

tal difficulties of the human lot, while the honest and the intelligent offer no such reassurance.

Mencken comments that solutions to “the sex problem” abound—it is just that none of them work:

There is no half-baked ecclesiastic, bawling in his galvanized-iron temple on a suburban lot, who doesn't know precisely how it ought to be dealt with. There is no fantoddish old suffragette, sworn to get her revenge on man, who hasn't a sovereign remedy for it. There is not a shyster of a district attorney, ambitious for higher office, who doesn't offer to dispose of it in a few weeks, given only enough help from the city editors. And yet, by the same token, there is not a man who has honestly studied it and pondered it, bringing sound information to the business, and understanding of its inner difficulties and a clean and analytical mind, who doesn't believe and hasn't stated publicly that it is intrinsically and eternally insoluble.<sup>20</sup>

Mencken's insight is, if anything, more relevant today than when he wrote, though Mencken's specific targets seem comparatively harmless when compared to the dictators and fanatics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who have employed the “messianic delusion” to seduce their followers and excuse their crimes.

Any meaningful estimate of Mencken's importance must distinguish between the doctrines he endorsed and what Joseph Epstein calls the “point of view” communicated in his writings; as Epstein points out, “it is not their opinions but the possession of an interesting point of view that separates the great essayists from their fellow workers, making them, in their own fashion, artists in prose.”<sup>21</sup> Mencken's materialism, atheism, and opposition to puritanism are far from unique and, indeed, have become the clichés of contemporary discourse. What makes Mencken worth reading is his refusal to move from these premises to the nihilism, despair, resentment, and self-pity that typify the

response of so many later writers to the same assumptions. The most impressive accomplishment of Mencken's writing is his ability to communicate his sense that both the delights of everyday life and the obligations of “ordinary decency” remain, even if one assumes the indifference of the universe.

1. Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York, 2002). 2. Mencken, H. L., “Hymn to the Truth,” *Prejudices: A Selection*, ed. James T. Farrell (New York, 1958), 245. 3. *Ibid.*, 246. 4. *Ibid.* 5. Kramer, Hilton, “Who Reads Mencken Now?” *The New Criterion*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (January 2003), 60. 6. *Ibid.*, 62. 7. *Ibid.*, 60. 8. *Ibid.* 9. Mencken, H. L., “The National Letters,” *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York, 1920), 68. 10. *Ibid.* 11. Mencken, H. L., “Roosevelt: An Autopsy,” *Prejudices: A Selection*, 69. 12. Mencken, H. L., “On Living in Baltimore,” *Prejudices: A Selection*, 208. 13. *Ibid.*, 209. 14. *Ibid.*, 210. 15. *Ibid.* 16. Kramer, 61. 17. Mencken, H. L., “On Being an American,” *Prejudices: A Selection*, 90. 18. *Ibid.*, 90-91. 19. Mencken, H. L., “The Cult of Hope” *Prejudices: A Selection*, 86. 20. *Ibid.*, 87. 21. Epstein, Joseph, “H. L. Mencken for Grownups,” *Partial Payments: Essays on Writers and Their Lives* (New York, 1989), 43.

## ***A Potent Imperium***

*Jeremy Black*

**American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy**, by Andrew J. Bacevich, *Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. xiii+300 pp.*

ANDREW BACEVICH'S *American Empire* is a first-rate book: important, interesting, and well-written. It stands outside mainstream writing on international relations as a

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result of its grasp of practicalities, and Bacevich's preference for rigorous analysis rather than the schematic model-making that, understandably, puts off so many readers. Bacevich sets out to consider the present situation in American foreign policy. He does so by re-examining the last century, searching out themes and continuities that move him away from turning points predicated on the beginning and "end" of the Cold War (I put the latter in quotation marks because in some parts of the world the Cold War has not ended, despite the demise of the Soviet Union).

In addition, Bacevich, Professor of International Relations at Boston University, looks at the relationship between America's global power and her domestic political culture. He concludes, "The question that urgently demands attention...is not whether the United States has become an imperial power. The question is what sort of empire [the Americans] intend theirs to be. For policymakers to persist in pretending otherwise...is to increase the likelihood that the answers they come up with will be wrong. That way lies not just the demise of the American empire but great danger for what used to be known as the American republic."

Bacevich's point of departure is the present, but he also goes back to look at how American policy has developed with the pursuit of moral ends increasingly linked to the pursuit of a potent imperium. Bacevich puts it clearly:

[T]he politico-economic concept to which the United States adheres today has not changed in a century: the familiar quest for an "open world," the overriding imperative of commercial integration, confidence that technology endows the United States with a privileged position in that order, and the expectation that American military might will preserve order and enforce the rules. Those policies reflect a single-minded determination to extend and perpetuate American political, economic, and cultural hege-

mony—usually referred to as "leadership"—on a global scale.

Bacevich's route is an interesting one, including a re-examination of the works of two critical American historians, Charles Beard and William Appleman Williams, in order to throw light on the extent to which the defenders of liberal internationalism found it necessary to develop a mythic account of America's ascent to global power: specifically, what he terms the "myth of the reluctant superpower." Bacevich reviews Beard's critique of Roosevelt's interventionism and also underlines the value of Williams's questions about the desirable character and organization of the American imperium and what consequences it would have for the American people. While disagreeing with the prescriptions of both Beard and Williams, Bacevich finds much of value in their analysis. As an example of a judicious discussion of ideas and their applicability, his treatment of the two historians is masterly.

