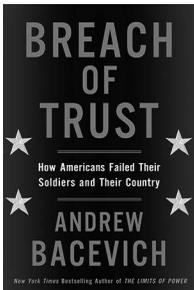




Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2013

192 pages

\$28.95



New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013

256 pages

\$26.00

Skin in the Game: Poor Kids and Patriots

By Dennis Laich

Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country

By Andrew J. Bacevich

Reviewed by Charles D. Allen, Colonel (USA Retired), Professor of Leadership and Cultural Studies, US Army War College

These two books approach the same topic, the all-volunteer force, from different analytic perspectives. While the term all-volunteer force is meant to include all armed services, the focus of these works is the service with the largest manpower component, the United States Army. Preserving the nation's security is a critical issue in this age of fiscal austerity facing the US government amid the struggles within the Congress, its political parties, and the executive branch. The challenge is to manage the national debt while providing for the security of American citizens. All indications point toward significant near-term reductions in Department of Defense budgets with resulting cutbacks in manpower, modernization, and readiness. The US military consumes over fifty percent of the discretionary spending of the federal government. Absent existential threats, it should be scrutinized for funding cuts.

Laich retired as a major general in the Army Reserve after 35 years of service; he held command at colonel and flag officer ranks. Bacevich graduated from West Point and was commissioned an armored officer; he rose to command the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Upon military retirement, Bacevich earned a Princeton PhD and recently retired as a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. Ironically, both authors have inherited Smedley's syndrome from "War is a Racket." Bacevich opens Chapter 8 with the description of a senior officer who, "in retirement defects...calling into questions officially sanctioned truths...[a]fter a decade of unquestioning subservience to the national security state" (115).

In this case, the "officially sanctioned truth" is the success of the all-volunteer force as a highly professional force, vastly superior to the conscripted force it replaced in July 1973. Laich and Bacevich served in the Vietnam-era draft Army, then during the presumptive validation of the all-volunteer force in the Persian Gulf War. National security professionals and military members of the touted all-volunteer force will find portions of these books difficult to accept since their core identities and motivations are under assault. Military readers will probably find convenient scapegoats in the civilian and political leaders whom they believe tend to overcommit the force—or with the citizens who go shopping while service members go to war on their behalf.

In *Skin in the Game*, Laich offers a simple framework with which to evaluate the all-volunteer force—*fairness*, *efficiency*, and *sustainability*. His assessment is presented rhetorically, and he offers the following disclaimer in the *Preface*: "This book is not intended to be a rigorous

academic product or a reference source. In fact, it could be characterized as a very long op-ed piece intended to promote dialogue” (xiii). The reader must keep this disclaimer in mind as Laich provides a brief summary of the development of the all-volunteer force at the close of the Vietnam War, which he regards as a political expedient of President Nixon. Most informative is his presentation of the rationale conveyed by the Gates Commission, which Nixon directed to examine the alternative to conscription. Along with the objectives, assumptions, and nine objections for the all-volunteer force, Laich provides his view of the “reality” that has transpired over the past four decades since the all-volunteer force’s inception. Laich believes that the all-volunteer force is not fair since people across the social economic spectrum do not serve equally (all-volunteer force soldiers are “poor kids and patriots”). It is also inefficient because the Army has outsourced some logistics and security competencies to private corporations to conduct its recent operations. Lastly, the all-volunteer force is not sustainable because of prohibitive personnel costs required to recruit and retain active component service members. Those costs include paying for rehabilitation from combat wounds and psychological trauma as well as retirement pensions.

Bacevich’s *Breach of Trust* provides a much more scholarly treatment; it continues the arguments of his previous works *The New American Militarism* (2005) and *Washington Rules* (2010). Bacevich asserts that the American way of life and its quest for global preeminence has placed the nation in a perpetual state of conflict and war. In protecting and projecting US values, national leaders have chosen the military instrument of national power by default, which in turn requires global presence of its force. The establishment and evolution of the all-volunteer force enable this presence. For the US political elite, the all-volunteer force is the blunt instrument for asserting preeminence: For senior military officers, the all-volunteer force has become the manifestation of a professional force with the prized autonomy that it entails.

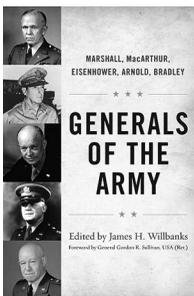
To quote Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “ay, there’s the rub!” Bacevich contends that the Departments of Defense and the Army have aligned with societal views of race, gender, and sexual orientation (most recently with the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”). Thus, the American public has little interest or concern about its military, apart from the feel-good patriotic fanfare at sporting events and occasional encounters with uniformed service members at airports. The all-volunteer force, with its complementarity with the National Guard and Reserve forces, was designed to link US forces with the American people, such that employments of the military would be noticed, felt, and supported by the public. Alas, that has not been the case, as Rachel Maddow has documented in *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (Parameters review, Summer 2013).

With less than one percent of the US population currently serving, the all-volunteer force has become separated physically and socially from the American people. Repeatedly, the civilian political elite has succumbed to the temptation to assert US preeminence and then used the nation’s impressive and available military force without constraint or accountability. While several national polls reflect a US military held in high esteem, Bacevich contends that it has not been effective in winning current wars and has abrogated elements of its professional jurisdiction

to private security organizations. He foresees a bleak future characterized by “more needless wars or shadow conflicts sold by a militarized and irresponsible political elite; more wars mismanaged by an intellectually sclerotic and unimaginative senior officer corps; more wars that exact huge penalties without yielding promised outcomes...” (190). Bacevich decries the warrior-professional who has supplanted the citizen-soldier through the “conversion of military service from collective obligation to personal preference [for service]” (79). Accordingly, Bacevich charges the nation’s political elites, senior military officers, and disengaged citizenry with a breach of trust with American service members.

Both authors buttress their arguments on the founding documents of our nation—The Declaration of Independence and The US Constitution. They refer frequently to the principle of no large standing forces. They assert that greatly reduced numbers in the armed forces would limit leaders’ desire and ability to launch military operations. To man the forces needed for peacetime engagement, the authors offer alternatives to the all-volunteer force, but they are equally pessimistic about the viability of military conscription. Laich proposes a hybrid of a draft lottery for the reserve component with the option of enrolling in college Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. Bacevich suggests a two-year requirement for national service that would enhance citizens’ sense of obligation to contribute to their nation. Any form of mandatory service would have to provide safeguards against the inequities that have plagued past conscription programs. All citizens must bear equal risk and share the burden of service.

It is appropriate to evaluate the viability of the all-volunteer force after its inception forty years ago—especially as we face the uncertainty of future decades. The strategic question remains a philosophical one: “What do we want the role of the United States to be in the world?” The answers to this fundamental query determine the role of U.S. armed forces, its composition, and the capabilities required to secure national interests. To inform such discourse, national security professionals and military members should consider the arguments and recommendations presented in these two works. Our nation can ill afford a breach of trust between its citizenry and those who serve to secure their collective interests.



Generals of the Army: Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower, Arnold, Bradley

Edited by James H. Willbanks

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In 2013, the United States Mint issued a set of commemorative coins honoring the only five officers to achieve the five-star rank of General of the Army. The half-dollar coin features Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and Omar N. Bradley. The dollar features George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Douglas MacArthur appears on the five-dollar gold piece. Authorized by an act of Congress that was sponsored by the US Army

Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013

262 pages

\$35.00