teach too many American children how to read, write, and count, but also fails to teach them about the struggle for and the importance of human freedom. ■

A Legacy of Liberty



Leaving a legacy of liberty is a goal shared by all of us. The Cato Institute's Legacy Society is our way to recognize Sponsors who have made Cato part of their estate plans. The Legacy Society confers the same benefits as received by Benefactor Sponsors who make annual contributions of \$5,000 or more to Cato. Legacy gifts play a vital role in achieving Cato's mission, and often provide Sponsors a unique opportunity to effect change in the areas they are most passionate about.

Recently, Cato began working through the closing of a large bequest. A Legacy Society Sponsor appreciated that the Institute's research and scholars offered the primary defenses of liberty in the local media outlets of his community, which were usually dominated by progressives. This gift will expand Cato's media presence by supporting our existing operations, which in 2015 reached newspaper, online, and broadcast audiences in the United States and around the world *more than 4,000 times*, including many people who've yet to secure the benefits of political freedom and economic opportunity.

At the same time, Cato has been working with a Sponsor and new Legacy Society member to advance libertarian ideas among students in his area. After several conversations about estate giving vehicles and the anticipated total contribution, we settled on a plan to achieve the goals of that Sponsor. Moving ahead, thanks to the Sponsor's commitment to helping young people attend Cato events, we'll be able to add new lovers of

liberty to our ranks, and then direct them to educational opportunities including Libertarianism.org, Cato University, a Cato internship, and involvement with other like-minded organizations.

Sponsorship of Cato makes you a partner in our efforts, and we value Sponsors as colleagues in our fight for individual liberty, free markets, and peace. Respecting donor intent is an important part of our commitment to honoring the partnership between Sponsors and the Institute. Your area of interest might be student programs, or foreign policy, or the unsustainable debt burden. Please let us know if you'd like more information about our activities, or if you'd like to discuss directing your support for Cato toward any particular activity. These conversations are common when it's time for people to discuss including Cato in their estate planning, and we're always glad to explore ideas and opportunities with current and potential Sponsors who aim to advance the principles of liberty.

Legacy Society gifts are a cornerstone of Cato's operations, enabling our pursuit to create free, open, and civil societies founded on libertarian principles. Cato's scholars and staff are honored by support from people committed to joining us in the fight to advance the public's understanding of the philosophy that is the foundation of the most prosperous society in history. Indeed our greatest challenge today is to continue to extend the promise of liberty to those who are still denied it, in our own country and around the world. ■

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New Audiobook

Jonathan Rauch's *Kindly Inquisitors* has challenged readers for more than 20 years with its provocative exploration of the issues surround-



The audiobook is read by **PENN JILLETTE**, a Cato Institute H.L. Mencken research fellow and the louder, larger half of Emmy-winning magic/comedy team Penn & Teller.

ing attempts to limit free speech. Now, a fully unabridged audiobook edition, with over 7 hours of playing time, is available. This newly expanded edition, with a foreword by George F. Will, illustrates the book's continued and growing relevance. The answer to bias and prejudice, Rauch argues, is pluralism – not purism. Rather than

attempting to legislate bias and prejudice out of existence, we must pit bias and prejudice against one another to foster a more fruitful discussion, helping us to replace hate with knowledge.



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