YJIA: You are a retired Army colonel and Vietnam veteran, and you also graduated from both West Point and Princeton before teaching at West Point, Johns Hopkins, and now Boston University. What led you first to a career in the military, and then one in academia?

Bacevich: Well, I was born in 1947, at the dawn of the Cold War, into a Catholic, Midwestern family. Both of my parents were World War II veterans. So, like many others raised during the 1950s, I grew up in an environment that valued patriotism and admired military service. When it came time to go to college, I applied to several places but had a particular interest in West Point. When I was offered an appointment, I chose to go there for several reasons, not least among them the fact that my parents wouldn’t have to pay for my college education.

Now, how I became an academic subsequent to leaving the Army is a more difficult question to answer. I ended up where I ended up, doing what I am less as a consequence of some grand plan than as a result of the kindness of strangers who helped me along or nudged me in a particular direction. I have no regrets about how things turned out, other than perhaps the fact that it took me this long to figure out that I find this kind of work very, very rewarding. I really was not cut out to be a soldier. Perhaps I should have figured that out sooner than I did.

YJIA: We frequently hear about making use of all of the “instruments of national power,” which might include military, informational, diplomatic, legal, identity, financial, and economic elements, among others. You are on the record as holding the view that the United States is over-reliant on the military instrument, can you elaborate a bit on that position?

Bacevich: Certainly! As you mentioned in the introduction, I am a Vietnam veteran and like many members of that generation I took from that experience the belief that force has limited utility and that the nation should resort to force only when absolutely necessary. Sometime around the time of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, that outlook—that skepticism about force—began to give way. To put it another way, Desert Storm gave
rise to the conviction—the illusion in my view—that the United States really had war figured out. We knew how to win, and that we could win quickly, decisively, economically. Even very senior members of the officer corps succumbed to this illusion. One consequence was to create a greater willingness to intervene, even when the interests at stake were less than vital. Recall the Clinton era, especially, with our supposedly anti-military, draft-dodging president who employed force with unprecedented frequency, although to be fair his two Republican predecessors had begun to pave the way.

After 9/11, this tendency reached its apotheosis when a group of people who very much shared in this belief in the efficacy of American military power set out to transform the Greater Middle East, persuaded that this was the best way to curtail Muslim animosity directed against the United States. What has that effort produced? It has certainly cost us a lot, but it has no decisive victories and conclusive outcomes. If anything, our military exertions have increased the amount of anti-Americanism in the world. Mostly, we’ve succeeded in squandering power.

There are many lessons that we might take from the past decade or so. One is that we should be more modest in our expectations of what force can accomplish. That doesn’t mean that we should disarm. It just means that we should temper our expectations of what force can achieve. Perhaps instead of trying to change others, we should change ourselves. That’s the view I’ve tried to promote.

YJIA: Along those same lines, you have written many books about the United States’ military power. What do you mean when you talk about “America’s Path to Permanent War?” Does it have anything to do with the “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower discussed in his famous farewell address?

Bacevich: Well, President Eisenhower’s address is justifiably famous and remains all too relevant. Yet it does not fully explain our propensity for war. In my book *Washington Rules*, I argue that in the immediate wake of World War II-Vietnam, the United States evolved a set of policy preferences that soon enough became habits. The habits soon defined normalcy endorsed by senior military leaders and civilian leaders and accepted unquestioningly by the American people.

I identify three such habits or rules, in particular. According to the first, we design U.S. forces not to defend the country but to provide instruments for global power projection, itself a justification for maintaining high levels of military spending. According to the second, we position those forces far afield, maintaining a global military presence. No other country maintains anything like a comparable profile. Were China, say, even to propose doing so, Washington would view it as a hostile act. As to the third rule, we marry these forces designed for global power projection to this and global presence to support a penchant for global interventionism. Let me emphasize: I’m not opposed to these practices per se. I just don’t think we should embrace them blindly. If the rules work—if they enhance the safety and well-being of the American people—then let’s stick with them. But if they don’t work—and the evidence of the past twenty or so years suggests that they don’t—maybe we ought to try a different approach.
YJIA: What should the international community be doing in Syria right now?

Bacevich: Well, what I think you’re really asking is, “what’s your view on humanitarian intervention and the so-called Responsibility to Protect?” First, let me emphasize there are circumstances, even if rare, where humanitarian considerations should prompt the United States to intervene. And I think we can probably have a lively discussion about whether or not Syria meets the criteria. My instinct would be to say it probably doesn’t. But I certainly respect the views of others who say that the ongoing death and destruction is simply intolerable. I just want the people who think that action is necessary to think the matter through and that means having a fuller discussion. The reflex response — “innocents are being killed and I really feel bad about it, so let’s send the American military so that I’ll sleep better tonight” — just isn’t good enough. Before we send in the 82nd [Airborne], there are other questions to consider. One of those questions is this one: To the extent that humanitarian crisis merits a U.S. response, why is it necessarily the case that the response has to be a military one?

