

# rites and responsibilities

A DIALOGUE SERIES ON SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL



## “A STRONG MORAL ARGUMENT”

A CONVERSATION WITH ANDREW BACEVICH

APRIL 2010

*In the historic presidential election of 2008, then candidate Barack Obama distinguished himself from the other candidates in the Democratic primaries in part on the basis of his record of having publicly opposed the war in Iraq. After winning the election, President Obama, though attempting to make good on a campaign promise to withdraw American troops and hand over control of the military campaign to the Iraqi government, has escalated the American global war on terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now, in a mid-term election season marked largely by its rancorous tone, it is sobering to note that opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan appears to have diminishing traction in the American imaginary. In this light, the following dialogue with Andrew Bacevich appears especially timely. Author of [The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War](#), [The Limits of Power: the End of American Exceptionalism](#), and, most recently, [Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War](#), Bacevich is a celebrated veteran as well as a fierce and indefatigable critic of American militarism and imperial policies. A self-described “Catholic conservative” and an admirer of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr., Bacevich is a social critic of note as much for his independence of thought as for his insistence on grounding his public remarks with a clear sense of moral principles and purpose.*

David Kyuman Kim  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies and American Studies, Connecticut College  
Senior Advisor, SSRC, and Editor-at-Large, The Immanent Frame

*DKK: This is David Kim from the Social Science Research Council, and I am at Boston University, on April 2nd, 2010—Good Friday—for a conversation with Andrew Bacevich, Professor of International Relations, for the next installation of [Rites and Responsibilities](#). Professor Bacevich—may I call you Andrew?*

AB: Please, yes.

*DKK: As I mentioned in my invitation to you to participate in Rites and Responsibilities, the series is about questions of sovereignty, accountability, authority, and religion. In reading your remarks from various forums, including [TomDispatch](#), among others, and given the array of your interests, I thought you were someone we very much needed in this discussion.*

AB: I'm very pleased to participate.

*DKK: I appreciate it. As a way to get us started, and to think a little bit about these different issues of sovereignty, religion, accountability, and authority, could you tell me a little bit about yourself? I know you grew up in the Midwest.*

AB: Right.

*DKK: And you're from a military family?*

AB: Well, no, I'm not. I mean, only in the sense that my parents both served in World War II. They served for the duration, as it were, but they were not career military people. My dad was actually briefly in the Army again during the Korean War, but that was simply because he had finished medical school in Chicago and he needed someplace to do an internship that would help put food on the table. And so he became a First Lieutenant Army doctor, but, again, just for one year. So, by no means am I from a military family, if that implies career military service. There's nobody I know of in my background who fits that definition.

*DKK: You have had several phases in your own career, but would you consider yourself someone who is, or was, a professional soldier?*

AB: I would say that I was a professional soldier, though I don't think I'm a professional soldier any longer, and I've tried to set aside that identity and go on to other things. I mean, from time to time I get referred to or introduced as “Colonel Bacevich,” and I don't correct people, I'm not going to make a fuss about it, but I don't call myself “Colonel Bacevich.” I used to be that, some time ago now. You know, I left the Army in 1992. I think that I'm now “Professor Bacevich,” and, frankly, I'm very happy to be Professor Bacevich.

*DKK: Tell me a little bit about that transition from being “Colonel Bacevich” to becoming “Professor Bacevich.” I've read several profiles of you in which you talk about going to West Point, serving in Vietnam, and then remaining in the military. None of these phases of your life and career appeared to be particularly comfortable for you, at least in the portrayals that I've read.*

AB: Well, I probably wasn't entirely comfortable with the life that I was living. Although I would want to emphasize that a soldier's life does provide many satisfactions: comradeship, a sense of purpose, and it can be a very stimulating environment. But the truth, I think, is that I was never really cut out for that life. And, in retrospect, I would say that the reason I lived that life for as long as I did—I was a serving officer for 23 years—quite frankly, I don't think I had the courage to cut the umbilical cord and venture out into the big, wide world. I remember when I got to the fifth anniversary of my commissioning, which was the time when my initial obligation had ended, and I could have gotten out of the Army. At that time, my wife and I had had our first child, the economy was doing badly . . .

*DKK: Now, what year is this?*

AB: This is 1974.

*DKK: Okay.*

AB: Post-Vietnam. And the Army said, "Would you like to go to graduate school for two years, and we'll foot the bill?"

*DKK: Right.*

AB: And it seemed like a great opportunity, so we basically kicked the can down the road. We got to the ten-year mark of service, and I actually went through the entire State Department Foreign Service Officer recruiting process, and the State Department said, "We'll hire you." This is roughly 1980, by which time we had three children, and they were going to hire me, but I would have had to take a pay cut! So my wife basically said, "We're not gonna do that!" And by then we're sort of marching our way up to twenty years of service, and at least some small pension as a consequence of that. But, in retrospect, I wish I'd had more guts to say, "This is not for me. I can do other things." But I didn't.

*DKK: But backtrack a little bit. I'm thinking of you as a young man at West Point. The folks I know who've gone to West Point did so for a variety of reasons: sometimes out of family obligations . . .*

AB: Yeah.

*DKK: . . . many out of a sense of genuine service and obligation and duty. But there is a particular culture of character formation . . .*

AB: Yes.

*DKK: . . . that is prevalent at West Point.*

AB: Yes, it's a very strong process of socialization that I think really is the principle driver of the West Point experience. Its purpose is really not a particular "education"—that's sort of ancillary, I think—but it is, rather, to force you into a mold.

*DKK: Right. An education of a certain sort, in that sense.*

AB: Yes, but it's an education that really leans more towards training than real education. I mean, it's not really about "free inquiry." It's not really about exploration. It's about exposure to a body of knowledge, with the expectation that you will achieve, not mastery, but familiarity. And that body of knowledge, in my day, though I think it's different today, was quite broad, but also leaned heavily towards math and science, as opposed to the liberal arts.

*DKK: Can you talk a bit about the culture of the military? In terms, not just of the mastery of math and science, as you say, but also in regard, as I'm hearing you, to the policies of the American military and to the way it's run. There appears to be, to use your language, a lack of critical reflection in the military. There is, as you say, a command structure there. Did you feel discomfort with that early on? Or is this something that, in the context of a process of deep socialization, was determinant of who you were as a young man?*

AB: I'm not sure that I know, even at this point. One thing that I would say about my personal makeup—and I've only really come to appreciate this later in life—is that I value order, and that I am uncomfortable with disorder and uncertainty. And this can be manifest in very simple ways—you know, an orderly home, though I know you would not say that, looking at my office!

*DKK: It looks quite tidy compared to my own!*

AB: But one of the things that military life offered me, and that I think kept me in it, despite the fact that I wasn't a good fit in many respects, was that it offered order and predictability and security—again, not to be dismissed when you're a young guy with a growing family. And, so, all of those aspects of military life, I think, helped to draw me to it, or at least to keep me in it for a period of time. That said, from this distance, I would say that there are many other important aspects of what makes life within the officer corps what it is, and I would never want to imply that the values of duty, honor, and country are absent from that life, because they are there and they are important. But less positive, I think, is an implicit definition of success, or of personal fulfillment, which is tied to upward mobility.

