Freedom Isn't Free /// Andrew Bacevich on the costs of America's desire to have it all

BY CHRIS BERDIK

At the root of America's financial crisis and its open-ended global war on terror, says iconoclastic conservative thinker and former Army colonel Andrew Bacevich, lies a principle as old as America's founding: freedom. In his latest book, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (Metropolitan Books, 2008), Bacevich argues that the meaning of freedom has mutated in recent decades. Today, it stands

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN NORTHEAST

for unbridled government spending, conspicuous consumption, and "radical individual autonomy." That new definition, he says, breeds crushing national and personal debt and dependence on foreign creditors and oil producers. To support it all, we've needed an expansionist foreign policy rationalized by a centuries-old belief in American exceptionalism — that we are a special nation on a providential mission to spread freedom around the world. The kicker, he says, is that this same definition of freedom saps our ability to sustain the global commitments and conflicts that it engenders.

Bacevich, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of international relations, doesn't have much hope that any president or political party will change this equation. He spoke with *Bostonia* about what he sees as the consequences of America's particular brand of freedom.

Your new book focuses on post–World War II America, but you also quote figures like Alexis de Tocqueville and John Winthrop. Was there an ideal America that you think we've fallen away from, or have we been heading this way for centuries?

We have always been a materialistic people, so I'm not trying to imply that there was some golden era in which Americans lived frugally and sat around listening to Beethoven while they read Shakespeare to their children. But roughly since the 1960s, a penchant for conspicuous consumption and a tendency toward self-indulgence have come to be the predominant expression of American freedom.

Now, I describe U.S. policy toward the world beyond our borders as continuously expansionist, beginning with the first colonists. And if you look up to about the time of the Eisenhower presidency, it is a spectacularly successful enterprise. Over that period, a handful of puny colonies are transformed into a global superpower.

But I go on to argue that beginning in the 1960s, this positive correlation between expansion, power, abundance, and freedom starts to become undone. Efforts to expand since then have actually undercut our power, have caused us to squander our material abundance, and, I think, are compromising our freedom. We need to rethink in a very fundamental sense our relationship with the rest of the world, which will be impossible absent a willingness to rethink and, indeed, abandon this notion of American exceptionalism.

But what about using our power to stop acts such as genocide — can exceptionalism be benign?

I think not. Exceptionalism could theoretically be benign if Americans viewed their providential mission as one of serving as the Good Samaritan to the rest of the world, that our mission is to feed the hungry and minister to the sick. But nation states are not and cannot be enterprises that derive their principal mode of force from altruism. Nation states necessarily are entities that, at the end of the day, act in the pursuit of self-interest. And so it seems to me that as a practical matter, exceptionalism will tend to serve as a fig leaf for the pursuit of self-interest and therefore make it much more difficult for us to see ourselves as we really are.

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Would you say that the bill for the excesses of American freedom is now coming due?

I think in a sense the bill is coming due now, but whether our political leaders or we ourselves will be willing to face up to the facts remains to be seen. My interpretation of what we hear from both parties in Washington is that there's no requirement for fundamental change either in our system or in the way we live. There may be a requirement to exert closer supervision of greedy bankers on Wall Street, but generally, the argument is that once the bailout takes effect, normalcy will be restored. I have my doubts. I think it's equally possible that the financial crisis really does signal a historic turning point and that the age of American primacy really is coming to an end.

WEB EXTRA
Through January, Professor Andrew Bacevich will answer questions about America's foreign policy priorities under President Barack Obama.

What exactly would it mean to the American way of life to follow your prescription?

We need to balance the federal budget. We need to cease borrowing from foreign countries in order

to sustain our penchant for consumption. As households, we need to begin saving again. Those are the sorts of things that I think are required. And to the extent that freedom is more or less synonymous with a compulsion to consume, to the extent that we continue to think that's really what we value in American life, then it seems almost impossible to learn to live within our means.

To the extent that people would be willing to embrace a different understanding of freedom — not one in which we would all move into the desert and live like hermits, but a definition in which consumption is no longer the central value — then it might become possible to generate political support for sacrifice. But even as I say that, it's obvious that some kind of wholesale reconsideration of our culture would be required first, and I can't say that that seems to me to be in the cards anytime soon.

Andrew Bacevich

President-elect Barack Obama has promised a culture change in Washington. But you think it's unlikely that new leadership will be able to put America back on track?
President Obama will face enormous constraints. The federal deficit for the current fiscal year is expected to be upwards of a trillion dollars. That alone, it seems to me, is going to impose real limits on his ability to make good on his promise to change the way Washington works.

Furthermore, an important legacy of the Bush administration has been to demonstrate how much more limited American power is than we imagined in the heady aftermath of the Cold War, while also damaging America's standing and reputation in the world. And in that regard, it seems to me that rather than embarking upon any great decisive foreign policy initiatives, President Obama is going to have to attend primarily to repairing the wreckage left by his predecessor.

Editing Eliot ///

Christopher Ricks relishes the sound of the words as much as their meaning

BY NATALIE JACOBSON McCRACKEN

It takes erudition to understand T. S. Eliot's poems, but, says literary critic and Eliot expert Christopher Ricks, it is also important to stop sometimes and hear the music.

Ricks, BU's William M. and Sara B. Warren Professor of the Humanities and codirector of the Editorial Institute at Boston University, is editing, with Jim McCue, the first complete critical edition of Eliot's poems, to be published by Johns Hopkins University Press in America and Faber & Faber in Britain.

Ricks is author of *T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism* and editor of *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, a volume of previously unpublished Eliot poems, among many books.

He spoke with *Bostonia* about editing Eliot.

We all know what editing fiction and nonfiction means. What does it mean to edit poems?
It depends how fully you do the editing. When I was editing Eliot's early, unpublished poems, a friend who's a literary agent assumed that all I had to do was copy them out, photocopy them, and send that to the publisher.

First, there's much textual work that needs to be done to establish a truly correct text of the poems themselves, to trace all the prepublication materials — jottings, manuscripts, possible illustrations, things of that kind.

And there's an even larger body of contextual material that a reader in the twenty-first century needs — annotation, in terms of classical and other kinds of literary allusion and of the social world. I found myself annotating the phrase "department store," not because nobody would know what it means, but because they ought to know that at the time Eliot wrote these poems people put it in quotation marks. It's a strange term. Does a department store sell departments in the way a hardware store sells hardware?

So there are all the contextual worlds. And there's the world of Eliot's theological and religious understanding, the world of his political convictions, and the world of other poems with which his poems would often be in some sort of conversation, which he loved doing — for instance at the start of "The Waste-land," saying, "April is the cruelest month."