

Review - The Age of Illusions

Written by Elizabeth Austin

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ELIZABETH AUSTIN, MAR 25 2020

The Age of Illusions
By Andrew Bacevich
Metropolitan Books, 2020

Andrew Bacevich's newest work, *The Age of Illusions*, examines the history behind American expectations of global supremacy and perpetual prosperity. The road from those expectations to the economic realities of the United States in 2016, Bacevich argues, led to the election of Donald Trump. The book has many valid, well-argued points. It's clear that Bacevich is attempting to save the country from societal collapse. However, the author's tone and lexicon limit the book's reach to like-minded individuals and academics. As a result, the lessons Bacevich seeks to impart may never reach an audience large enough to make a difference.

The book opens with a quote from James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955):

In America, though, life seems to move faster than anywhere else on the globe and each generation is promised more than it will get; which creates, in each generation, a furious bewildered rage, the rage of people who cannot find solid ground beneath their feet.

Though this rage has been building for generations, Bacevich argues that the true "age of illusions" comes from post-Cold War hubris and, "expectations of material abundance on an unheralded scale, permanent military supremacy, a vastly enlarged conception of personal freedom, and a belief in presidential wizardry, if not exhibited by the incumbent then expected of his successor" (p. 60).

When these expectations are not met, mass disillusion inevitably ensues. Bacevich makes it clear that he believes Trump is a demagogue. However, he sees Trump's election as a result of generations of unfulfilled expectations and the need for Americans to feel "great again" (p. 176). His theory is supported by startling statistics. As he notes in the book, for the first time in history the life expectancy of white working-class American males is dropping due to a narrowing labor market for those without college degrees, and subsequent social dysfunctions including divorce, mental health issues, and substance abuse. This phenomenon has become known as "deaths by despair" (Boddy 2017).

There are four major elements, Bacevich argues, that supported American expectations of guaranteed prosperity: globalization, global leadership, freedom, and presidential supremacy. Globalization was fueled by "unrestrained corporate capitalism" (p. 4) that allegedly would bring immense wealth by allowing the free movement of goods, capital, and ideas across borders. Global leadership meant America as an empire, enforcing globalization to its benefit. Freedom took on a new definition in which America would not be constrained by concerns of safety and survival. Finally, presidential supremacy gave the U.S. president the authority to ensure the nation's prosperity at all costs.

Bacevich provides several examples which fed into these expectations, including the successful American military intervention in the ethnic conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s. According to Bacevich, this victory yielded three conclusions (pp. 98-99):

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1. It revealed the pusillanimity of America's European allies who proved unable to stem the barbarism engulfing parts of the former Yugoslavia as the country came apart.
2. It exposed the weakness of post-Soviet Russia, which lacked the muscle to fulfill its self-assigned role as protector of the Slavs.
3. It demonstrated the feasibility of relying on military action to enforce norms and punish bad behavior, almost without cost to U.S. forces, an approach with obvious potential for application elsewhere.

As a result, an unrealistic precedent was set for American supremacy and easily won military campaigns. This precedent, and the four elements, contributed to the widening gap between expectation and reality. America's role as a global leader began to fade as a consequence of the "forever wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead of easily won victories by a vastly superior U.S. military, these conflicts have dragged on for nearly two decades. Globalization and U.S. tax laws resulted in working-class Americans losing homes and jobs, while wealthy Americans became wealthier. Millions of Americans struggled to reach the metaphorical Emerald City—a place of prosperity, peace, and perfect freedom—as it moved further and further beyond their reach. And now, without significant structural changes, it appears they will never get there. Income inequality is staggering and continues to widen unabated. For example, the compensation ratio between CEOs and employees increased dramatically from 20:1 in 1965 to 59:1 in 1989, and it had ballooned to 271:1 by 2016 (Mishel and Scheider 2017).

By the time Trump was elected, the United States was starkly divided, "Rather than beneficiaries of globalized neoliberalism, they [working-class Americans] saw themselves as its dupes. In the 2016 election, financial impotence was to turn into political outrage, bringing the post-Cold War to an abrupt end. As for the people who shop for produce at Whole Foods, wear vintage jeans, and ski in Aspen, they never saw it coming and couldn't believe when it occurred" (p. 139). So what is the solution? Bacevich argues that we need a shock that will necessitate structural change similar to the Great Depression, and that shock is already here, it's climate change. As more people are affected by natural disasters and resources dwindle, he believes that the U.S. may change its policies and even the wealthiest Americans will adjust their expectations and change their way of life.

The issue with *The Age of Illusions* is not the strength of Bacevich's arguments but rather, the audience this book will reach. Despite its brevity, it's not easy to absorb. Some points are lost without prior knowledge of political science theorists, like Fukuyama or Huntington, and American history. And the author exercises his considerable vocabulary, using words like "penumbra" and "comestibles" in back-to-back paragraphs. This begs the question, who will read this book? It is geared toward those who already agree with Bacevich and who dislike Trump. Will it, then, inspire the changes that the author argues America so desperately needs? It is doubtful, to say the least, that the voters who are suffering most from disillusion and desperation will read *The Age of Illusions*.

Also, the author admits that he is not on social media. In this day and age, and for this generation, though the content matters, it's also the vehicle. For example, as is cited in the acclaimed documentary *The Great Hack*, Donald Trump's campaign claims to have run 5.9 million Facebook ads while Hillary Clinton's campaign ran a mere 66,000. The author does not mention this data point and is admittedly removed from the millions of social media-influenced voters. Many more could learn from him, and this informative book, if targeted appropriately. Though its arguments and narrative are sound, *The Age of Illusions* will most likely have little impact on the country that Bacevich is trying to save from itself. Hopefully, America will be able to right itself before natural disasters, worsened by climate change, force its hand.

References

Boddy, Jessica (2017) "The Forces Driving Middle-Aged White People's 'Deaths of Despair,'" *NPR Shots*, March 23.

Mishel, Lawrence and Jessica Scheider (2017) "CEO Pay Remains High Relative to the Pay of Typical Workers and High-Wage Earners," *Economic Policy Institute*, July 20.

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About the author:

Elizabeth Austin is a writer in Los Angeles. Her debut novel, *Compass Rose*, was released in March 2017. Elizabeth has a master's in international affairs from the American University of Paris, where she was awarded a travel grant and completed thesis field work in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. She also has a master's in international relations from the University of St. Andrews, for which she completed dissertation field work in Cambodia. She has contributed articles to *International Policy Digest* and *Global Politics Magazine*, and book reviews to E-International Relations.