*DKK: Right.*

AB: Again, I only say this in retrospect, and I know that many of the people I served with, I think, would probably disagree with me, but it became apparent to me over time that even when the officer corps spoke the language, and sincerely spoke the language, of duty, honor, and country, that, at the same time, it placed even greater value on the competition to get ahead—that to be a good soldier, to be seen to be a good soldier, was, in many respects, to be seen to be somebody who was going somewhere . . .

*DKK: Right.*

AB: . . . somebody who was making the promotion list, who was getting the plum assignment, who was getting opportunities, who was receiving awards and recognition. In that sense, it's not really all that different, I think, from many other hierarchical organizations. But I think that within the officer corps, at least in my time, and maybe just in my part of the officer corps, the part in which I served, there was a great emphasis on that. And I think I conformed to that ethic in ways that I would say today that I regret, because it's pernicious, and it's not conducive to honesty. It's actually conducive to dishonesty, because in many respects the way you get ahead is to be sensitive to which way the winds are blowing and to conform. And in that sense, it is an environment that is not at all conducive to critical thought and, I think, self-understanding. I'll give you a specific example right now, which is one of the things that I've been writing a little bit about, and thinking about, and that is—I don't want to make this sound too much like inside baseball here . . .

*DKK: That's okay.*

AB: There has been an underappreciated, radical transformation in American military thought over the past four years, roughly. The implications of this change are monumental, and it is the very fact that there's this tendency towards conformity within the officer corps, and an absence of critical thought, that I think creates barriers that prevent us from understanding the significance of what has happened.

Now, what has happened? Well, what has happened is that the officer corps in which I served, the officer corps that grew out of the Vietnam experience, and whose collective mindset was very much shaped in a negative way by Vietnam, determined after Vietnam that it would embrace rather fiercely a conception of warfare that would prevent us from ever getting stuck in another Vietnam. And that conception of warfare was one that insisted that the United States would fight short wars, producing decisive outcomes and preventing the alienation of the officer corps from the affections of the American people. In other words, no more counterinsurgency! That's the Army in which I served in the 1970s—or, excuse me, in the 1980s and 1990s, for the most part—and that's the Army that invaded Iraq in 2003. And in Iraq, of course, these expectations of short, decisive, economical wars were demolished. Indeed, the expectation was based on a false conception of what war is all about. But what was the reaction of the officer corps to that failure? The reaction was to rediscover counterinsurgency, and to make counterinsurgency the new American way of war, now ostensibly applied successfully in Iraq and at the moment being applied by General McChrystal in Afghanistan. And to somebody of my generation and my perspective, this was an astonishing development, because in essence we now have an officer corps that really doesn't believe that war works.

If you listen to people like General Petraeus and General McChrystal, they say that there is no such thing as a military victory in Iraq and Afghanistan, that what we need to do in places like Iraq and Afghanistan really amounts to a project of armed nation-building, and that armed nation-building is now really the

American way of war. That is the military response, as it were, to the problem posed by violent anti-Western jihadism. Well, let's think about this a second: if indeed counter-insurgency, or armed nation-building, is the new American way of war, and if we are engaged in what the Pentagon calls a "long war" in order to deal with the problem of jihadism—well, how many other counterinsurgencies are we going to be required to undertake after Afghanistan? Where to next? Pakistan? Iran? Syria? Saudi Arabia? Egypt? I mean, it is a preposterous notion that this new American way of war—counterinsurgency or armed nation-building—can possibly offer a coherent response to the problem we're facing. And yet, there's this general acceptance that the idea is a good one, the implications of which condemn us, if we continue down this path, to permanent war!

*DKK: So, if I hear you correctly, the transformations in the military that you are describing, and in American attitudes about military action and force, and their relationship to war, are predicated, not on a series of successes, but on a series of failures.*

AB: Oh, I think there's no question about that! So, what I've just tried to describe is the mindset of the officer corps, which now believes—and some people say this out loud—that the essence of American strategy turns out to be global counterinsurgency. That's what they call it. They have an acronym: G-COIN. So, that's where the officer corps, in its inability to engage seriously in critical thought, has come to. Where are we? Where are we, the American people? Well, we the American people, I think, by and large say, "Well, gosh, if General McChrystal and General Petraeus say that this makes sense, then I guess it does."

*DKK: Right.*

AB: Our collective understanding of war has come to be one in which we think our role is simply to defer to these military experts. They lack the capacity to think critically, while we have forfeited our responsibility to think critically about war. So, to my mind, we find ourselves in these circumstances in which we're just sort of adrift. I mean, it ought to boggle people's minds that the global war on terror began, by our definition, in 2001 with the invasion of Afghanistan, proceeded in 2003 to the invasion of Iraq, and in 2009 President Obama returns us back to Afghanistan. This is progress? But there seems to be a remarkable unwillingness to try to take account of the military experience—and, I would emphasize, the military experience, not simply of the post-9/11 period, but the broader military experience of, roughly, the last thirty or forty years—and to try to understand its implications. I just wrote a short piece about the Carter Doctrine. We, without anybody sort of paying attention, just passed the thirtieth anniversary of the Carter Doctrine, which was promulgated by Jimmy Carter in the January 1980 State of the Union address. This was right after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Carter says, in effect, in this very direct, public statement: "The security of the Persian Gulf is of vital interest to the United States. And we will use all means necessary, including military force, to ensure that no one dominates the Persian Gulf." Well, what happens? What happens is that, over time, the commitment to prevent anybody else from dominating the Persian Gulf morphs into the determination that we will dominate, not simply the Persian Gulf, but what we today call the greater Middle East. I don't mean that Carter intended or foresaw that, but that's the way the Carter Doctrine, in a sense, mushroomed, much as the Truman Doctrine of 1947 mushroomed. The Carter Doctrine was based on the unstated premise that the use of American hard power would enhance the stability of the region. Well, what do we have after thirty years? What we have is an incredibly long list of American military activities in the region, pursuant to the Carter Doctrine. You know, Reagan's intervention in Lebanon, George Bush's first war with Saddam Hussein . . .

*DKK: Bombing Tripoli . . .*

AB: Bombing Tripoli! Supporting the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, and on and on! Okay, thirty years on, is the greater Middle East more stable as a consequence of all of this activity? I mean, you could think about it for about five-and-a-half seconds and say, "Obviously not!"

Well then, is it possible that the assumption that U.S. military presence and activity enhance stability in the region is wrong? Indeed, is it possible that U.S. military presence and activity in the region actually promote *instability*? I don't think it takes a strategic genius to get a glimmering that there's something amiss here, and yet, remarkably, within the officer corps, within the national security establishment, in the

country at large, there seems to be no awareness of the possibility that the path we have followed, ever since Carter promulgated his doctrine, just might be the wrong path.

*DKK: What you've laid out is incredibly rich, and there are lots of strands I want to try to tease out and pursue. I do want to come back to Carter, because Carter seems to play, in The Limits of Power, for example, a pivotal role in the narrative.*

AB: Yes, that's right.

