

# Dark Ages America

## The Final Phase Of Empire

### Introduction

What we are now seeing are the obvious characteristics of the West after the fall of Rome: the triumph of religion over reason; the atrophy of education and critical thinking; the integration of religion, the state, and the apparatus of torture; and the political and economic marginalization of our culture. Early in 2005 the New York Times reported that increasingly, across the nation, secondary school teachers were leaving the subject of evolution out of the curriculum because they'd get into trouble with their principal if he or she found out they were teaching it.

Teachers often avoid the topic out of fear of protests from fundamentalist parents. Add to this the pervasive hostility toward science on the part of the Bush Administration, and we get a clear picture of the Enlightenment being steadily rolled back.

Religion also shows up in the current American tendency to explain world events, in particular, terrorist attacks, as part of a cosmic conflict between Good and Evil, rather than in terms of political processes. Fundamentalism and democracy are completely antithetical. The opposite of the Enlightenment. American hatred of freedom shows up quite clearly in the statistics of public attitudes toward the Bill of Rights. What has happened in the wake of 9/11 is not just the threatening of the rights of a few detainees, but the undermining of the very foundation of democracy.

Detention without trial, denial of access to attorneys, years of interrogation in isolation - these are all now standard American practice, and most Americans don't care. Increasingly, the evidence piles up that intellectually speaking, this nation is very obviously "living in the dark".

Millions of American adults are ignorant of the most elementary facts, such as the identity of our enemy in World War II. Our children graduate from university not knowing the difference between an argument and an assertion, and are unable to reason clearly, and don't really know what evidence is.

11 percent of young adults can't find the United States on a world map, and only 13 percent of them can locate Iraq. Only 12 percent of Americans own a passport. As in the Middle Ages, when most individuals got their understanding of the world from a mass source - the Church - most Americans get their "understanding" from another mass source: television.

Political and historical "analysis" on this basis, typically amounts to a few slogans they picked up the day before from broadcast news or even a late-night comedy show. On the eve of the 2004 presidential election, 42 percent believed Saddam Hussein was involved in the September 11 attacks, and 32 percent believed that he had personally planned them.

More than anything else, torture evokes the culture of the Dark and Middle Ages. We associate these eras with barbarism, with "cruel and unusual punishment". Not only are we supporting governments that routinely practice torture, but in the wake of 9/11 we began transferring suspected terrorists to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Morocco to do our dirty work for us, which includes hanging prisoners from the

ceiling, subjecting them to electric shocks, forcing objects up their rectums, tearing their fingernails out, and fracturing their spines.

Since Abu Ghraib, there have been periodic revelations in the press about American-led torture being worse, and more widespread, than previously thought. America has been transformed from a country that condemned torture and forbade its use to one that practices torture routinely.

Americans began torturing prisoners after 9/11 and never really stopped. Yet there was no outcry over any of this. The U.S. infant mortality rate is among the highest for developed democracies and the World Health Organization rates our healthcare system as thirty-seventh best in the world, well behind that of Saudi Arabia.

America is spending hundreds of billions of dollars on phony wars. As Rome became socially and economically nonviable, it simply became irrelevant on the world stage. History is no longer on our side, time is passing us by, and the star of other nations is rising as ours is sinking into semidarkness.

In the wake of 9/11, civil liberties were severely compromised, the already huge gap between rich and poor was rendered more extreme, and we began to behave like a rogue nation, acting as a law unto ourselves.

One could argue that terrorism is already winning, in that it has managed to push us further along the downward trajectory we were already on. If “morning in America” was little more than a joke when Reagan uttered it in 1981, it is a total delusion today.

There are no levers of social change today. The Democratic party is politically and intellectually bankrupt. This book was written for those individuals, American or not, who are more interested in reality than illusion, more committed to understanding America as it is than in being comforted by a fantasy of what it is.

## Liquid Modernity

What happens in the larger world - in the macrocosm - influences, and is reflected by, what happens in the fine details of everyday life - the microcosm. The macrocosm of course is globalization, the economic integration of the world along the lines of laissez-faire market economy.

America has been the cutting edge of this way of life, a society characterized by speed, fluidity, and transience - obsessive change. Being modern in this context means having an identity that is always shifting, always "under construction". America is the ultimate anti-community.

The notion that each person is free to choose his or her own destiny was the ideal of a New World that was rejecting the social chains of the old one. The promise of freedom in America is precisely to be liberated from the past.

Americans cannot choose not to participate in the utterly fluid, high-pressure society that the United States has become. When normlessness becomes the norm, the social order turns into a hall of mirrors. This way of life may prove to be the great discontinuity in human history.

## Work

Work is the arena in which most of us spend most of our waking hours, and the impact of globalization here is going to be especially telling. Workers know they are disposable, so see no point in developing any commitment to jobs, workmates, or even the tasks they perform.

Everything seems to be ever new, endlessly produced, consumed and discarded. The most functional work attitude in such a context is one of cynicism. Projects and human connections bubble up and collapse with dizzying speed.

Everyone is running his or her own little virtual company in which skills aren't cumulative and everyone is disposable. There is constant talk of "teamwork" but it is a phony courtesy, part of the workplace "process". In reality, we are all creatures swimming alone in puddles of time.

We wander from job to job, and now it's hard for anyone to stay put anymore. Our job commitments are contractual, contingent, impermanent, and this model of insecure life is spreading outward from us. We live in a contest of the fittest, where the most knowledgeable and skillful win and the rest are discarded.

What is absent from our lives is a sense of narrative coherence. The way we have to live in order to survive in the New Economy has set our inner lives adrift. In a world characterized by constant change and fluidity, nothing is or can be taken very seriously.

The whole system radiates indifference. A regime which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy. Everything is now in overdrive. The new economy is at work 24/7.

In 2000, the average American couple worked seven more weeks than they did in 1990, and the average American now puts in 350 hours per week more than his or her European counterpart. We have to work harder and longer, and under much greater stress.

Our lives are frantic, people are constantly on call via cell phones, beepers, faxes, voicemail, e-mail, and the like, which now break into our lives like burglars, destroying any vestige of private life. The new arrangements have meant the erosion of families, the fragmentation of communities, and threats to our integrity.

Everything gets telescoped down to ME, as the primacy of self-loyalty becomes a necessary survival strategy. The macrocosm of the larger world and the microcosm of everyday life have collapsed into each other. We are the economy and the economy is us.

On the grassroots level of people's working lives, this merger of our identities with the economy is surely one of the most destructive aspects of the new globalized world order. Floating above all this is a halo of corporate propaganda designed to celebrate this way of life as nothing less than salvation.

The ideology of the frantic life is the mystique of the market, the notion that markets are where we are most fully human. By the time the 1990s rolled around many Americans had fallen victim to a kind of "market populism", the belief that financial markets were more democratic in nature than democratically elected governments.

While millions of workers got laid off and then rehired as temps by their former employers, now without health and pension benefits, economists were raving about the wealthy as being the real winners in life, and labeling everyone else "second rate".

All of this spin on how great business was had a great cultural impact, really dating from the beginning of the Reagan presidency. The equation of the market with freedom got enacted into public policy and permitted a huge upward transfer of wealth, which was somehow regarded as an expression of the popular will.

Books such as *God Wants You To Be Rich* and *Jesus, CEO* became best sellers. Other managerial books talked about the corporate soul and the inherent goodness of the market, using words like "telos" and "spirit".

While the management gurus glorified "teamwork" and "interactive styles", top managers saw their salaries rise in direct proportion to the number of employees they could fire. A headline on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune* said it all: "Rise in Joblessness Delights U.S. Markets".

Globalization is our destiny; it is, in effect, the late phase of capitalism. We did not evolve to this place by accident and there seems to be no way to alter this trajectory - not even slightly. Anything truly different or anything truly creative has to swim against an enormous tide of commercial garbage.

When everything is reduced to marketing the only legitimate measure of worth seems to be what is desired. Professional integrity starts to evaporate, because livelihoods now depend on popularity.