Moving forward, Bacevich shows how, as the American imperium became committed to globalization, those who resisted were seen as opponents of the United States. Inheriting British ideas from the nineteenth century, American writers and policymakers understood free trade and the unfettered movement of capital as political as well as economic goods, and thus as central goods for government to pursue. The state thus became a protection system for an economic world view which, in turn, helped fund the state.

But rather than seeing this in left-wing terms as the product of economic conspiracy and class interest, Bacevich focuses on the moral ideals that motivated policy, specifically on the pursuit of a benign and mutually beneficial world order that reflected an imperium rather than an empire of control, constraint, and coercion. The democratic objective at

the heart of American capitalism is here seen as both cause and consequence of freedom. Bacevich underlines the degree to which this economic goal—seen at once as being in America's and the world's interest, and as conducive to liberty as well as prosperity—provides a continuous theme that bridged the close of the Cold War. It was pertinent both before 1990 and after it. Democratic capitalism had to be supported, and if necessary, fought for, everywhere.

Bacevich's discussion of the 1990s is particularly profitable. He argues that a greater reliance on military coercion as an instrument of policy and the tendency of serving military officers to displace civilians in implementing foreign policy were manifestations of the increasing militarization of American statecraft after the Cold War. This is not a course he welcomes:

The note of apparent civil-military reconciliation on which the decade began proved ephemeral. Before the 1990s ended, evidence of civil-military dysfunction had become increasingly difficult to ignore. Meanwhile, events had exposed the limitations of the proconsular system—and of American's reliance on gunboats and Gurkhas to police the world.

The Kosovo crisis, nevertheless, is presented as an illustration of the fact that, faced with opposition, the United States would do whatever was necessary to achieve its purposes. From the European perspective, it is slightly surprising to be told that the U.S. "fought over Kosovo... to forestall the intolerable prospect of Europe's backsliding," since the crisis is commonly presented in Europe in terms of the difficulty of persuading President Clinton to focus on the Balkans and be willing to risk a ground war. Indeed, Clinton was criticized for the distraction of the Lewinsky saga.

The analysis offered in this book is on the whole persuasive, and indeed, it is the

ability to offer an account that makes sense of so much that is so impressive. For example, the American determination to overthrow the European colonial empires after the Second World War can be located more clearly in light of the themes advanced in this book than in Cold War terms. The Americans hoped that newly independent peoples would support democratic capitalism and thus look to the United States for "leadership." This can (now) be seen as a foolish view, although the alternatives were, and are, not welcome.

The role of continuity and memory in framing responses to crises is one that has also been ably discussed recently in Jeffrey Record's important book, *Making War, Thinking History* (2002). Records show how historical lessons, particularly Munich and Vietnam, were misinterpreted, and suggest that "the tendency to regard violent nationalism in the Third World as the product of a centrally directed international Communist conspiracy was a strategic error of the first magnitude." Bacevich, in turn, is scathing about the failure of the senior President Bush and his advisors to respond adequately "when confronting events without obvious parallel during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s."

This rich book deserves a very wide readership. It offers intelligent and mature reflections on foreign, military, and economic policy and on the relationship between the global imperium the United States seeks to direct and the condition of her civil society. There are also important questions about imperial overreach. The long-term is more than a series of short-terms, and understandable as it is for conservatives (and others) to frame questions and answers in terms of immediate issues—the September eleventh-ization of American policy—or at least to focus on post-Cold War paradigms, it is necessary to consider issues in international relations in the longer term.

Traditional conservative values such as prudence have been unduly neglected as internationalism has become the theme of much of the right. This has implications not only for conservative positions on domestic politics, particularly low taxation and restricted public debt, but also for the idea of national sovereignty that has played a central role in conservative thought on international relations for generations.

Internationalism challenges sovereignty at a number of levels. For the imperial power, the United States, it poses the difficulty of responding to the expectations of allies and, more seriously, those whose alliance is sought; as well as the issue of how best to answer calls for decision-making, judgment, and arbitration through international bodies that the United States both distrusts and yet finds it necessary to use. For other powers, there is the problem of how best to protect and further traditional national goals while responding to the demands of the imperial power. The ambivalent American response to conservative Arab regimes is indicative of a more general problem, for it is not only in autocratic regimes where conservatism is challenged by American policies and pretensions. Bacevich's instructive book invites us to reopen the case for a more measured stance to internationalism and for a cautious response to the assumptions of others. He deserves high praise for his intelligent conservatism.

## ***Modernism in the Visual Arts***

*James F. Cooper*

**Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism**, by T.J. Clark, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 2001. 451 pp.*

THIS IS AN IMPORTANT BOOK, for two reasons. The first is its comprehensive overview of the two-hundred-year history of modernism in the visual arts, beginning with, as Professor T.J. Clark posits, Jacques-Louis David's painting *Death of Marat* (1793), and ending in the postmodern era of gargantuan museums and banal biennials. The second is the author's fundamental thesis that the evolution of socialism—with its origins in the French Revolution and concluding with the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall—is inseparably linked to modernism. Clark's contention is that both failed, and for similar reasons. At a time when the arts and arts scholarship are still often perceived through the prism of postmodern semiotics and Marxist ideology, Clark's verdict is comparable to a bombshell thrown into the midst of smug political conventioners accustomed to forging national agendas and anointing cultural elites.

Clark is a respected scholar of postmodern theory, Chancellor's Professor of Modern Art at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of several books on early modernism, including *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-51*; *Image of the People: Gustave*

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