*DKK: And even in the genealogy you tell, which, to paraphrase, I read as saying, "The real genealogy indicates that the roots of the War On Terror happens right at the end of the Carter Administration."*

AB: Yes. On the other hand, I think there are several dates you could pick. Frankly, you could probably pick Franklin Roosevelt meeting with King Ibn Saud in the Great Bitter Lake toward the end of World War II and cutting this deal with the Saudi Royal Family—"We'll protect you, if you . . ." A lot of things have spun out of that. Or you could pick the overthrow of Mosaddegh by the CIA in Iran in 1953. But, I have to say—and maybe it's too cute, or too neat—I think that a very useful way to date the beginning of this long war is with President Carter's "malaise" speech in the summer of '79, and its rejection by the public and the media, followed shortly thereafter by the President's declaration of the Carter Doctrine. It's not that everything changed then, but that's when things started to tip in a particular direction, and many other things followed.

*DKK: So, there are several ways to go at this. One of them would be to ask, not just about the U.S. military and its internal culture, but also about the U.S. military's sense of what its mission is. You just described, for instance, a military culture that's changed from one focused on national security to one that has adopted a preemptive strategy towards establishing a global stability that we will, in fact, never have.*

AB: And to do so relying as much on nonmilitary instruments and ideas as on military ones. Again, it's remarkable how quickly things change. But, do you remember back in the nineties? The nineties was certainly a decade of U.S. military interventionism. Some amount of the interventionism of the 1990s was publicly justified in terms of humanitarian intervention. I myself don't believe that that was the real motive, but that's kind of the way it was marketed.

*DKK: That was the press.*

AB: *Marketed.* And the American right pushed back strongly against that kind of interventionism, insisting that the purpose of the United States military was to fight and win the nation's wars. It was a military that did battle.

Most famously, in the run up to the 2000 election, Condoleezza Rice wrote an [article](#) for *Foreign Affairs* in which she contemptuously said that the purpose of the 82nd Airborne Division is not to escort kids to kindergarten.

*DKK: Hm. Right.*

AB: I mean, this was sort of a slap at, ostensibly, the liberal-Democratic tendency to misuse the military. Well, here we are, ten years later, and we have: A, a political consensus that the 82nd Airborne escorts kids to kindergarten, among other things; and, B, we have the officer corps itself endorsing the notion that escorting kids to kindergarten—or developing legitimate institutions, promoting economic development, and fighting corruption—that this enormous basket of tasks sits right in the lap of the United States military. You know, if we said that the federal government was going to take on the responsibility of doing in Detroit and Cleveland what it says it's going to do in Kabul and Kandahar, every Republican, and probably the majority of the American people, would say, "Well, this is absurd. This is nonsense. The federal government cannot drop into Detroit and transform a dysfunctional public education system into one that works right." But to claim we're going to do that in Afghanistan is something to which people say, "Yeah, I guess so. Send the troops. They'll do that."

*DKK: Right. So, clearly, a prevailing hubris has been operating in American foreign policy for decades. And, as you note in several of your writings, a comeuppance has arrived for each of these . . .*

AB: But, see, it's remarkable how, when hubris bumps into reality, in a sense, it just redefines the reality. For instance, the hubris in the 1990s, in the officer corps of which I had been a member, dictated, in effect, "Because we understand modern war, we can beat anybody."

*DKK: Technology . . .*

AB: Technology, precision weapons, perfect intelligence. "Bring it on, and in a matter of time, we will win the victory." That was the hubris then, and that smacked up into the Iraqi insurgency! And instead of saying, "Perhaps war is a lot more complicated than we thought, and something to be avoided," we've now simply proclaimed ourselves the masters of nation-building—"Yes, we can transform Afghanistan into a modern, functioning nation-state!"

*DKK: So, an obvious place to take this conversation, and this line of thinking, is to discuss your critiques of American exceptionalism, and the ways in which the attitude and identity of American exceptionalism have shaped what it is for America to be a nation, and have shaped its foreign policy—because, as I hear you characterize it, what we're trying to do in Afghanistan, for example, with these ideas about nation-building, also involves a massive effort to establish a set of political goals as to who should be in these nations we are building, under what principles they should be governed, and with what values these governments should operate.*

AB: Well, they're necessarily ours! And I'm not sure they could be anything other than that. If, when the French engaged in nation-building, or colonialism—if we would like to call it that—to the extent that they cared about values, the values and the institutions that they were imposing were French. So I don't think that we're somehow unique in that regard. Maybe the difference between ourselves and the French in that regard—or between ourselves and the Brits—is that they were quite conscious of that, and quite explicit. The French claimed they were spreading French civilization. We, I think, tend to say, "We are not trying to reform Afghanistan in our own image."

*DKK: Well . . .*

AB: And we don't understand the extent to which, in fact, we are.

*DKK: Right. And, so, one of the things that I find bracing about your work, and that coincides with my own work, is the idea that we're not only "a nation" but also, in fact, an empire. And, furthermore, we're acting like an empire without admitting as much. But one of the hard pieces, in my estimation, is to figure out a strategy to connect that reality with the myth that the U.S. operates under, that we are not an empire but we are, rather, a single sovereign nation seeking to do good in the world. As you say, we are engaged in American imperial practices: nation-building, preemptive war, counterinsurgency, the expansion of American culture as both a diplomatic and a military tool. How do you square that with an American populace that probably does not identify with the phrase "American Empire"? To my mind, that's an enormously important yet difficult problematic. Right? To get an American to say, "You know what? We are, in fact, an empire. Trace our history. Look at what's happened in the wars that we've engaged in." Right?*

AB: Well, it's a great question, and I don't think there's a simple answer. But the answer would certainly include some of the following, I think: first, of course, would be naming the founding of the Republic as an anti-colonial act—that is, understanding the founding of the Republic in a context in which the Anglo-American population of North America had, I think, already come to firmly believe that it was engaged in the creation of a New World. Remember that?

*DKK: Yes, yes . . .*

AB: I still remember that when I was kid, the phrase “New World” had lingering currency. And, even as a kid, not quite understanding what it all meant, it clearly signified to me difference, apartness—that the Old World did things a certain way, and we were in the New World. So, the creation of this Republic, in this anti-colonial revolution in the larger context of the New World, I think, created a sense of conviction that we couldn't be engaged in an imperial enterprise, because that's what the Old World did. A third factor, I think, is that most people view the period around the Spanish-American War (a period that most Americans are oblivious to) as an anomalous chapter in American history, and in a sense—and this is my point—it is, insofar as it's only then that we engage in *formal* colonial, imperial activity.

*DKK: Right. The Philippines, Cuba, and so on.*

AB: Exactly right. But, by and large, American imperial activity—and it *is* imperial activity—takes place in a context of *informal* empire. For instance, we didn't try to annex Japan after World War II, but we did establish a relationship, which extends down to the present day, and which, in a variety of ways, mostly related to security, allows us to exercise—to hold all the cards, to have the upper hand in this relationship. And so the fact that our approach to empire tends to be informal rather than formal plays into the pre-existing notion that we're not really an empire. “If we're an empire, where are our colonies?” Of course, the answer is, “Look at Puerto Rico!” But even that . . .