Many other countries are aware that America is running on empty; some hope to avoid the same fate. A few years ago, thirty-three Italian towns banded together to protect their human-paced way of life from America's turbo-charged economic model.

It's an extremely self-destructive path but as more of the world gets pulled in this direction, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize it as a path to nowhere.

## Media

One American institution that has been particularly susceptible to the influence of globalization and the market-driven mentality is the public media. Spending large amounts of time with communications machinery is what most of us now do.

Forty-two percent of American homes are “constant TV households” meaning the set is on most of the time. The average American watches it about 4 hours a day and it now consumes 40 percent of his or her free time.

The more money moves to the center of our lives, the more cynical we become about higher values. Television programs of 20 years ago seem sluggish to us now. And if we look back fifty years we see that in terms of action, movies were much slower and that magazine articles were much longer and more complex.

The shortening of attention span that goes with all of this leads to an emphasis on stereotypes. Hence, the steady dumbing down of American culture, as life becomes more formulaic. In such a situation, democracy is reduced to a sideshow: The ceaseless quest for disposable feeling and pleasure hollows out public life altogether.

In addition, American popular culture makes the whole notion of right and wrong seem ridiculous, and so replaces democracy with a safe, comfortable nihilism. In brief, the life of the mind has been replaced by a huge consumerist fantasy. We see the evaporation of interest groups, neighborhood alliances, and all forms of civic life - the very stuff of democracy.

A further consequence of the new media supersaturation has been the privatization - and hence the destruction - of public space. It is now almost impossible to find peace and quiet on a train or bus or subway or street corner or even in a restaurant or art gallery.

The narcissism of all this is breathtaking, but in truth the new media technologies merely enable the elaboration of narcissism that runs deep in the American psyche, an infantilism that is a trademark of American culture.

European and traditional cultures have a superego, whereas American culture does not; it only has an ID.

## Children

If mass-market culture is driven by infantile needs and impulses, we also need to explore what such a world is doing to our children. By the year 2000, 25 percent of U.S. teens were involved with weapons; 70 percent admitted cheating on tests in school; more than 15 percent had shown up for class drunk. An estimated six million American children have been diagnosed with attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), including perhaps two hundred thousand between the ages of two and four. One million children now receive Ritalin every day in school.

All in all, the use of antidepressants among American children grew three- to tenfold between 1987 and 1996. Children in the United States now receive four times as many psychiatric drugs as children in all other countries in the world combined.

Meanwhile depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders are skyrocketing. We need to examine the relationship of the corporate world to the world of childhood, and the way that that relationship shapes children's perceptions.

Whereas the old toys were about real-life situations - dolls that expressed notions of motherhood, for example, to which both mothers and daughters could relate - the new ones simulate activities from movies and television.

Playthings used to teach the young the values and customs of their culture. The new ones by contrast, are the product of a simplistic vision, that of a corporate marketing strategy that has no particular interest in child rearing per se but a very great interest in sales, turnover, and profit.

As a result, parents have become onlookers in their children's playtime activity, not active participants in it. All this leaves children with few models of past or future. Boys get a magical pseudo-technology of violent conflict; girls get models of female caring that are not grounded in reality.

Toys are typically inspired by characters in the mass media. This trend was launched by Walt Disney in 1937, when Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs got linked to toys that precipitated a "merchandizing frenzy".

The marketing techniques that were used to promote the accumulation of goods among adults also cultivated the children's market. The result is that children now live in an ethos of fantasy consumerism. Modern American childhood is for the most part an education in shopping.

Not that some parents are unaware of what's going on, or the dangers it poses; the problem is what any of us can do about it. One marketer actually refers to children as "consumer cadets" in whom the consumer embryo begins to develop in the first year of existence.

The biggest selling point to advertisers lies in forcing kids to watch two minutes of commercials.

Corporations offer free equipment to schools - computers and internet browsers. In return, the advertise online and also collect data on what children are interested in, supplying this information to advertisers and marketers. (p33)

The upshot of all this is that the school is turned into a venue for corporate and consumerist indoctrination - with the blessing of many schools and probably most of society. The ads teach kids that buying is good and will make them happy. They teach that the solution to life's problems lies not in good values, hard work, or education, but in materialism and the purchasing of more and more things.

What they get is a worldview in which products are the means and ends of life. Schools are becoming case studies in the commodification of everything. The result is the absence of any social space that is not dominated by ever more intrusive corporate marketing. A programmed embryo is inevitably going to turn into a programmed adult.

## Community

Today there isn't much of it left. Notions of community support and civic obligation are pretty feeble in the United States. We live in one of the lonliest societies on earth. A market society makes strangers of us all. As globalization accelerated and the economy shifted into high gear, the last vestiges of community in America were effectively snuffed out.

Most Americans are living in a psychological slum. Washington is probably the worst of the lot. If a whole society behaves in a certain way, can it still be said to be depraved? Almost any exploitation and degradation of others is justified in terms of an expanding economy and the consequent confinement of the world's riches in the pockets of the few.

The reason why *Seinfeld* and *Friends* were so popular is that they depicted community situations i.e. ones in which people hang out together on a daily basis and have a shared history. We prefer not to run the risk of reality, of getting hurt, and as a result very few of us have a neighbor whose private thoughts we truly share.

The unpleasant truth of middle-class American life is that most of us don't talk to our neighbors about anything except the weather. Another important aspect of the breakdown of community life in America is the erosion of civility. Americans have started relying on the courts as a substitute for sitting down with one another and working out their differences in a civil manner.

It may be the dark side of the New Economy. In what other context would we expect to find "reality" shows on TV, such as *Survivor*, in which screwing the other person is the name of the game, and which millions find vastly entertaining.

The loss of national purpose is at least partly responsible for the breakdown of civility. A market-driven society exists only to satisfy individual desire; we spend all our time acquiring things because we lack alternative sources of meaning.

The result is that we no longer see ourselves on a common journey. This shift from neighborliness to suspicion and isolation took only a few decades to achieve. During the fifties, relationship took precedence over the profit motive.

We had a society in which market forces challenged traditional values, whereas today we have a society in which market forces have triumphed over those values. What we can expect at banks and shops is rudeness and impersonality. The ATM is friendlier and most people prefer to use it.

With Reaganomics and Clinton's globalization having done their work, it is a different world. People no longer evince any interest in the community. It is easy, of course, to argue that America has always been a nation in rebellion against stifling communities, or that Western civilization itself has been about the rise of individualism and impersonality.

Yet most Americans are aware that community has disappeared, that their schools are not better, that their streets are not safer, that local government and business are less responsive than they were just a few short decades ago. Not a pretty picture.

Americans have become dramatically disconnected from family, friends, neighbours, and social structures; this has happened in every walk of life and across all sections of the population, irrespective of gender, race, class, and educational background.

Tens of thousands of community groups disappeared from 1973 to 1994; more than one-third of our social infrastructure vanished during that time. Church groups, union membership, dinners at home with friends, bridge clubs - all have been decimated.

It has been demonstrated that communities with high levels of social capital are much better equipped to deal with poverty, unemployment, drugs, and crime; their general vibrancy and political effectiveness are much greater.

For the foreseeable future, the erosion of social capital can only deepen. Shopping malls are now America's most distinctive public space, and mall culture is about being in the presence of others, but not in their company.

All of this undermined the physical basis for civic engagement. The point is that the rebuilding of social capital cannot occur in a context in which power, money, celebrity and the like have become the key values of the dominant culture.

We have walled-off communities and isolated corporate headquarters, which give off a sanitary, impersonal feeling. Our landscapes reveal a nation ruled by economic forces with little vision beyond the dollar. One city after another shows the same pattern.

How did things come to such a pass? How did the United States arrive at the point that money, power, speed, and mindless entertainment came to be the defining characteristics of American civilization?

Time to have a look at causes.