So let’s talk about Syria. If I understand it correctly, large numbers of Syrians are fleeing their country, mostly into Turkey and Jordan, in order to escape the chaos in their country. They are suffering greatly. Well, to ease their plight, rather than sending American soldiers to fight in Syria, why not admit Syrian refugees into America? I mean, if indeed we care about their well-being, why don’t we express that concern by welcoming them to our shores as we have welcomed so many others before. Rather than having U.S. troops pay the price to ease our collective conscience, let’s have citizens pay the price by welcoming the poor and destitute into our communities and settling there. My bet is that such an approach would actually benefit a greater number of people at less cost to the taxpayer. Furthermore, if there really is no alternative to using force, then the country needs to cover the costs involved. So if we want to undertake a humanitarian intervention in Syria, then Congress should raise our taxes or cut entitlement programs, rather than simply passing the costs onto future generations. And if we are willing to send our soldiers to fight and die for Syria, then let’s make sure that the U.S. military is genuinely representative of the nation, so that all parts of our society — Yale included — share in the burden of service and sacrifice. So I’m all for humanitarian intervention, but not so people who feel badly can sleep better at night.

We also need to be realistic about exactly what we can accomplish. In a place like Syria, we may be able to stop the killing, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that we can fix whatever underlying problems created and are sustaining this mess. President Obama has said that Assad must go. Who do we think will replace Assad? Jeffersonian democrats? Or Islamists whose radical political agenda is contrary to our interests, and might also be contrary to those of our Israeli allies? Is anyone so foolish to think that the United States will be able to decide the answer to those questions?

YJIA: You have described the U.S. military as entering a “Golden Age of Special Operations” and other unconventional warfare. What are some of the benefits and hazards of a national policy that depends on “war in the shadows” including Special Operations and drone strikes?

Bacevich: I think the main benefit is to reduce risks and costs. When Secretary Gates,
toward the end of his time as Secretary of Defense, said at West Point, that anyone proposing to send a land army into the Middle East or Asia anytime soon should have his head examined, he was expressing one of the lessons that most people have taken from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It’s an understandable and appropriate lesson, hence the increased allure of drones and special operations. They enable you to avoid many of the negatives that come with establishing a “big footprint” in places where you are not particularly welcome. But there is a downside. An infatuation with special operations and drones can encourage recklessness in the use of force. I mean, President Obama has seemingly asserted a prerogative of killing anyone he wants to kill just about anywhere in the world. Now that doesn’t mean that he’s likely to exercise that prerogative in Chicago or in London, but in the Greater Middle East, just about anything goes. Anybody that his national security apparatus identifies as threatening our national security becomes a legitimate target. And Obama exercises that prerogative, which even extends to the extra-juridical killing of U.S. citizens abroad.

Set aside the constitutional issues for a moment. How exactly does this practice provide the basis for sound strategy? I have no problem with the state killing people who need to be killed, but the killing needs to be politically purposeful. There needs to be some identifiable path leading toward an end to violence. With regard to our troubled relationship with the Islamic world, how many people are we going to have to kill before the problem goes away? Might it not actually be the case that killing people serves to exacerbate the problem? Killing—the whole enterprise we used to call the global war on terrorism—might just be a way of dodging the very difficult political, cultural, and religious questions that lie at the root of the matter. I can understand the desire to avoid those questions because they are indeed very, very difficult. But avoiding difficulties cannot provide an adequate justification for killing.

**YJIA:** You alluded there to a topic which many people, including you yourself, have recently written about: the growing divide between the people who create foreign policy, those who carry it out, and the people for whom these policies exist. Perhaps the most acute of these is the civil-military divide. Does a civil-military divide exist? How broad is it? What can be done to close it?

**Bacevich:** The divide exists, and I am by no means the only person to say so. Any number of serving officers, people I don’t even know, have contacted me out of the blue to make just that point. Secretary Gates specifically mentioned it, and if I remember correctly, so did Admiral Mullen as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. So there is pretty much a consensus that a gap exists.

Now the real question here is, “Is that gap a problem?” I have become persuaded that it is. The gap itself undermines national security and undercuts military effectiveness. To put it another way, the all-volunteer force has turned out to be not such a good deal. What can we do to close the gap? One way to remedy it might be to bring back
the draft or to implement a program of national service. In a small way, educators can play a role. In my undergraduate course on the American Military Experience, I use memoirs, novels, motion pictures, and documentaries to introduce students to the reality of war and soldiering. When it comes to military affairs, they are for the most part at least naïve, if not altogether illiterate. I’m trying in a small way to correct that, to provide them with some understanding of what soldiering is all about. Soldiering in peacetime, soldiering in wartime – or soldiering on the ground or in the air or on the sea – I want them to empathize with what it means to serve. I am by no means trying to recruit them. But I do believe that Americans in our day can’t be effective citizens without some basic knowledge of military affairs. To put it another way, if we are ignorant, that’s when the demagogues and charlatans snooker us.

