

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Andrew J. Bacevich graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1969 and served in the United States Army during the Vietnam War. Afterwards he held posts in Germany, the United States, and the Persian Gulf. He retired in the early 1990s with the rank of colonel.

Bacevich, who has a doctorate from Princeton, taught at West Point and Johns Hopkins University prior to joining the faculty at Boston University in 1998. He teaches international relations and history at BU.

On May 13, 2007, Bacevich's son, also named Andrew J. Bacevich, was killed in action in Iraq. He was 27 and a first lieutenant assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 8th U.S. Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division.

Bacevich is the author of *The Limits of Power: American Exceptionalism* (2008). His previous books include *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy* (2002), *The Imperial Tense: Problems and Prospects of American Empire* (2003) (editor), *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (2005), and *The Long War: A New History of US National Security Policy since World War II* (2007) (editor).

Thank you for the privilege of presenting my views to this committee. I am particularly honored to do so alongside these veterans of the Afghanistan War.

Members of this generation have come to know war well and I would not presume to comment on their experience. My own generation had its own intimate relationship with a different war, one that has now become a distant memory. As with many who served in Vietnam, my own views even today are perhaps too colored by that experience. Still, in gaining some perspective on the predicament that we currently face, Vietnam may retain some lingering relevance.

What strikes me most about that war is the extent to which its lessons have been forgotten and in some cases even inverted.

In one of the most thoughtful Vietnam-era accounts written by a senior military officer, General Bruce Palmer once observed that “With respect to

Vietnam, our leaders should have known that the American people would not stand still for a protracted war of an indeterminate nature with no foreseeable end to the U. S. commitment.”

General Palmer thereby distilled into a single sentence the central lesson of Vietnam: to embark upon an open-ended war lacking clearly defined and achievable objectives was to forfeit public support, thereby courting disaster. The implications were clear: never again.

General Palmer’s book, which he titled *The Twenty-Five Year War*, appeared in 1984. Today, exactly twenty-five years later we once again find ourselves mired in a “protracted war of an indeterminate nature with no foreseeable end to the U. S. commitment.”

How did this happen?

In the wake of Vietnam, the United States military set out to develop a new way of war intended to preclude any recurrence of protracted, indeterminate conflict. The expectation was that by emphasizing technology and superior skill U. S. forces would achieve victory quickly and at acceptable costs, thereby protecting themselves from the possibility of public abandonment. In 1991 Operation Desert Storm seemingly validated this new paradigm.

Yet events since 9/11, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, have now demolished such expectations. Once again, as in Vietnam, the enemy calls the tune, obliging us to fight on his terms. Decision has become elusive. As fighting drags on, its purpose becomes increasingly difficult to discern.

American soldiers are now said to face the prospect of perpetual conflict. We find ourselves in the midst of what the Pentagon calls “The Long War,” a conflict global in scope (if largely concentrated in the Greater Middle East) and expected to last even longer than General Palmer’s “Twenty-Five Year War.”

To apply to the Long War the plaintive query that General David Petraeus once posed with regard to Iraq – “Tell me how this ends” – the answer is clear: no one has the foggiest idea. War has become like the changing

phases of the moon: it's part of everyday existence. For American soldiers there is quite literally no end in sight.

Yet there is one notable difference between today and day thirty-eight years ago when the chairman of this committee testified against the then seemingly endless war in Vietnam. At that time, when the young John Kerry spoke, many of his contemporaries had angrily turned against their generation's war. Today, most of the contemporaries of those fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan have simply tuned out the Long War. The predominant mood of the country is not one of anger or anxiety, but of dull acceptance.

In other words, Americans today do appear willing to "stand still" when considering the prospect of endless war. There are many explanations for why Americans are so disengaged from the Long War, but the most important, in my view, is that few of us have any personal stake in that conflict.

When the citizen-soldier tradition collapsed under the weight of Vietnam, the post-Vietnam military rebuilt itself as a professional force. The creation of this all-volunteer military was widely hailed as a great success. Only now are we beginning to glimpse its shortcomings, chief among them the fact that it exists at some remove from American society. Americans today profess to "support the troops" but that support is a mile wide and an inch deep. It rarely translates into serious public concern for whether the troops are being used wisely or well.

The upshot is that with the eighth anniversary of the Long War now approaching, fundamental questions about this enterprise continue to be ignored.

My purpose today is to suggest that the members of this committee have a profound duty to take those questions on.

In his testimony before this committee, the young John Kerry famously – or infamously, in the eyes of some – asked: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

What exactly was that mistake? Well, there were many, but the most fundamental lay in President Johnson's erroneous conviction that the

Republic of Vietnam constituted a vital U. S. security interest and that ensuring that country's survival required direct U. S. military intervention.

Johnson erred in his estimation of South Vietnam's importance. He compounded that error with a tragic failure of imagination, persuading himself that there existed no alternative to a massive U. S. troop commitment and that once in there was no way out.

My own view is that we are in our own day are repeating LBJ's errors. Recall that in his testimony before this committee, speaking on behalf of other antiwar veterans, the young John Kerry derisively remarked that "we are probably angriest about all that we were told about Vietnam and about the mystical war against communism."

The mystical war against communism finds its counterpart in the mystical war on terrorism. As in the 1960s so too today: mystification breeds misunderstanding and misjudgment. It prevents us from seeing things as they are.

As a direct result, it leads us to exaggerate the importance of places like Afghanistan and indeed to exaggerate the jihadist threat, which falls well short of being existential. It induces flights of fancy, so that, for example, otherwise sensible people conjure up visions of providing clean water, functioning schools, and good governance to Afghanistan's 40,000 villages, with expectations of thereby winning Afghan hearts and minds. It causes people to ignore considerations of cost. With the Long War already this nation's second most expensive conflict, trailing only World War II, and with the federal government projecting trillion dollar deficits for years to come, how much can we afford and where is the money coming from?

For political reasons the Obama administration may have banished the phrase Global War on Terror, yet even today the conviction persists that the United States is called upon to dominate or liberate or transform the Greater Middle East. Methods may be shifting, with the emphasis on pacification giving way to militarized nation-building. Priorities may be changing, Af-Pak now supplanting Iraq as the main effort. Yet by whatever name the larger enterprise continues. The president who vows to "change the way Washington works" has not yet exhibited the imagination needed to conceive of an alternative to the project that his predecessor began.

The urgent need is to de-mystify that project, which was from the outset a misguided one. Just as in the 1960s we possessed neither the wisdom nor the means needed to determine the fate of Southeast Asia, so too today we possess neither the wisdom nor the means necessary to determinate the fate of the Greater Middle East. To persist in efforts to do so – as the Obama administration appears intent on doing in Afghanistan – will simply replicate on an even greater scale mistakes and misjudgments comparable to those that young John Kerry once rightly decried.

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