## Economy, Technology

Bretton Woods was a proactive measure, and a very successful one, both in terms of economic productivity and social equality. It underwrote the welfare state. Its repeal in 1971 set the stage for a “predatory” economy, both home and abroad. The floating exchange rates that resulted stimulated the growth of finance capitalism, which in turn led to a huge gap between rich and poor.

These policies, which have eroded democracy and led to a much more aggressive foreign policy, have destabilized the American empire both at home and abroad. The repeal of Bretton Woods, in short, is a major factor in our decline. (p50)

## The Home and the World

U.S. foreign policy has finally landed the country in a huge mess, one that is both self-destructive and, sad to say, largely of America’s own making. This policy is closely tied to the nation’s domestic policies, and both are in turn intrinsically related to life “on the ground” - that is, to the values and daily behaviour of American citizens.

The Bush Doctrine of 2002, announcing the right of preemptive military strike, and America’s de facto intention to rule the world, is not entirely new, but it does mark the transition from a twilight phase in American history to an actual Dark Age.

9/11 was a wake-up call that was not understood and that went unheeded. It was America’s last chance to try to pull away from a downward trajectory, a chance that was completely blown. A scenario of steady decline is probably all that is left to us at this point; we will not get another chance.

## Secular vs Tribal

Societies without the freedom to be just left alone tend to be tribal in nature, heavily dominated by custom and tradition. In those cultures, the separation of Church and state - a mainstay of secular democracy - is usually absent.

Thus both Israel and Iran are torn by internal strife along the secular-tribal spectrum, as are Turkey and the United States. Many American evangelicals probably have more in common with the citizens of Damascus than they do, say, with the many inhabitants of New York and Los Angeles.

No culture today is purely tribal or purely secular. Still, the archetypes do exist in people’s minds, and do operate across the cultures of the world to varying degrees. Where talking about two kinds of worlds here: one where you could basically drop dead and nobody would notice; and another in which you don’t have a moment’s privacy, and where everything you do is everyone else’s business. Which would you choose?

This dichotomy reflects two profoundly different ways of being in the world - one characterized by no meaning, and the other characterized by too much meaning. The concern that the cultural impact of the West, the power of its economic and technical juggernaut, will seduce the Muslim world and thereby destroy its spiritual integrity, is a key anxiety for that part of the world and goes back a long way.

Berman, Morris (2006) *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire*. W.W. Norton & Company, NY, USA.

A crucial aspect of that anxiety is the Western separation of church and state, a separation that is anathema to Islamic societies. From a Muslim perspective then, the modern West is inevitably going to appear godless and shallow, a danger to those who regard politics as the expression of the divine. When Americans asked in the wake of September 11 “Why do they hate us?”, they didn’t really want an answer. The question was purely rhetorical; what Americans wanted was an explanation that would justify their anger, and their demand for revenge.

It is the Americans and Europeans who should ask themselves what has gone wrong with the West, where superior technology and wealth go hand in hand with arrogance, oppression, corruption, pornography, loose sexual morals, risking street crime and the leisured pursuit of trivia.

As for the Middle East, most of its problems arise from continued Western intervention in the region.

This raises the question as to whether Islam and the West are inherently at odds. Certainly, many thinkers on both sides of the divide believe this to be the case. They point to variations on the secular-versus-tribal divide we have been talking about.

Clearly, there are arguments to be made on both sides, but it is possible that both camps would agree on this: the two civilizations clash fundamentally; there is no common ground. There is no compatibility between liberal democracy and Islamic fundamentalism; that much is perfectly clear.

To fundamentalists, all foreign ideologies are evil. Their goal is a holy war, jihad, against apostates and infidels, and a return to pristine Islamic roots. So they and their Western enemies would agree that their worldviews are dramatically opposed.

Not surprisingly, the history of the Islamic states is one of almost unrelieved autocracy. This is a tribal and intensely personal world, not a secular and contractual one. Attempts to export capitalism and parliamentary democracy to the Islamic world have not, as a result, been successful.

For millions of Arabs and Muslims, this universe of abstract systems, this world of Western freedom and individualism, constitutes the soullessness of modernity. The attack on the World Trade Center, in this interpretation, was not so much an attack on the United States, but on modernity - secular, non-tribal modernity - itself.

Our material success is our punishment, in terms of what that success has done to the natural environment, our social fabric, and our personal lives. If the shadow side of secular capitalist culture is glaring, the darkness of tribal cultures is as well.

Amnesty International’s 1997 report on Saudi Arabia consists of a thick dossier on secret trials, flogging, amputation, abuse of women, and institutionalized torture. Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan under the Taliban, it’s all pretty depressing.

Where there is no separation of church and state, where “tribal” interconnectedness leaves people with no place to hide, this kind of brutality is often the norm, and no amount of courtesy in the souks of Aleppo can make it okay.

The Islamic civilization had a marvelous period of scientific achievement from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, during most of which time the intellectual culture of Europe amounted to very little by comparison.

Western science is based on doubt, experiment and measurement, and the truth is regarded as unfolding and provisional; whereas in tribal cultures, the truth is typically regarded as revealed, God-given and final. There can be no doubting the severe antiseccular and anti-intellectual bias of contemporary Muslim thought and politics - much like the Bush administration, ironically enough.

Scholars are persecuted in the Muslim world and frequently chased out. One of the most offensive things to millions of Muslims is the attempt to view the Koran in historical and secular terms. Whereas the application of critical and historical analysis to the Bible began in Europe nearly two hundred years ago, modern Islamic scholarship will have none of it.

Those who attempt to examine the Muslim canon from a rational point of view get vilified, and there has been a systematic attempt within Islam to stop intellectuals from accumulating social and historical knowledge.

Islam stopped producing great thinkers several centuries ago. Islamic scholars have been content to repeat what others have written, and the whole Muslim world is sunk in intellectual sterility. After the twelfth century, the intellect gave way to obscurantism, and this scholastic petrification lies at the heart of the social and political sterility of the Muslim world.

Critical thought for its own sake has the potential to erode the foundations of any society. The fundamentalism of evangelical Christians now stretches right up to a White House that has made its bias for faith over reason quite clear.

Iranian youth in huge numbers find the reigning Islamic orthodoxy repellent and are more interested in checking their email than dying for Islam. A great many Iranians favour the separation of church and state. The Islamic nations regard the West as having a pagan culture of celebrity, hedonism, commercialism, and instant gratification.

As groups come into conflict over cultural fault lines, the major question will be one of identity: not "which side are you on?" but rather "what are you". If the differences between civilizations are essentialist - matters of identity - then there really isn't much that can be done to build bridges between the conflicting parties.

2001 marked the resumption of the war for the religious dominance of the world that began in the seventh century. Western notions of individualism, free markets, and separation of church and state have little resonance in Islamic cultures.

1. The West champions individual freedom over relationship or group loyalty; Islam does the reverse.
2. The West, at least theoretically, separates church from state; Islam does not.
3. The West developed the notion of the "corporate body", the senate, or representative assembly; Islam did not.
4. The West, in a secularization of the Catholic corpus mysticum, eventually developed the idea of the corporation that lies at the heart of capitalism; Islam did not.
5. Western science has the notions of the fact-value distinction, genuine critical analysis, and provisional truth; Islam keeps reason subordinate to faith.

The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.

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Radical Muslims hate us not for who we are but for what we do. Their objections to what we do are quite reasonable, politically speaking, and unless there are some serious changes in what we do - we shall be fighting a bloody, self-destructive war until the cows come home.

The disunited States of America are a mixture of nationalities, ethnic groups, and races united only by the 'American Dream', or to put it more correctly, worship of the dollar - the Almighty Dollar. Around the same time, bin Laden said in a speech to the American people: "I urge you to seek the joy of life and the after life and to rid yourself of your dry, miserable, and spiritless materialistic existence".

Who we are does make a difference to our enemies; and although the American Dream is more than just a materialistic one, Islamists really do understand how central materialism is to the American way of life. Hence, their avowed declaration to bankrupt the American economy - it's their primary strategy because they know that this is to hit us where it hurts the most.