YJIA: So do you think the United States needs to re-institute the draft?

Bacevich: Yes. A few years ago, I’d have said otherwise. But my views on this issue have shifted. The army in which I served in Vietnam was a draftee army. I was very much persuaded at the time that ending the draft and moving to a professional, standing force made sense. As a serving officer, it made my life easier. The benefits were manifest. We ended up with a force that was better-disciplined, better-trained, and consisted for the most part of people who wanted to serve. But I have since become convinced that allowing people to opt out of national security has disastrous effects. One of these effects is to allow policy makers greater latitude in deciding where, when, and how to apply force.

But I think you can make an argument – and I’m trying to make this argument in a book I have coming out in the fall – that despite its admirable qualities, the all-volunteer force doesn’t win. And despite some very real limitations, a citizen force does win. That’s been the American experience, at least. It may not win all the time; it certainly didn’t in Vietnam. But to my mind we failed in Vietnam because the war itself was supremely stupid and because it was massively mismanaged. Don’t blame the draftee who toted an M16. Blame Johnson, McNamara, Wheeler, and Westmoreland. But note that the wars that made this country great were fought and won by citizen-soldiers. Citizen-soldiers won World War II. Citizen-soldiers won the Civil War. Both of these wars engaged the attention and energy of the people. In both cases, a contract, maybe even a covenant, defined the relationship between the state and the people. The Americans who donned uniforms to go off and fight did so not at the behest of the state but on behalf of the people. After Vietnam, we tore up that contract, and abandoned that covenant. In the near term, it seemed like a smart thing to do – all those troublesome draftees went away and college kids were freed of worrying that their Uncle Sam was going to send them off to war. But now we’ve begun to see the negative consequences of abandoning the tradition of the citizen-soldier.

People claim – with justification – that the United States today has the best military in the world. We have the best military that the world has ever seen, by some measures. But we don’t win wars. And the wars in which we engage end up being enormously costly. And there are too many of them.

We have the best military that the world has ever seen, by some measures. But we don’t win wars.
YJIA: So the United States has the best military, but it doesn’t win wars. Why not?

Bacevich: So I think the essence of the problem is that we let the American people off the hook when it came to military service, and by extension, service in wartime. That has to be remedied. Now, I don’t think that the remedy to this is to reintroduce the system of selective service that existed during the Cold War. I don’t think we should draft everybody—we don’t need and can’t afford a force that large. But I do think that the time has come, once again, for us to examine the concept of national service. The idea would be to have all able-bodied youngsters do some kind of service to the nation—not to the state necessarily, but to the nation, with some number of them invited to serve in the United States military as their form of service. We need that not only to have a more effective military policy, but as a way of reconstituting a meaningful definition of citizenship. National service would help restore the principle that citizenship entails obligations, not merely rights and privileges.

My book recounts the debate over the ending of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). On many college campuses this was a really big issue. Harvard was one of the places where opposition to the policy was especially strong. And when the Pentagon abandoned DADT, the president of Harvard released a victory statement, which said, in effect, “This is a great day, because it affirms military service as a basic right for all citizens.” And I wondered, “since when did military service become a right?” That’s not the way the Founders defined things. They judged it an obligation. The Militia Act of 1792 required all male Americans of a certain age to enroll in the militia. According to George Washington, an obligation to contribute directly to the defense of the country, not financially but also in being available for military service, was a foundational principle of national policy. So I think we need to reevaluate this whole question of rights and responsibilities entailed by citizenship. Military service ought to be at the center of that reevaluation.

YJIA: How should the U.S. policy community respond to Iran?

Bacevich: Well, I don’t understand why containment is off the table. Why assume that containment won’t work in this case? I suppose the answer depends on one’s view of the regime. Despite the vile rhetoric we hear from people like President Ahmadinejad—and it is vile rhetoric—I see no evidence that Iran ought to be viewed as an irrational actor. Since the creation of the Islamic Republic, its leaders have behaved very rationally. I’d go a step further. If Iran is, in fact, developing a nuclear weapon, that, too, would constitute a rational act on their part. Put yourself in Iranian shoes. Survey the national security landscape from their perspective. What you see is a host of threats. And guess what Problem #1 is? It’s us! Given the record of the past sixty years, why would any Iranian judge U.S. intentions as anything other than hostile?