*DKK: Or, “Look at the Midwest!”*

AB: Well, exactly! Look at California! The places that were taken! So, I think there are a variety of reasons. And then there's the peculiar vastness of our country, and it's incredible richness and variety, which over time, helps to create a provincialism, a parochialism.

*DKK: You don't have to go anywhere else because all the difference and variety is here.*

AB: Yes. And that, I think, also causes Americans to be not fully cognizant of the way American power is exercised around the world. I know from my years of living in Europe, in relatively small countries—they all exist cheek-by-jowl. You can't live in Belgium without being acutely aware of France and Germany, but you can live in Nebraska and barely be aware of Kansas! So, I think that that, also, in a sense, has contributed to the difficulty of both understanding and accepting the reality of American empire.

*DKK: But if you trace back to one of the first points you made, about America's founding as an anti-colonial enterprise, and consider The Limits of Power—elsewhere you tie that narrative to a civil-religious narrative, namely, the idea that we are a nation of destiny, that Providence guides our history, even though we don't know the meaning of this history, even though the formal qualities of American civil religion may not be fully articulated for the average citizen.*

AB: Or they're articulated using different vocabularies at different moments of our history.

*DKK: Yes, that's right. But there is a way in which that civil-religious cosmology—I think you even use that word “cosmology,” or, I think you write “a civil-theological cosmology.” Right?*

AB: Yes.

*DKK: You know, it's so deeply ingrained in what it means to be an American . . .*

AB: That it's hard-wired.

*DKK: Yes, right, it's hard-wired. So, to try to take out that hard wiring would be to try literally to extract and transplant out of people a part of their identity.*

AB: Yes. I was tremendously struck when President-elect Obama appeared in Grant Park on the night of his election, and one of the things he said in his speech was—this won't be a quote by any means—something to the effect that, “It's time for us once again to bend the trajectory of history . . .”

*DKK: Oh, right.*

AB: “. . . toward a more hopeful future.” To me, that was so deeply American, and, I think it was probably heartfelt. He believed that! I mean, he, the President, believes! Maybe he doesn't believe it now, after a year of banging his head against a wall, but he came into office believing that we can bend history, and that it's we Americans who can bend history, and who, in many respects, are called upon to bend history. Same thing with President Bush after 9/11. It's a striking thing. The guy whose campaign said, “Soldiers don't escort kids to kindergarten,” and who, in 2000, if you remember, was arguing for a humble foreign policy. I don't think Mr. Bush—Governor Bush at that point—had really thought very deeply about the way the world works, but he sort of had an inclination towards modest purposes. 9/11 happens, and the guy gets up the next morning and he is Woodrow Wilson's forgotten stepson! And I don't think it was cynical. I think that 9/11, for him, was a conversion experience, and that he fully embraced the notion that the United States has a saving mission, and that that saving mission has to be expressed in terms of an opposition to tyranny and spreading democracy. Now, I don't think all the people around him thought that way. I don't think Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney shared that commitment to the saving mission. But the fact that the President believed it provided a convenient way for the administration to endow its actions with this gloss of purposefulness, moral purposefulness, that many Americans would hear and say, “Yeah, that's us. That's what we do. It's World War II all over again.”

*DKK: Right. And, going back to Obama's Grant Park acceptance speech, we started a [discussion series on The Immanent Frame](#) inspired by that speech and, in particular, the phrase he uses, when he says, “Courage, compassion,” and the like—he cites a litany of so-called American virtues, and then he says, “These things are old, these things are true,” and subsequently inscribes for his audience, the American people, that this sense of higher purpose is tied to what it is to be a nation that's called “America.”*

AB: Hillary Clinton, at what was advertised as her first major foreign policy address—I think it was to the Council on Foreign Relations, in July of 2009—in the course of the speech, she quotes Tom Paine: “We have it within our power to start the world over again.” This had been a favorite quote of Ronald Reagan's—he used to say it all the time. So, point number one is, here we have this ostensibly conservative Republican and this ostensibly liberal Democrat both embracing this remarkably bold claim. And then she went on to say, “And we now need to use that power.” And, again, I think that that doesn't even get reported in the newspapers because . . .

*DKK: We take it for granted!*

AB: We take for granted that that's what Americans say! That's the role we assign ourselves.

*DKK: That's our idiom.*

AB: Yes, that's our idiom. Idiom is exactly the right word. And it's both the frequency with which the idiom gets used and our ready acceptance of it, I think. It's not simply, “These are clichés that are being expressed, and we know they're clichés, so we ignore them.” I think it is an affirmation. The idiom affirms, offers an assurance, that Hillary Clinton understands this mission and embraces it, and that she is therefore a reliable steward of our collective purpose, and we collectively, then, are assured. We take assurance from that.

*DKK: So it's not simply American exceptionalism there. It's a kind of affirmation of American supremacy.*

AB: Oh, I think so! American exceptionalism does not simply mean that we are different. It also claims that we are *better*.

*DKK: Yes. And that kind of top dog culture is not merely rhetorical.*

AB: This afternoon I'm going to a memorial service for Howard Zinn. It's the reason I'm wearing my tie today.

*DKK: Oh, gosh.*

AB: And Howard Zinn, who recently passed away, was famous for being one of, actually, many scholars whose task was to assault the American exceptionalist narrative of history and to expose its underside. Now, maybe some of them went too far, complaining that it was all underside, but my point is that the historical profession, or maybe intellectuals more broadly, over the past fifty years, have subjected the narrative of “America, the uniquely benign power” to a relentless assault. Everywhere, from the treatment of Native Americans to the story of slavery, of racism, of discrimination against immigrants, of the oppression of workers, of crimes against humanity—I mean, it’s really been a relentless assault! And what’s remarkable to me, as somebody who is now in the academic business, is how little any of that relentless assault has changed the dominant narrative, which still prevails, and how little that critique has affected American politics. When Hillary Clinton, of all people, stands up in public and says, “We have it within our power to start the world over again,” and basically, in saying that, dismisses the record of how we have tried to change the world, it’s just an astonishing thing.

*DKK: Absolutely. It is astonishing. And, you know, now that you bring up Zinn, and that you're going to his memorial service today, I think about [A People's History of the United States](#), and that it has sold, I think, more than a million copies . . .*

AB: Oh my gosh, yes!

*DKK: It's extraordinary, just in terms of sheer numbers.*

AB: It’s a phenomenon!

*DKK: Right, it's a phenomenon. So, again, this question comes up: you have someone like Zinn, who himself has this tremendous legacy of anti-imperial historiography . . .*

AB: In terms of an individual scholar making an impact on his time, he probably accomplished more than anybody else in the American academy. In the realm of the social sciences, liberal arts, and humanities, I don’t think anybody can touch the popular—or apparently popular—impact that he’s had. And yet, I’m not sure it made a dent!

*DKK: Well, that's what's troubling both of us, right? Taking a powerful counter-narrative like Zinn's People's History Of The United States, or John Hope Franklin's massive study [From Slavery to Freedom](#), you think, “Well, we have very assiduous, detailed accounts of the ways in which the self-identity of America has unfolded, not just from American exceptionalism, but also from American supremacism, and these counter-narratives have shown that this American self-identity is based on a faulty premise.” And it would seem that there is widespread evidence of denial—you know, that there is a willful denial of a certain kind of reality.*

AB: See, I don’t know if it’s that. For shorthand, let’s call it the Zinn Critique.