Americans do not understand that individual freedom is not a universal aspiration, and that other peoples - especially in the Middle East - put other values first, such as honor, order, and tribal loyalty. It is our behavior that is the issue, not our way of life.

The actions of the United States as heir to the British Empire in the Muslim world, are what went wrong. Americans thought of themselves as an empire since revolutionary days. Expansion has been the dominant fact of American life for three centuries.

When manifest destiny had run its course and there was no more contiguous land to buy, annex, or conquer - the root impulse got channeled into overseas expansion - manifest destiny gone global. Teddy Roosevelt declared that American supremacy would promote the interests of civilization itself, that peace would be the consequence of empire, and that the United States must not shrink from its role as policeman of the world.

We do not see that by expanding our own economic system we make it difficult for others to retain their economic independence. Nobody could have foreseen this but it was these policies that set us on the long road to the Age of Terror in which we now find ourselves.

The inability or unwillingness to look at ourselves through foreign eyes, to see those who object to being steamrolled by us as anything but knaves or ingrates, has a very long history. For ours is a total worldview; it has been, and remains, largely impervious to substantive critical feedback.

The ideology underlying American foreign policy is comprised of three interlocking ideas. The first sees the American future in terms of a quest for national greatness, coupled to the promotion of liberty. The second defines attitudes toward others in terms of a racial hierarchy. The third holds that revolution in general is a dangerous thing.

Most of our imperial ventures or wars of conquest have involved an "enemy" who was nonwhite. The United States, both at home and abroad, always had a system of racial hierarchy in mind, one that put those with the lightest skin at the top and those with the darkest at the bottom.

In effect, racial hierarchy permeates our culture and has been used to underwrite our claims to foreign lands and to justify the imposition of Anglo values and institutions. Americans still live in a world in which Anglos are on top, Europeans follow, and the Third, non-white, World sits at the bottom.

“Black Africa” occupied the lowest rung, just as black ghettos represent the lower reaches of American society. Plainly put, Americans don’t respect cultural patterns different from their own, and this has facilitated an imperial foreign policy.

The American Dream involves something more comprehensive than just making money. It includes Americans’ vision of themselves as bringing freedom and the American way of life to the world, being atop a racial hierarchy, and keeping political revolution at bay.

Our relationship with the Middle East is the culmination of a foreign policy that has been building for some time now and will prove to be the linchpin of the American downfall.

## Pax Americana

The only thing that kept America from establishing a full-fledged empire in the postwar period was the presence of the Soviet Union as a restraining force. As in the case with the “war on terror”, much of the Cold War was an illusion, a large mythic structure or narrative co-created by the United States and the USSR for their own respective domestic political agenda.

The two “threats” thus maintained each other and enabled each system to define itself in opposition to the other. If the main goal of U.S. foreign policy after 1945 had been to fight communism, the pax americana we had established during the Cold War years would have been dismantled after 1991.

But our military spending never dropped below Cold War levels after that date.

The conspiracy theory of a global red menace threatening to engulf the world was grossly exaggerated by the United States for imperial purposes, to gain public support for military and political intervention in the affairs of other nations and for the huge defense budgets such intervention would require.

In this way, the Cold War became the justification for building a global empire. The rhetoric of world Communist revolution was largely hot air, a unifying tool for building a strong USSR. It is not that the Berlin airlift and Wall and the Cuban missile crisis were not real, but that seems to be largely it. Most of the Cold War was smoke and mirrors.

The Truman administration felt that selling its anti-soviet policy to Congress and the public at large would make it necessary “to scare the hell out of the American people”. Secretary of State Dean Acheson indicated that it would be necessary to use dramatic language, such as “the free versus the enslaved world”.

As General Douglas MacArthur later put it, the government kept the American people in a perpetual state of fear, and in “a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor”. The same sort of Machiavellian politics, of course, was resurrected when “terrorism” replaced communism after 9/11.

The similarities between the Truman and Bush Jr. administrations in this regard, and in the tactic of governing through fear, are quite obvious. McCarthyism is nothing more than Americanism with its sleeves rolled up.

Whereas neutralization of the Soviet threat had been the original goal of containment, that threat was now the means by which the instruments of containment would be perpetuated as ends in themselves. We often gave non-communist dissenters little alternative but to join forces with the communists, in order to survive; to many countries, we were beginning to look like a “neo-imperialist pariah” - an image that has only gotten worse over time.

The government was never able to say why the world balance of power was at stake in Vietnam. The truth was that Vietnam was symbolic rather than real; intrinsically, it meant nothing at all. Meanwhile the ante got upped; it would “look bad” to withdraw.

Across the globe, we began to look like what we in fact were: “a superpower pounding a peasant country to dust for opposition to American will”. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger ever gave up their intolerance of Marxism, even when it took indigenous, popular, and independent forms. In fact, neither of them could accept the possibility that Marxism could be indigenous, popular, and independent.

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Once again, there was a deep concern over “credibility”, over how we would look in the eyes of the world. How better are we than our enemies? is the disturbing question that hovers over a good deal of American foreign policy.

We claim to stand for freedom and self-determination; in reality, we act to destroy these more often than not. Out of fanatical anti-revolutionary ideology we have delivered millions of so-called Communists into the hands of dictators and torturers. As the second century of the American republic wore on, our “shadow” was getting increasingly dark.

Having a shared enemy has been crucial to the United States because the country lacks a shared ancestry or cultural experience. It enabled us to dismiss the fact that Communists were often freely elected in other countries - a reality we couldn't tolerate because it required the acceptance of ambiguity and complexity.

We preferred to fall back on conspiracy theories, which enabled us to cling to an apparently much needed belief in our own righteousness and innocence - something that obviously hasn't changed much in the last fifty odd years.

This conspiracy psychology had an obvious additional payoff for certain sectors of government and industry: we armed ourselves to the teeth in the 1950s, setting the national security state in motion as we mobilized on a permanent basis.

Jimmy Carter wanted to put the containment policy to rest, and this simply would not fly with the American people who loved the Cold War too much to let it go. So they were drawn to Ronald Reagan, a man who saw the world in simplistic terms, and who pledged to make America great again.

What the Cold War provided then was conceptual simplicity, something Americans found difficult to live without. As with the war on terrorism, it obviated the need to understand international relations at any depth. All you had to know was “Communist” or non-communist.

According to Jimmy Carter, the time was over for blaming an enemy for our own problems, rather, the time had come to look within ourselves and to put our own moral house in order. The Carter morality was, within two years, heavily out of step with the return to the usual public demand for a more muscular and military foreign policy.

It was also a case of the inability of nuanced thinking to make any headway with a voting public trained to “think”, for so long, in terms of simplistic oppositional slogans. Carter did not think in oppositional terms, and since that is all the media and the public are able to do, his message got lost.

After a quarter century of badly needed binary rhetoric to shore up a sense of disintegrating identity, the nation was far more interested in hearing speeches about the “evil empire” than about anything more complex, or real.

Popularity with the media was at the top of Reagan's list. He was not interested in the substantive details of foreign policy; he probably couldn't even understand them. What interested him was rhetoric, public appearances, and ceremonial duties.

He had no intellectual curiosity whatsoever. His political philosophy amounted to little more than “us good, them bad”, and that was basically what most of the American people wanted to hear. It's not very

difficult to win an election, or stay in power, if you reflect back to the American people the binary way of thinking they are so used to.

But anything really different from that - the Ralph Nader green platform of 2000, for example, or the Jimmy Carter human rights platform of 1976 - is largely doomed. Americans love their large, energy-inefficient vehicles, and don't seem to be too preoccupied with the fact that other peoples of the world have to die in large numbers so that we can live and extravagant wasteful lifestyle.

Jimmy Carter had something more creative, more introspective, in mind. What chance did he have? Americans as a people don't really like to look inward. The Third World regarded us as imperialistic, self-serving, and hypocritical, endlessly employing a double standard.