So I don’t know if Iran is developing a nuclear weapon, but if I were their equivalent of a National Security Advisor, I’d certainly be recommending it.
thought to have—a nuclear capability, you suddenly fit into a different category. And being in this category pays huge benefits; check North Korea. Check Pakistan. Check Israel, for heaven’s sake. So it probably makes sense for Iran to develop at least some kind of shadowy capability, if not to broadcast it through overt weaponization. That said, from our perspective, such an Iranian capability poses a problem. I just don’t see why we would dismiss containment as a response to that problem. Containment and deterrence have worked in the past, and it’s my guess that they would work in the present. Now, if I were an Israeli, I might have a different view. Given Jewish history and given Israeli history, I can fully understand why Israelis might find a strategy of containment risky. The Israeli penchant is to strike first. And we can’t dismiss their concerns. On the other hand that doesn’t mean that we should allow U.S. policy to be made by Israel, or with Israeli concerns uppermost in mind. So I’m all for giving containment a chance and I’m adamantly against the idea that we should have another go at preventive war by attacking Iran.

**YJIA**: Given your dual roles as both someone who has been tasked to carry out U.S. foreign policy as an Army officer, and someone who teaches about it as a college professor, you have had the opportunity to study foreign affairs and to witness its implementation personally. What has your experience taught you about what it takes to make effective foreign policy?

**Bacevich**: Realism and modesty. Others have noted the way that U.S. political discourse is saturated with vast claims of our “chosen-ness” and the great responsibilities that God or Providence has supposedly assigned to the United States. I think all such claims are exceedingly pernicious—false—bogus. We are indeed a great power. We became a great power through a combination of fortuitous circumstance and opportunism—we took what we wanted when the taking was good. It could be that circumstance is now favoring others and maintaining our advantageous position is going to pose challenges. So let’s give up the illusion that we are in charge—that we are indispensable. Let’s exhibit modesty about what we can achieve and about what we are called upon to do, whatever that means. If we can simply avoid blowing up the planet, we’ll do OK. The notion that we can spread our ideals around the world, that we can achieve world peace, those are illusions. We shouldn’t indulge them. We’ll do well if we succeed in coping with what history throws our way.

**YJIA**: As Professor of International Relations, what kinds of things do you focus your teaching on in order to shape the next generation of international affairs scholars, policy makers, and policy implementers?

**Bacevich**: Well I don’t know that I’m trying to do any of those things. What I’m trying to do is to contribute to the education of young people who I hope will be good citizens of the United States or whatever country they happen to come from.

In the present moment that means two things. The first is to challenge the received historical narrative—that is, the version of the past that we imbibed with our mother’s milk and that is constantly reinforced. For example, yesterday marked the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War. Among the op-eds in the *Washington Post* was one by
Richard Cohen and one by Michael Gerson. The first denounced President Obama for not intervening in Syria. The second denounced President Obama for not being forceful enough in asserting U.S. global leadership. Both of these pundits, on the 10th anniversary of the Iraq War—which neither bothered to mention—cited Munich as the key historical example to which we need to pay attention. The Cohen op-ed ended by figuratively handing President Obama an umbrella as a present-day successor to Neville Chamberlain. Op-ed writers who say, “Remember Munich, on to Damascus!” are really selling a bill of goods. Now the only reason these op-eds work is because as citizens we have come to accept a particular version of history, one that emphasizes certain facts and disregards others.

The story that “matters” is the story of World War II. But it’s World War II viewed from a certain vantage point, one that defines the War as a contest pitting the Anglo-Americans against the Germans where the operative lessons center around events like Munich. Okay, let’s remember the lessons of Munich. But let’s understand that there is a heck of a lot more complicated story out there, yielding other lessons. We need to go beyond history as a story of good guys against bad guys. In the conventional narrative—FDR and Churchill arm-in-arm against the Nazis—Great Britain stands among the good guys. But let’s talk about how Great Britain dismantled the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I. More than any other single power, Great Britain created the mess that today we call the Greater Middle East. And let’s look honestly at the course of events in that region since Great Britain handed off responsibility for that messed-up part of the world to the United States of America. We talked earlier about Iran and its nuclear program. What’s the history to which we should attend in understanding this issue? Neville Chamberlain appeasing Adolf Hitler? Or the United States and the Brits conspiring to overthrow Mossadeq in 1953? The history centered on the familiar narrative of World War II is becoming increasingly less useful. As citizens, we need to expand and to revise our understanding of the usable past.

YJIA: You mentioned you are writing another book. Does it have a name yet? When can we expect to see it on the shelves?

Bacevich: Yes, it’s called Breach of Trust. It’s an attempt to persuade Americans that the gap between the military and society is a problem. It will come out in September. Y

– Interview conducted by Charles Faint.
Transcribed and edited by Charles Faint.