*DKK: Okay.*

AB: On the one hand, you have the Zinn Critique finding its way into millions of bookshelves across the country, a critique that—again, greatly simplifying here—is found in the classrooms of Boston University and other institutions, and that, to some degree, finds its way even into popular culture.

*DKK: And into the critiques of a huge cohort of educators.*

AB: Yes. In popular culture, you have movies about racism, or movies that depict American military history other than in the heroic mode. So, it’s a substantial body of work—but I don’t know that we’re in denial about that. I think that the truth is that there are the counter-Zinn messages, on the other hand, and the counter-Zinn messages are also powerful. They come in a multiplicity of forms: in advertising, in

journalism, in popular culture, in god-knows-what—and I think that they overwhelm. So it's not so much that we, as citizens, ignore Zinn, but that Zinn is overpowered by a host of other messages that enable the older narrative, the narrative of America as a benign presence in history, to survive, basically unaffected.

*DKK: You know, one of the themes in The Limits of Power that is, at minimum, unnerving is the way in which you trace the denigration of the concept of freedom in regard to American political and military practices. Particularly at the end of the book, you talk about Bush's "Freedom Agenda." And, as you know, there have been criticisms of the United States' foreign policy, which had sought to justify military actions like those in Iraq as liberation practices. The criticisms of these so-called liberation practices pointed out the inconsistency between this sort of foreign policy and domestic policies that diminished or ignored oppression at home, namely, white supremacy and racial injustice, the treatment of women, and so on. I guess I'm trying to listen for strategies to recuperate something like freedom—not just to recuperate the language of freedom but to change the meaning of freedom for an American population that ties it to these really narrow imperialist frameworks.*

AB: I'm not optimistic at all about the possibility of change. One of the things I was trying to say in the book is that, because we're dealing with these multiple crises, and the way the crises kind of reinforce one another, we're really in a difficult situation. But I think you've put your finger on it—that the core of the problem is cultural, and, if I understood what you are saying, it's that we worship freedom.

*DKK: Right.*

AB: And yet we refuse to actually contemplate freedom, to think about freedom.

*DKK: That's well said.*

AB: To define freedom.

*DKK: Yes, indeed.*

AB: And the solution—well, there is no solution. We might make some headway, though, in dealing with the problems that we confront, if we, as citizens, were willing to think critically about what it means to be a free person, a human being at this moment in history—not just in U.S. history, but in global history—because, were we to think about that, I think we would then probably change our ways. And the changes would have large implications for everything, from environmental policy to levels of consumption to expectations of what force can accomplish in international affairs. I think I refer to it in that book—and I've used it in talks more times than I can count—but I really think the most important text in the post-9/11 period is a statement that Donald Rumsfeld made on several occasions in the September-October 2001 timeframe. The words were not always the same, but the sentiment was always exactly the same. What he said was, "We face a choice: to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way they live, and we choose the latter." And I think that's what the so-called "global war on terror," or the long war, is all about—an effort to change the way "they" live, so that we will not have to consider the possibility of changing the way "we" live. And we can't consider that, that sort of change is unacceptable, so we have to impose change on them.

*DKK: Right.*

AB: And that places off-limits the notion that contemplating the way we live could perhaps be a good thing, *the* necessary thing. Of course, some people would say, "Well, I guess you just hate America. You must hate the American way of life. Why do you hate America so much?" But that's not the point!

*DKK: Well, no. Or you could actually say that it's out of a deep love of America that you would engage in that kind of critical reflection, right?*

AB: I think so. A love of America, a love of your community, or a concern for your children. I mean, if you take seriously—and some people don't take it seriously—but if you take seriously things like climate

change, then there are potentially enormous implications for two, three generations down the pike. And if we're going to address that, we are going to have to change the way we live. That doesn't mean we're all going to go, you know, live in little huts and be denied all the advantages of modern life. But there are excesses that need to be curbed. And, frankly, there's a strong moral argument. It's not just to prevent climate change; we need to curb the excesses if we're actually going to live consistently with the values that we profess.

*DKK: I hear and read you as making a very powerful set of arguments about the lack of discipline among Americans and in regard to precisely this question of excesses, especially our insatiable consumption and consumerism.*

AB: I would absolutely want to emphasize that. And, well, I make my living ripping off ideas from other people. (DKK LAUGHS) There's a new biography of Christopher Lasch out—it's called [Hope In A Scattering Time](#), I believe. I've written [a review of it](#). It's a wonderful book, because it's an analysis, with a description and assessment, of Lasch's journey and his legacy in an intellectual sense. I find Lasch's writing very difficult, but you read this book with a renewed appreciation for the extent to which he had an acute awareness of how our values were being undermined by the way we chose to live our lives, or, to some degree, by the choices that were imposed on us. And I think Lasch is another one of those writers who was certainly influential in his time, as influence is measured in that realm, and who today deeply needs to be revived.

*DKK: I'm so glad you brought up Lasch. I have in my notes a note to myself, literally, "Please ask Andrew Bacevich about Lasch and Niebuhr." When I was reading The Limits of Power, Lasch's writings kept coming to mind as a kind of—how should I put it?—not quite as a counter-voice, but as a kind of accompanying voice in your text, for example, in the criticism you make of consumerist culture and the excesses of that culture, which lead to a kind of denigration of what it is to be a moral person and a moral country.*

AB: Well, this is where it gets difficult, or complicated. For instance, I don't know what title they're going to use when they publish it, but I titled the review essay "Family Man," referring to Lasch, because at the very heart of Lasch's critique—and, I think, his prescription—was an argument that modernity, as it had evolved in the context of American society, had come to be an assault on children, and that the haven against the heartless world, which would preserve these children from assault and perhaps permit them to grow into adults, was the family. And he meant what we call "the traditional family." I tend to sympathize with that. But the reason I think it's difficult is—let's face it, folks: in America, in 2010, the Ozzie and Harriet model is long gone, and nothing is going to return our understanding of family to that definition. We don't have just multiple definitions—there is *no* definition, because, whatever the arrangements you or I would choose to make in our intimate and personal lives, we just call it a family. And it is. I'm not trying to say that I question the right of people to do that, except that it does seem to almost place off-limits the notion that family is indeed extraordinarily important with regard to the raising of children. It's wrong to assume that all forms of family are all equal. I mean that there are some arrangements, it seems to me, that, arguably, are better than others. But you go down that path, and you look to your right, you look to your left, and you've got crazies for partners.

*DKK: Ha! Right.*

AB: And I don't mean to suggest that's where one should go. My real point is simply that Lasch's views are very challenging for us, even for somebody like me, who finds him very attractive.

*DKK: Yes, I agree with that—that Lasch's ideas are challenging for us. I didn't know him well, but Lasch was my teacher.*

AB: Oh!

*DKK: At the University of Rochester.*

AB: Oh! I never met the guy!