We backed right-wing regimes across the globe; Vietnam looked like neocolonial repression of indigenous nationalism. During the Carter Administration an effort was made to think in terms of a lasting world order beneficial to all, rather than to make every decision based on gaining a short-term advantage over an enemy. Carter failed because he asked the American people to think as citizens of the world with an obligation toward future generations. But who, then, really failed: Jimmy Carter, or the American people?

The blow-back from self-righteous crusades is going to be the theme of the twenty-first century, as we continue to weaken ourselves through endless war and oppositional logic, and the attempt to project our military into every corner of the globe.

The traditional effort to sustain democracy will lead to the destruction of democracy. And this, by now, is our imperial destiny, and there does not seem to be any way to alter it. U.S. foreign policy is about economy - "dollar diplomacy".

The goal of preserving the economic disparity between the United States and everyone else remains a persistent theme. There is simply no getting around these basic facts:

There is, as Dwight Eisenhower said in his farewell address, a military-industrial complex.

During the Truman administration the military-industrial complex insisted on, and got, a permanent war economy, one that generates vast wealth for American defense contractors.

After the Second World War the American republic was essentially replaced by a national security state, largely exempt from congressional oversight and answerable to practically no one.

It is the economic factor, combined with the militarization of American foreign policy that has been key to the transformation of the republic into an empire. The whole world is to become a free-market economy, and the U.S. military is there to remove any opposition to this process.

We are enforcing a worldwide economic order in which the deck is loaded in our favour:

globalization=Americanization. An expanded military budget means lots of business for American defense industries and weapons manufacturers.

It is sobering to realize that in the 1920s and 1930s, the United States deployed an army that was roughly the size of Portugal's. Today, America has a quarter of a million troops and civilians stationed in 130 countries.



It is, by far, possessor of the largest military establishment in the world and is the world's largest arms exporter. The U.S. share of the global arms trade doubled after the Cold War ended, so that America now sells roughly half of all the weapons sold worldwide.

From 1952 to 1994, the annual increases made available to the Pentagon exceeded the combined net profit of all American corporations. American leaders have turned to the military to solve political and economic problems. But there is no military solution to terrorism.

The Republican leadership doesn't want to hear this. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 - when no weapons of mass destruction were in fact present - and the assignment of rebuilding the country to the U.S. armed forces indicate just how far this process has gone.

It was, in particular, after the Gulf War that the U.S. military evolved into a global constabulary, a kind of imperial police force. Between 1989 and 1999, the country engaged in forty-eight open military interventions, as opposed to sixteen during the entire period of the cold war.

By the end of the nineties, a militarized foreign policy was something most Americans took for granted. Clinton paved the way but the final conversion of America from a republic to empire was planned in the closing years of the Bush Sr. administration.

Our Congress has been hijacked by corporate America and its enforcer, the imperial military machine. We have allowed our institutions to be taken over in the name of a globalized American empire that is totally alien in concept to anything our founders had in mind.

The German philosopher Hegel referred to this as "negative identity", the process of creating an identity for yourself by defining yourself against something. Only Jimmy Carter, as we saw, out of a genuine Christian inspiration, wanted the nation to turn the searchlight inward - and we just weren't having that. We had been anti-Communist for so long that besides being consumers, we had no other identity. George H.W. Bush had no vision. He had no convictions about anything and no historical imagination whatsoever. George H.W. Bush was sleepwalking, unable to articulate a rationale for the exercise of U.S. power in a post-Cold War world.

All Bill Clinton could offer Americans was an expanding consumer economy. When you get down to it, globalization, besides being an updated euphemism for imperialism, is not much more than an elite version of shopping.

The big idea that the neocons had in mind to fill the national void was "world hegemony" - a level of military mastery without precedence. "Full Spectrum Dominance". "I want to be the bully on the block", stated Colin Powell and he flatly stated that he saw nothing wrong with America running the world.

This notion of having to be in constant control of everything, of needing to watch and monitor the activity of the planet in minute detail - what else to call it but insane? On September 11 2001, George W. Bush who up to that time had no idea what he was doing in office save following in his father's footsteps and giving handouts to the rich, suddenly found his mission in life.

Within days, he began making speeches that were coherent, free of the usual gaffes and grammatical errors. The bottom line is that September 11 enabled the neocons to realize their dreams of a new

American empire, for the horrendous event of that day reduced the public's usual resistance to American military involvement overseas.

We will strike preemptively when there is a threat, Bush said, and we will define what constitutes a threat. We shall also act to prevent the emergence of a rival power. The audience applauded wildly. In a word, we are going to militarily rearrange the world to suit ourselves. The war on Iraq began almost exactly six months later.

This was a prescription for a benevolent American dictatorship, as well as for perpetual war. A regime in which the cops have to answer only to themselves, had a name: police state. We need to get a bird's-eye view of the overall foreign policy picture that emerged over the years 1992-2002, a development that highlights the precise nature of American's late-empire phase and gradual turn toward a Dark Age.

Once the USSR collapsed, the gloves could come off; our real imperial strategy could be revealed once and for all. The Bush's plan for American hegemony was just another version of Manifest Destiny. In the case of the Bush doctrine, coupled with the bush administration's assault on civil liberties, it can be argued that we have been in the midst of a slow-motion coup d'etat, one that has, in fact, been building since the late seventies, and that can now, in the wake of the 2004 presidential election, finalize its program for a one-party system and a theocratic plutocracy.

The result is a seamless propaganda machine that has effectively destroyed public discourse in the United States, to the point that we now dwell in a kind of right-wing propagandistic fog. If you doubt for a moment that there is a "vast, right-wing conspiracy" in this country, you must be living on another planet.

What it would take now to pull back from the edge, let alone reverse course, requires a grace, a flexibility and an imagination that we simply don't possess. The United States has gone from barbarism to decadence without the intervening stage of civilization, or, at least, without much of one.

## **Axis of Resentment – Iran, Iraq and Israel**

What the United States did in the rest of the world, it did with a vengeance in the Middle East. It is no great stretch of the imagination to conclude that the events of September 11 were the tragic but inevitable outcome of our foreign policy in the Middle East.

As she ruled the waves less and less, Britannia passed the torch on to the United States. Fortunately or unfortunately, America has no one to pass the torch to; rather, the imperial project will be her undoing. We have come to the end of this way of life.

A major factor in the unraveling process is that of economic and military “overstretch”, in which our strategic adventures will become too costly to bear. Indeed, they are already. Terrorist strikes against us will generate more overstretch and thus more blowback in a negatively reinforcing spiral that we are apparently unwilling or unable to arrest.

Forcing other people to be like us, in the name of “democratization” or modernization, or remaking the world for our own economic or geopolitical purposes, is a big part of this self-destructive cycle. The reality of overstretch and blowback is quite literally staring us in the face.

Our ideology in foreign policy includes the belief that we have a mission and are the torchbearers of freedom; the commitment to a hierarchy of race; and the profound aversion to any but the most modest of social or political changes in the Third World.

If we cannot grasp that the events of September 11 were retaliatory rather than “insane” or “evil”, we shall have little hope of putting an end to terrorist attacks upon us.

## The Meaning of 9/11

On the eve of the 2003 attack, George Bush and Tony Blair declared that Britain and the United States would attack Iraq even if Saddam Hussein left the country. The enemy - “evil” - can never be defeated by definition; there are no possible criteria for what a victory would consist of.

In effect, the goal becomes war itself, war without end. If the U.S. were not preparing to attack Iraq, it would be preparing to attack another nation. The U.S. will go to war because it needs a country with which to go to war.

The sordid tale of how the neocons and the Bush administration tricked the country into war has been told many times by a variety of journalists and scholars across the political spectrum. While the rest of us were in mourning, the neocons began a deliberate, cynical manipulation of the political situation. To implement their plans they would conflate Iraq with 9/11 and terrorism. The Iraq hawks set out to corrupt the process of intelligence assessment. The fix was in; this was a war they were simply going to have, come hell or high water. “Truth” was not part of the equation.

In short, the decision to invade Iraq was made almost immediately after 9/11, but kept under wraps for several months. The next step was to make up a story and sell it to the American people. The problem was that not enough people wanted war.

A Gallup poll of mid-August 2002 showed support for the war at 53 percent, down 8 percentage points from two months before. To make things worse, elite opinion was heavily against it. “There is scant evidence”, wrote Scowcroft in an op-ed piece for the Wall Street Journal, “to tie Saddam to terrorist organizations, and even less to the September 11 attacks”.

What to do? One tactic was to keep repeating a lie - namely, that Iraq and Al Qaeda were linked. Another tactic was to manufacture a nuclear threat. Cheney told the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco “the judgement of many of us that in the not-to-distant future, Saddam Hussein will acquire nuclear weapons”.

Many intelligence analysts were appalled by these statements, but government scientists who disagreed were expected to keep their mouths shut. The decision to go to war drove the intelligence, not the reverse. The Bush administration disseminated information that ranged from selective to preposterous. Professionals in the Pentagon and elsewhere who had dissenting views were excluded or marginalized. Analyses submitted by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which contradicted the claims about WMD or the Iraq-Al Qaeda link, were simply shunted aside.

Greg Thielmann, who retired as INR chief in late 2002, later remarked, “Everyone in the intelligence community knew that the White House couldn’t care less” about contradictory information. “I’m not sure”, said Thielmann, “I can think of a worse act against the people in a democracy than a president distorting critical classified information”.

A good example of this activity was Colin Powell’s presentation to the U.N. Security Council on 5 February 2003, in which he made the case for WMD and links to terrorists. Hans Blix, the chief U.N. weapons inspector, easily cast doubt on much of Powell’s evidence.

The talk proved to be based on hyped and incomplete intelligence; it was full of holes, and presenting very tenuous evidence for Iraq-Al Qaeda ties. As confident as Powell appeared, the reality was something else.

According to U.S. News and World Report, Powell junked much of what Cheney's office and the CIA had given him, tossing pages into the air and exclaiming "This is Bullshit!" So the secretary of state, the good soldier who could always be counted on to do what was asked of him, publicly trumpeted arguments he suspected of new were fictitious, gave the White House the talk they essentially wanted. A stellar performance all in all.

What is outrageous, of course, is how the war came to pass, and the hoodwinking of the American people. So the neocons got their war, after which - given the absence of any WMD - they began to play down the importance of these.

On June 3, in a lecture Wolfowitz gave in Singapore, he said that the real goal of the war all along was oil. The next day, Cheney lunched with GOP senators and told them to block any investigation into the evidentiary basis for the war.

None of this bothered the American people, the great majority of whom were supportive of the war. A poll taken by the Washington Post just before the second anniversary of 9/11 revealed that 70 percent of the American people thought that Saddam Hussein had been directly involved in the attacks, that the 9/11 hijackers were Iraqis, and that Hussein had used chemical weapons against our troops.

Another poll, taken in June 2003, indicated that 41 percent believed that WMD had been found, and 75 percent thought Bush showed strong leadership on Iraq.

Bush said the reason America went to war was that "Saddam refused to let the inspectors in", when in fact he did - they left for their own safety once Bush decided to attack the country. The statement created no stir whatsoever; it was barely noticed.

Nor did Bush allow himself to be engaged at press conferences on the subject of whether he tricked the nation into war; instead, he just repeated several simplistic assertions over and over, in the tradition of Ronald Reagan, and most of the American public was perfectly fine with this.

The Soviet Union was long gone but the psychological need to confront 'evil' states remained. Iraq was practically pulled out of a hat as an immediate danger. The neocons manipulated the insitutional power of their own positions to draw the American public into a synthetic neurosis that supported their template for regime change in the Middle East.

The case for war against Iraq was an argument of disconnected claims and images, many of which turned out to be false or uncorroborated. These techniques of mass persuasion are the same as those practiced by the former Soviet Union.

The battle plan was called "shock and awe", the idea being that America would strike with such speed and overwhelming force that the Iraqi citizenry would be psychologically demoralized, thereby willing to give up without a fight.

When a powerful nation can pick fights only with the small and weak, it is because it is weak itself. Talk about bringing "democracy" to Iraq was also PR; it also played well to a gullible American public. One very significant event that took place during the invasion, but which failed to capture much attention in

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the United States, was the looting of the archaeological museums in Baghdad. American forces moved in to protect the oil fields.

“Stuff happens”, said Donald Rumsfeld, and made a joke about it. If your “values” are those of corporate consumerism, you don’t really have a civilization. So why worry if manuscripts and books are stolen or burned?. Someone like George W. Bush would probably be only too happy to bulldoze these museums and libraries and replace them with shopping malls.

The end of the world begins not with the barbarians at the gate, but with the barbarians at the highest levels of state. It takes barbarians in the streets cheering the barbarians at the highest levels of state to make a new Dark Age a reality.

The American government didn’t care about the destruction of our Western heritage because, like the American people, it no longer identifies with it, and couldn’t care less about it. When a civilization has reached a kind of critical mass and goes into its final phase, the only people who can rise to the top are typically those who will, in the name of “national greatness”, actually promote that process of disintegration.

Jimmy Carter was a temporary reaction against the causes of decline, but other than that we have been on a downhill course ever since. A civilization doesn’t die from being invaded from the outside, but rather commits suicide.

The damage of September 11 is nothing compared to the damage we did and are currently doing to ourselves as a result of our reaction to that event. In a bizarre kind of way, Rumsfeld, Perle, Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz and Rice are Bin Laden’s comrades in arms.

American companies were lining up for government contracts in Iraq even before the war started. Bids were invited for billions of dollars in work, including reconstruction of roads, water systems, seaports and airports - everything we destroyed during the two wars we visited upon the country and the decade of sanctions in between.

These bids were invited only from companies that had strong political links to the Republican party such as Halliburton. By the end of 2003 the main beneficiaries of an 8 billion dollar bonanza in government contracts for rebuilding Iraq went to major Republican campaign donors.

By all appearances, we invaded Iraq for the sake of American business. As one critic put it, the story of the war was “to kick their ass and take their gas”. Indeed, it would be hard to find a clearer or more cynical example of Dwight Eisenhower’s military-industrial complex.

So American soldiers fight and die in Iraq, many thousands of Iraqis are killed, and the classic “merchants of death” clean up. Like the rest of the Bush Administration, Paul Bremer regarded the war as a good business opportunity, and wasted no time rolling out the red carpet for U.S. multinationals.

Another area of corruption is the role of the media during this war which was largely that of a cheering section. The war spectacle that was released was the result of a virtual merger between the Pentagon and the media.

It paints a disconcerting portrait of a timid, credulous press corps that, when confronted by an administration intent on war, sank to new depths of obsequiousness and docility. True, the New York

Times op-ed page ran a number of essays critical of the war, but the front page was largely war propaganda - as the newspaper gudgingly and belatedly admitted in a lukewarm apology to its readers. Few news organizations reported on Weapons of Mass Destruction claims as aggressively as the New York Times.

Between August 2002 and 19 March 2003, the Washington Post, which was rabidly pro-war, ran more than 140 front-page stories that focused heavily on administration rhetoric against Iraq. According to Karen DeYoung, a former assistant managing editor, "we are inevitably the mouthpiece for whatever administration is in power". Inevitably! What's wrong with this picture?

You get a public voice by telling power what it wants to hear. By putting out an anti-Arab position, people such as middle east scholars rise to positions of significant public influence and visibility. It is not easy to locate alternative voices in this country; the notion of "the liberal media" is pretty much a joke. Much of the news coverage of the war came via media owned by Rupert Murdoch. The media was saturated with slogans, to the point that the media created a kind of "echo chamber" in which the government's rationale for the war was repeated over and over again.