*DKK: It was an interesting time to be around people like Lasch, and Eugene Genovese, and Stanley Engerman, who were at a much earlier point in time dyed-in-the-wool Marxists, who . . .*

AB: Who had made the journey.

*DKK: Well, yes. And, as a young college student, I was experiencing them at a moment in which they were making pretty strong pivots away from their respective pasts.*

AB: Actually, I think Genovese is another very interesting figure in that regard. Again, you've got these problems: you can read him as somebody who is basically making the case on behalf of the slaveholders, as the people who had the greatest insights into the problems of American life! But, on the other hand, some of those insights, with regard to the functioning and implications of capitalism, were and are tremendously valuable.

*DKK: That's right. I do want to get to Niebuhr, but staying for the moment with Genovese and Lasch, you can read their intellectual biographies as moral stories, particularly in regard to their respective kinds of transformations. It's certainly not the case that I endorse at all the direction that Genovese ultimately ended up taking towards conservatism. I have similar reservations in regard to Lasch's points about the family. If you took away some of the particulars he makes in regard to the conventions of the heterosexual nuclear family, but took the deeper philosophical and moral point he makes about the need for children to be raised in environments where they are . . .*

AB: To be nurtured.

*DKK: Yes, to be nurtured with strong, abiding love—with a sense of care, a sense of trust that they will be taken care of in the world. I don't think that's necessarily a liberal or a conservative standpoint. It's to say that there are certain conditions that allow young people to flourish. We have not been particularly good at maintaining those conditions that allow young people to flourish, that allow children to flourish, and subsequently we end up entertaining a whole host of influences—you named some of them: popular culture . . .*

AB: And institutions. You know, we turn them over to institutions that are supposedly going to do the nurturing, but in fact are not able to do so.

*DKK: Right. And, so, I'm trying partially to connect this back to an earlier part of our conversation, when we were saying: "You know, there's a lack of understanding of American history. There's a lack of understanding of the values espoused by the American population." Right? This could be in regard to freedom. This could be in regard to racial equality, for example. And one of my abiding scholarly interests is to ask: how do you get people—how do you get their attention—to interrogate their commitments to freedom, racial equality, and the like, when the high moments of urgency have passed? The high moments of the civil rights movement have passed, you know? You can talk about this in regard to the U.S. military as well. Think about the American popular imagination of the U.S. military, for example, during the time of Vietnam versus contemporary attitudes about the military. During the Vietnam War, the counterculture of the sixties into the seventies, at minimum, vilified the U.S. military. Compare that to American popular culture now, and everyone on the political spectrum . . .*

AB: Gotta support the troops.

*DKK: That's right. Gotta support the troops, indeed. That's a pretty astounding transformation.*

AB: I think it's incredible. I mean, it's incredible in terms of how professed attitudes have changed. It's also astounding how rapid, empty, lacking in real content this notion is.

*DKK: Well, probably for both sides! Right?*

AB: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

*DKK: Because the anti-militarism of the sixties and seventies counterculture, with Vietnam, was not strictly about the war in Vietnam.*

AB: Mm-hmm.

*DKK: Clearly, a lot of the energy reflected anxiety about conscription, about the draft.*

AB: Yes, yes.

*DKK: Right?*

AB: Yes. Now we don't have to worry about that, so, "Yay troops! I ain't one of you, but you guys go over there to Afghanistan!"

*DKK: Well, but there's a paradox here, in that we are involved in more theaters of war now than we have ever been in, maybe with the exception of World War II, but at least since Vietnam. More than any other time since Vietnam.*

AB: Oh, yes! And they go on and on and on!

*DKK: They go on and on and on, and yet there is a huge disconnect in the American popular imagination about what that means. War takes places as a kind of abstraction. "We're in Iraq. We're in Afghanistan." Well, what does that really mean?*

AB: What it really means for the American citizen is, "I'm not there. *They're* there, these troops that I support." I think the question you're getting at is, what is it that, at certain moments, does seem to call our collective attention to a matter in ways that produce, not simply awareness, but action? And I suppose that one would make the case that, roughly, between World War II and the mid-sixties, race was able to command that attention. I'd also say that, since Dr. King's assassination, we've erected statues and declared holidays and named highways after him, but in many respects, I think, the attention has drifted away from race.

*DKK: Absolutely.*

AB: And away from Dr. King's agenda, if you want to call it that. His sense of what needed to be done remains nowhere near to being completed, especially with regard to poverty.

*DKK: Right.*

AB: But the point is, why is it that there are these moments? I think—and again it's in a racial context—one would say the same thing about the Abolitionist movement in the two decades before the Civil War: that there was not simply an awareness but a gathering of collective energy that demanded to be heard, and ultimately was heard in powerful ways. And yet, whether we look at consumer culture and its implications or at the militarization of U.S. foreign policy and where it has led us and what it points toward—which, to my mind, are both deeply pernicious, and not unconnected—it doesn't generate sustained attention. I think that one of the most astonishing things in an age of many astonishing things is how little 9/11 mattered. I mean, we all remember, first of all, how we felt and our own emotional response to the event, but we also remember the way all the people in the know declared that this was a watershed in American history, that "from now on, there's going to be pre-9/11 history and post-9/11 history."

*DKK: "Everything is different now."*

AB: "Everything has changed." But it didn't. It is remarkable, the extent to which that event, in many respects, remains unexamined. I don't mean examined in the sense of, "Who conspired to do what on 9/11?" Rather, unexamined in a sense of, "What was the array of factors and forces that coalesced to bring this about?" We're not interested in that. Truly, we're not. It changed almost nothing. And nobody, I think, on September 12, 2001, would have said, "A decade from now, this will all be basically forgotten." But that's what happened.

*DKK: Well, as you know, one of the themes of our conversation is that we are a forgetful people.*

AB: Yes. Willfully so.

*DKK: A willfully forgetful people. You make this point—in regard to the rationalizations of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—a couple of times, very powerfully, in The Limits Of Power, where you say, "When the U. S. government, when the Bush Administration made the fight with radical Islam, extremist Islam, equivalent to the fight against Nazism, the fight against totalitarianism—when it did that, it effectively miscast Islam."*

AB: And vastly overstated the threat.

*DKK: Yes. Right. Because as you say, at least twice in the book, "Islam does not represent an existential threat to the United States in the ways that the fascists and Communists did."*

AB: Right.

*DKK: Would you unpack that a bit?*

AB: Well, there is a threat. I think that the threat is real but modest. And rather than casting it as one of Islamofascism, as the neocons do, it's better to cast it as, in essence, an equivalent of the mafia, albeit a mafia that does, in a sense, draw its energy from a distortion of a religious tradition. But, nonetheless, it's an international criminal conspiracy. These are murderers and thugs, and they need to be dealt with. But you don't deal with an international criminal conspiracy by invading and occupying countries. You deal with it by mounting a sustained international police effort to eradicate the problem. So, it's the FBI and the CIA and institutions like that, collaborating with their counterparts in other nation-states that share our interest in ensuring that states will exercise a monopoly on the use of violence. And, quite frankly, I think the vast majority of nation-states, and the governing classes, do share that common interest. There are exceptions, but almost nobody wants a world in which violence is wielded by non-state actors, to use that political science term. Now, there are important exceptions: the alleged—and probably true—Iranian support for Hezbollah and Hamas, for example. But, by and large, I think, it would not be difficult to raise up a consensus among nation-states, even while we may disagree on other substantive matters, that organizations engaging in international terrorism should not exist. And I'd also hasten to say that, insofar as the response is an international police effort, it's also going to be a police effort in the sense that, comparable to domestic police efforts, the problem's probably never going to go away. You know, we have bank robberies here in Boston. But just because we have a bank robbery, it doesn't mean we declare martial law. It means that we need to try harder to prevent and catch bank robbers. And if your local police force is able to deal with crime, or keep it at a level at which everyday life goes on, that's probably good enough.

*DKK: Right.*

AB: I think that the radical, anti-Western, violent jihadism is not a problem we can destroy, but it is a problem that can be managed. And, again, the answer is not war, and the answer is not invading and occupying countries, and the answer is not these huge, enormously expensive, and probably counter-productive nation-building campaigns.

*DKK: You know, as I'm listening to you, I can't help but think of nations in the West that have learned, ostensibly, to live with terrorism. I think about England and the IRA. I think about France, even in the*

*seventies, dealing with Algerian terrorists. And it's not that you would say that the British or French were particularly comfortable with those conditions, but they somehow learned to live with the idea . . .*

AB: Well, I don't know if they learned to live with it, but it did not cause them to abandon their values entirely. They probably compromised their values in sundry ways, but it ultimately caused France and Britain to acknowledge the political context in which this violence was being perpetrated and to look for political solutions. The political solution for France was to allow Algerians to exercise the right of self-determination.

*DKK: Sovereignty.*

AB: Right! And the solution in Northern Ireland is this complicated Good Friday process. I can't pretend to fully understand it, but it looks to some type of shared sovereignty as a way of removing the conditions that produced the violence. The answer was not, "Destroy the IRA." Of course, we now have the so-called Real IRA, but I mean that the goal was to persuade the IRA to lay down its arms . . .

*DKK: To transform it from a military terrorist organization . . .*

AB: To bring it into politics.

*DKK: Yes, that's right: to bring it into politics. At the end of The Limits of Power, you say, "The solution to extremist Islam is not to try to make Islam American." And you follow with what I found to be a very powerful phrase: "Let Islam be Islam."*

AB: Well, I say this without making any pretensions to being an expert on Islam, but I do generally buy the notion that there is a great conflict underway within the Islamic world, and the essence of the conflict is the reconciliation of belief with modernity. We in the West faced that problem a couple centuries ago, and we wrestled with it.

*DKK: I think we're still wrestling with it.*

AB: Some of us. But, by and large, most people in the West have reconciled religion and modernity. And I think that, whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, the reconciliation happens, by and large, through the privatization, or the marginalization, of religion. I mean, we here in the United States claim to be, and by some measures are, I guess, the most religious people in the whole developed world, but that translates into, "I profess to be a believer when I'm asked in a poll if I believe. I go to church on Easter and on Christmas. I baptize my children, and when they grow up, they get married in a church." It doesn't necessarily mean, for most of us, that one lives one's life according to the rather clearly articulated expectations of Jesus Christ. So, most of us, I think, have figured out how to live in the modern world and still have some connection to a religious tradition. I think that the Islamic world is wrestling with that. I think that their challenge is, in a sense, even greater than ours, because, if I understand it correctly, for them, religion and politics are simply joined at the hip. The notion that you can have a religious world and a political world that are divorced from one another is difficult in their tradition. That said, I believe they're going to have to figure out their solution to that critical issue, and that it's arrogant beyond belief for us to imagine that we can solve it for them. And I think that our insistence on pushing them to a solution probably just exacerbates the resentment directed against us, and makes it that much easier for them to scapegoat us, to blame us for their problems, which are significant. So, that's what I mean. "Let Islam be Islam" means: allow Islam, the people of the Islamic world, to evolve their religious tradition in ways that make sense to them.

*DKK: I want to connect what you just said about religion and modernity in the West, and the reconciliation that has rendered some form of secularism that, for many, might be viewed as the privatization of religion. I want to ask you specifically about who you've become. We started our conversation with a discussion of your life as a military man. Now you're a public intellectual and a cultural critic, among other things. And, clearly, the figure of someone like Reinhold Niebuhr seems to have played a huge role in your emergence as a public intellectual and cultural critic. Or, at least, you have recourse to Niebuhr when you engage in cultural and political criticism. How does this relate to your self-identity? I mean, you've characterized*

*yourself, variously, as a Catholic conservative but also as a critic of dominant norms of thinking and being. I think one of the connections I drew as I was reading your work and thinking about Lasch is that it is hard to cast either of you in conventional political roles.*

AB: I think one of the reasons I'm drawn to people like Lasch and Niebuhr, and even Genovese, though less so, is that all of these people—and I'm sure there are others whom we could cite—refused to be bound by a label. And the resolution I've come to, relatively late in the game, is to refuse to be bound by a label, to refuse to be situated in a particular camp, to refuse to say, "Those people over there are my adversaries, and I must disagree with everything they stand for." To go beyond that really puts you in a position to learn. And I can't say that I've done this consciously—I really have not—but I think that's where I am. So, when somebody asks me, "What are you?" I'll typically say, "I'm a conservative," and I think I can make the case for why I can call myself a conservative. But by no means do I believe that there is a very specific basket of values and ideas that define truth, and that all these other people who adhere to different values are wrong. I don't think that at all, especially, I think, as I've gotten older. As a young person, first of all, I cannot say that I was politically aware. I mean, when the sixties really got hot, I was at West Point! I was, not completely, but to a very large degree, isolated from the cultural upheaval that was such an important part of that time. I have to say, I was not at all empathetic with regard to the great social movements of that time. I hope that I was not an overt racist, but I didn't see Civil Rights as a cause that I was called upon to commit myself to.

*DKK: Hm.*

AB: I'm not saying that proudly; I'm saying it with some embarrassment. The same thing could be said with regard to gender equality. My point is that, even though I call myself a conservative, I am acutely conscious of the extent to which most of the good things that have happened in American society over the course of the last fifty, sixty years came from the Left, and that's because it was people on the Left who were calling attention to injustice and inequality, and insisting that simply continuing to tolerate these things was . . .

I really think that our politics would be much better if it consisted of principled debate—debate between two principled camps, rather than debate between Republicans and Democrats, neither of which, in my mind, is a genuinely principled party.