As for the American press corps, reporters themselves admit that if they write anything too negative, they'll be kicked out of the White House press pool, lose access to the centers of power, and thus potentially damage their careers.

What, exactly, is the role of the press in a democracy? Surely not ass kissing as we go off to an unjustified war. Surely not kowtowing to transparent government propaganda. If reporters can't ask difficult or embarrassing questions, if they cannot write anything too negative, then they no longer perform anything akin to a real function anymore.

The American practice of torture shows, perhaps more than anything, how different a place the United States has become. Abu Ghraib, of course, is the most notorious torture story to come out of the invasion of Iraq, but our abuse of human rights is hardly limited to one Iraqi prison.

The irony of Abu Ghraib, however, was that the place had been used for similar purposes by Saddam Hussein. The photographs that were turned up form a vivid portrait of part of the American imperial psyche: sadism, depravity, and utter contempt for Third World peoples.

We see men with wires attached to their genitals; being threatened by attack dogs, which were subsequently unleashed; piled together in a pyramid while naked and hooded; being forced to masturbate in front of female soldiers, or be sexually fondled by them.

And all the while, American soldiers posing for the camera, grinning, laughing, giving a thumbs-up sign over a battered corpse, and in general, expressing unabashed glee. In terms of the impact on the Arab world, it is hard to imagine what could be worse.

Even the Israelis don't treat the Palestinians this way. For Muslims there isn't anything more degrading than public nudity and sexual humiliation. The photos capture exactly the quality and feel of the casual sexual decadence that so much of the world deplors in us.

Sexual torture as entertainment confirms the worst beliefs that Muslims have about the United States: depravity, a total lack of moral values. Arabs see this behaviour as representative of the United States, and do not accept our government's line that it is the work of a few "bad apples".

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Rather, it is the result of an official American culture that deliberately insults and humiliates Muslims. The dominant force in Abu Ghraib consisted of military intelligence teams, including CIA officers and interrogation specialists from private defense contractors; and it was this group that set the agenda. The Red Cross weighed in on the issue, reporting a wide, systematic pattern of abuse and torture in American run Iraqi prisons, and rejecting completely the government's claim that Abu Ghraib was an aberration.

The Pentagon operation encouraged physical coercion and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners. It was a transfer of techniques that were already being used at the interrogation center in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, to Baghdad, with a much expanded scope.

So while the abuses of Abu Ghraib were being explained as a contradiction or exception to the American occupation, the truth was that they were a logical extension of it. A Red Cross investigation also revealed that doctors working for the American military there, as well as Guantanamo, collaborated in the interrogation and abuse of detainees.

The process by which Abu Ghraib became possible involved a fundamental subversion not only of values but also of law. If you have a government of men and not laws, you are going to get into serious trouble. It's acceptable to torture prisoners to death, if you claim it was done in the interests of national security.

It doesn't take long for the disregard of law and of basic human rights to migrate from the foreign arena to the domestic one. Democracy is a lot more fragile than we think. Americans have not been overly concerned about this new direction in which we are moving.

A large percentage of them are probably not even aware of it. Our willingness to engage in torture erodes democratic values. The administration can talk "democracy" all it wants, but if you are practicing torture, it becomes unclear in what sense you are still a democracy.

Where is the cutoff point? Why stop with a captive, after all? Why not his family and friends? In Israel, torture went from rare exception to standard practice, in a misguided effort to prevent civilian acts of terrorism. And once it becomes common it undermines society's democratic norms, whereby a nation is defending what it stands for by subverting its own values in order to defend them.

Furthermore, if torture is justified in the defense of our way of life, then why get exercised over the curbing of civil liberties. The USA Patriot act allows the government to conduct secret searches and the FBI to obtain access to personal and financial records of individuals without a court order or without even establishing probable cause of crime.

The government can also jail American citizens indefinitely, without a trial, without being charged, or without being able to confront witnesses against them. The Patriot Act enables the FBI to monitor phones and computers and investigate library borrowing records.

The FBI can force anyone to turn over records on customers or clients and it can gag the recipient of the search order from disclosing the search. The definition of "terrorism" is so broad that it can be used to target environmentalists or any other domestic political protesters whom the government happens not to like.



By September 2003 it was revealed that the powers of the Patriot Act were being used quite widely, to include nonterrorist cases and garden-variety crimes.

All of this was an unfortunate consequence of September 11, but the constant waging of “war on terrorism” makes it easier for oppressive legislation like this to get enacted. The new technologies are quite creepy, going beyond even the wildest dreams of Orwell’s big brother.

Their use will take on a life of its own, setting the stage for an information security apparatus that will alter our democracy forever. 31 percent of corporate chief security officers believe that the United States is in jeopardy of becoming a police state.

What has happened to our democracy in the name of defending it? During the first three years of Bush’s tenure, nearly 3 million jobs were lost in the private sector; 1.3 million Americans fell below the poverty line; 2.3 million more were without health insurance; long-term unemployment doubled; economic growth amounted to 1 percent.

A good part of this was due to the sharp increase in military spending, the lion’s share of which is for advanced weaponry that has nothing to do with fighting terrorism. Across the nation fire stations, zoos, and hospitals have been shut down, teachers, police, and social workers fired.

Funding for the arts was hit particularly hard, with heavy reduction in arts spending or outright elimination of state arts budgets in at least twelve states. The echo of the Roman pattern is obvious. As Cicero famously put it, “The sinews of war are infinite money”. Who has infinite money?

Half the army’s combat strength is tied down in Iraq, a key factor in our imperial overstretch. Another reason for the neglect of the terrorist threat may well be our long-standing and perverse relationship with Saudi Arabia, a repressive fundamentalist regime whose population is virulently anti-American.

If we are opposed to radical Islam, we should be going after the House of Saud. Fifteen out of the nineteen September 11 hijackers were Saudi nationals, yet the Bush Administration chose to go after Iraq. The spread of Wahhabism since the 1970s is in part a by-product of a U.S-Saudi alliance that was historically based on anticommunism and oil, and we have propped up that regime so it would serve our ideological and economic interests.

There was, in short, a strong motivation for the Bush administration to leave Saudi Arabia alone, and to go after Iraq instead. As for the inevitable backlash, we have already seen this in worldwide Islamic revulsion toward the United States and a resultant jihadist recruitment for Iraq, which fuels the continuing insurgency there. In effect, we took a country that was not a terrorist threat and turned it into one.

Even without the travesty of Abu Ghraib, severe blowback against the United States of the next few decades is virtually assured. With the outbreak of the war, the killing of civilians, the pictures of crushed babies and armless children being broadcast by Al Jazeera around the world, Arab newspapers everywhere expressed their outrage at America.

The feeling was that the United States might actually be trying to exterminate Arabs, that America was the enemy, and that terrorist attacks on it would therefore be justified. American troops, the newspapers reported, were callous killers.

The general belief was that the United States was evil and it wanted to devour the Muslim world. In short, if we didn't have a "clash of civilizations" before the Iraq war, we certainly do now. Terror is the price of empire, the two go hand-in-hand.

So we missed the boat on 9/11; we decided to continue "policing the earth" more dramatically than we ever had. This decision is turning us into ghosts as we enter the Dark Ages in earnest.

## The Roads Not Taken

The particular factors that made a civilization's rise to power possible prove to be, in the fullness of time, the very factors that do it in. Going too far in the secular direction creates the anomie of a society expanding economically and technologically for not other purpose than expansion itself.

it becomes a society without intrinsic meaning, devoid of any real human connections. Going too far in the tribal direction creates a situation in which things are so totally interconnected that you feel you can never breathe.

Whenever someone says the word "community", I want to reach for my oxygen mask. America's poverty is worse than that of India's, for it is that of a terrible loneliness that comes from wanting the wrong things.

It is not that technology, individualism, economic expansion, and all the rest are necessarily bad; that would be a rather foolish conclusion. It's that any of these when pushed to the limit becomes pathological.

The lopsidedness that originally energized us is now threatening to take the whole system down. The fragmented character of American society is due to the fact that at every fork in the road, we have chosen the individual over the collective.