*DKK: You turn a nice phrase in The Limits of Power: "principled dissent." Tying this back to the discussion of the secular culture that we live in, I wonder at times about the possibilities of the kind of reflective iconoclasm that you were just describing, about where you would find someone like a Niebuhr or a Lasch or a Genovese, or a Trilling, in the fifties, or, later, Martin King—all of whom, in one way or another, engaged in principled dissent. Now, this may be a sociological question, it may be a psychological question, it may be an anthropological question, but does secular culture diminish the availability and possibility of principled dissent? It's reminiscent of a discourse among certain political theorists who insist on the need to check your values at the door when you're engaged in public and political discourse. But, of course, that's not the political reality we live in. Niebuhr is a theologian as well as a cultural critic. He's drawing on his Christian grounding to engage political culture. He uses a theological language when he says, in effect, "I'm a Christian realist," which is not the same as being a political realist. He says, "I'm a Christian realist," meaning, "There are theological truths that I adhere to that I know are not realizable in the world, and yet I am beholden to them, and I measure up how history unfolds in regard to these theological truths."*

AB: Well, what I'm thinking as I'm listening to you is, one of the problems is that we live in this time in which, in some respects, American religiosity is very pronounced, and very much present in our politics. If you want to get elected President, you'd better pay attention to how many votes you're going to get from, you know, the conservative Protestant evangelicals, and so on.

*DKK: That's right. There's a reason Obama and McCain showed up at Rick Warren's church!*

AB: And yet, one wonders—I'm just thinking out loud here—if religion has somehow become shallower. It's become a mode of posturing, rather than something that someone like Niebuhr drew on, or that Dr.

King drew on. And, to circle back around to Lasch, who was raised by parents who were overtly atheist, and who was himself, I believe, never religious in any kind of a conventional sense—yet, clearly, in his intellectual journey, he was moving in a direction in which, whether or not he was a believer, there developed an appreciation for the importance of religion as a component of the way society functioned, or of what makes human beings human. But it wasn't, for any of these people—for Dr. King or for Niebuhr or for Lasch—it wasn't cheap religion.

*DKK: No. Not at all.*

AB: It wasn't Jerry Falwell religion. Now, I haven't read his books, but I know that people point to Jim Wallis as somebody who has some serious things to say in that regard. So, when I say it's getting shallow and cheap, I don't necessarily mean that as an across-the-board thing.

*DKK: I often talk to my students about this. I'll pose a question to them: "If Martin Luther King, Jr. showed up on the political scene today, would we recognize him for the moral force that he was?" My answer to that question is no. And they say, "Yeah, probably not." In other words, there is a dominant mode of secularism that seems to be kind of tin-eared, that makes us hard-of-hearing when it comes to strong moral discourse grounded in a religious tradition.*

AB: Maybe we'd say, "Excuse me, Dr. King. We have a black President; African-Americans vote; overt discrimination, segregation—we've addressed these problems." And Dr. King, I think, would say, "Wait a second. The issue here is social justice. Hop in the back of my car and let's go drive to this neighborhood in Boston, and we'll talk about whether or not the work is done." But it wouldn't go very far.

*DKK: It wouldn't go very far. And there's a way in which someone like President Obama is very adroit at absorbing those kinds of criticisms. One of the strong narratives you tell in *The Limits of Power* is about the American imperial presidency. How would you situate Obama in regard to this legacy of the American imperial presidency? Because I think you've said, in various places, that one of the strands of the Catholic moral tradition that's not drawn on very ably, for example, is the Just War tradition. Obama, in his Nobel Peace Prize speech, explicitly draws on the language of "just war." Now, whether it's deeper than rhetoric, I'm not quite sure.*

AB: I think if you look at the Afghanistan decision . . .

*DKK: So, situate Obama both in regard to that American imperial presidency lineage that you identify, but also, speak to the ways in which you'd try to convince someone like Obama, or the folks who support Obama, to transform the Presidency away from the American Imperium.*

AB: Well, I think that the moment he was elected, the imperial presidency reached its zenith, in the sense that we had chosen to elect the man who promised to change how Washington works. I mean, the expectations that accompanied his inauguration, not just in the United States but, apparently, around the world, were enormous! The idea of an imperial presidency is one that, actually, many people around the world embrace—that the President is the President of the World! I mean, some people have even written this—not entirely tongue-in-cheek, I think—that he is the world's president. So there were these enormous expectations, and they have not been fulfilled. And I am not surprised that they have not been fulfilled. That's not a criticism of the President, who I think is probably the most gifted politician we've had, you know, at least since Reagan—and I don't mean that as a partisan comment—or maybe since Franklin Roosevelt. And I think that what the President himself may or may not have learned is that, to some degree, the imperial presidency's a sham, because one person isn't going to fix the problem, whatever the problem is. Maybe the President himself has recognized that, but I daresay that the American people have not, that we are going to have another election in a couple of years, in which, with all the hoopla surrounding it, these expectations will resurface. "Now, at last, the Messiah is standing just offstage, and if we can usher him into the center of things, that'll fix everything." There are all kinds of reasons why the imperial presidency came into existence, and I would never underestimate the importance of the Cold War, the rise of the national security state, and of the President as the Commander-In-Chief who presides over this apparatus and is therefore granted an enormous exercise of power. But I also think that, to some degree, we

have an imperial president because it's convenient for us to look to Washington and, because we all understand that Congress is corrupt and dysfunctional, to look to this person, this individual, who will be the savior. And by looking to the President, we avoid having to look at ourselves, and we don't have to think about the fact that maybe salvation is not to be found in Washington, that maybe it's actually something that is going to be found closer to home.

*DKK: And that idea that salvation should be found closer to home surely speaks to the evacuation of civic culture and the lack of availability of spaces for ready reflection about these questions. After all, it's Good Friday, and I couldn't help but think, on my drive up here, about whether America would get to a point where it would think about its fate in regard to whether there could be a Good Friday for America. We are living a dark and ambiguous time. We're living in a time, literally, after the annihilation of hope. This is what I mean when I ask whether America would be willing to acknowledge living through its own Good Friday, because if you're living through a Good Friday, you wouldn't necessarily know that Easter is coming. You only know the darkness and death of Good Friday.*

AB: You know, it's funny: I happen to be a Catholic, and what we're talking about reminds me that I also wrote about this very briefly in [my militarism book](#)—how Americans were falling in love, more or less, with military power in the eighties and nineties, and that the Church, at that moment, was beginning to articulate some very important cautions. You could cite the Bishops' statement about nuclear weapons as one example, and many of the things that Pope John Paul II was saying and writing, likewise. And then we had, and we still have—it never ends—the clergy sex abuse scandal. In light of this scandal, why would anybody listen to a bishop, on any matter whatsoever? And so, one of the things I deeply regret as a Catholic is that, if indeed we are in a moment of hopelessness, when my church ought to be able to express a hopeful message, a message that could illuminate a hopeful path, they have forfeited that opportunity or obligation as a result of the clergy's own, or the hierarchy's own, disgraceful behavior. And I mean this specifically for the Catholic Christian tradition, but to the extent that the Catholic Church can, at some times, have something to say to others, that's lost. And that's really part of the tragedy of our times, I think.

*DKK: Well, it may be lost, but it also may be an occasion, a certain kind of opportunity. Right? I mean that, if, as I was saying, America can come to a point where it recognizes that we're in a Good Friday moment, it may be that the Catholic Church can come to recognize its own Good Friday moment.*

AB: Well, that would be nice. But, thus far, the response of the hierarchy tends to resist that conclusion.

*DKK: Well, that seems clear. Not exactly the sort of the note I had anticipated ending our conversation on, but surely urgent issues nonetheless. I do appreciate the time you have taken with me.*

AB: Thanks a lot. Thanks for coming up. I appreciate it.