Just the reverse can be said of the Islamic nations. They seem to have taken things such as community, group solidarity, and tradition to their extremes and created their own type of pathology and civilizational failure.

Each civilization swung too far in a particular direction, which is why they are now mirror images of each other - fundamentalist in their own ways. Both have arrived at a moment of crisis. We are desperate today for community because we have been lonely and alienated for so long.

We ache for silence because our environment is saturated with fatuous commercial noise. We resonate to beauty - when we do encounter it - because we swim in an ocean of gadgets and garbage. The concept of American character is very much out of fashion these days, violating as it does the much more popular notion of multiculturalism.

Surely in a land as diverse as ours it makes no sense to speak of a central set of traits that "characterize the American people". There are, so the argument goes, many Americas, not just a single one. All historians employ the concept of national character because history shapes culture and culture molds the national character.

Regardless of the forces that have shaped the American character, the bottom line is that there is one, a dominant psychology. It is based on the expectation of material abundance, of inexhaustible plenty - of living in a nation whose streets will be paved with gold, if they aren't already.

This vision of plenty led to the relentless commodification of life, to consumption as literally a mode of perception. And if a few Native Americans view this as a collective pathology, well, the collective definitely does not.

There certainly is an American character; it's called "hustling". We are a nation of people on the make. This hustling has a sunny, upbeat face to it, the Yankee "can do" mentality. Nearly everyone in early Berman, Morris (2006) *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire*. W.W. Norton & Company, NY, USA.

America had little interest in what was good for the nation, and a very great interest in “what’s in it for me?”

The overall picture is that of a scramble for profit, and the result has been a nation that is not only endlessly competitive, but reamarkably violent. Religion was a very strong current in early America. Yet none of this managed to derail the individualistic and commercial ethic of American society, and the two aspects probably went hand in hand.

The early Puritan merchants, often wrote “in the name of God and profit” at the top of their ledgers. A communitarian outlook never seemed to really take root in the culture at large. Deviations from it were easily suppressed, co-opted, or brushed aside.

Even the depression did little to alter the basic commercial outlook and individualistic way of life, and ultimately wound up strengthening them. “Virtue” now means the capacity to look out for oneself and one’s family.

It was the collective result of individual selfish actions, through the invisible hand of the markets that somehow added up to the greater good. The profit motive underlies everything and makert relations amount to a natural, and benevolent system.

America went from monarchy and hierarchy to egalitarianism and commerce practically overnight. The citizenry was engaged in trade and moneymaking and not particularly interested in the nation at large. The Founders believed in rank and social distinctions and had never imagined that the upshot of their efforts would be a society that equated personal quality with money, and virtue with pure self-interest. In a very real sense, the American nation was born bourgeois. Unlike Europe, it never went through a feudal phase. Individualism, laissez-faire economics and the pursuit of private interests were locked in from the beginning; deviations form that norm never really had a chance.

The United States offers its underclass only the ideology of individual mobility and personal achievement. America is the only major industrial nation without a general allowance program for families with childrne and without national health insurance.

It also has the highest percentage of people living in poverty among the developed nations. Being “taken care of” is regarded as un-American; instead, the emphasis is almost wholly on individual success. Individualism is the moral standard on which everything is judged and of which Americans are aggressively proud.

Yet by 1994, two-thirds of the American public said the country was seriously off track. Shadow material knocking at the door, perhaps. American culture is vulgar, materialistic, violent, disturbingly anti-intellectual, and basically vapid.

The American revolution created this democracy, and we are living with its consequences still. The greatest danger of unfettered and dysfuctional democracy is that it will discredit democracy itself. Americans are utopian moralists who press hard to institutionalize virtue, to destroy evil people, and eliminate wicked institutions and practices.

A majority even tell pollsters that God is the moral guiding force of American democracy. They tend to view social and political dramas as morality plays, as battles between God and the Devil, so that compromise is virtually unthinkable.

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The design of our cities, including the rise of a car culture, the growth of the suburbs, and the nature of our architecture, has had an overwhelming impact on the life of the nation as a whole. The real importance of the psychological frontier is the illusion that there is something “out there” that can fill up the emptiness inside - hence, the endless restlessness that is so characteristic of America.

The car offered something dear to the American way of life: a technical as opposed to political solution to the problems of the nation - a panacea, as it were, for some of the country's major ills. The United States has an almost morbid aversion to actually working through social and political problems because it is extremely nervous about real change.

During the progressive era of the early twentieth century, one popular answer to the presence of slums was the notion that everyone should buy a car and commute from the suburbs. An approach like this was dear to the American heart because it did not involve collective political action and because it offered to preserve traditional cultural values.

One reason technology has had so great an appeal in the United States is that it typically offers to change things without really changing them. From its introduction, the car was greeted with huge enthusiasm.

There was an automobile psychology in the United States and the American citizen had become dependent on the car. American society was essentially reshaped to fit the car. Street cars declined dramatically between 1929 and 1940, since Americans wanted private and individual control of the road.

Meanwhile in 1932 General Motors formed a consortium of tyre, oil, and highway companies to buy and then shut down street car systems, bribing local officials when necessary. The car was a metaphor as well as a machine - a symbol of psychic liberation. Cars were given animal or mythological names - Green Dragon, Wolverine to suggest wildness and adventure.

Early films exploited the theme of the use of cars by young people to escape the “tyranny” of their parents. The spread of the automobile gutted our cities, destroyed cohesive urban neighborhoods and city parks, generated endless suburban sprawl, and alienated racial minorities.

In the form of the tractor, the motor vehicle displaced the horse and made the small family farm obsolete. The car privatized the life of American citizens more than ever before, and the damage it has done to the environment, via pollution, is incalculable.

The truth is, mass transit, never really had a chance in America. We are committed to progress for the individual, not for the community. Places such as Paris or Barcelona emerged from an aesthetic vision, whereas Dallas and Houston are the product of free-market commercialism.

Most American cities lack a sense of place; they have become alien worlds for most people, who withdraw from any community involvement. In the main, single-family houses and an elaborate highway system constitute the American landscape.

The American failure to understand cities in terms of civilization shows up, unsurprisingly, in the way our cities look. Whereas European cities are beautiful, urbane, and healthy, Atlanta and Las Vegas are gigantic wastes.

A crucial factor contributing to this unhappy state of affairs is the architectural movement known as “modernism”. The organic city is a thing of the past; it belongs to the age of handicrafts. The new city, on the other hand, is a city in motion; it is about speed and rational order.

The constellation of skyscrapers and expressways became the model for postwar American urban renewal because it fit the needs of real estate speculators and corporate clients. Streets were regarded as nothing more than conduits for transportation; sidewalks were replaced with malls; and buildings, now isolated from the rest of the city, were made to stand free in plazas instead of lining the streets.

Soon everything - high schools, hospitals, hotels, and apartment buildings - began to look like boxes. An architecture of aloof anonymity, as it has been called, became the symbol of corporate America. America doesn't have great public spaces because in order to have them, a culture must first esteem the idea of the public realm itself, and we don't.

The physical space we move in is seen by Americans as lacking any inherent value; it's just a large, empty “box”. Again, this is a major reason that the automobile was able to make such rapid headway in America, because space that is geometrically conceived is something you pass through, nothing more. Los Angeles is our first suburban metropolis. The city has no central core, and no truly effective mass transit system. Citizens of Los Angeles overwhelmingly voted against a new rail and trolley station and in favour of a completely decentralized, car-based city.

The suburban metropolis remains oddly alive in the United States, a testament to our unique combination of corporate dominance and radical privatization. The end product of all this furious commerce for its own sake was a trashy and preposterous human habitat with no future.

We have lived car-centered lives for so long that we have forgotten what a great landscape or city is about. Americans have no understanding of sacred spaces, places of quiet, or ones of relaxed public assembly. Car culture plus suburbia equals oil dependency equals war culture. This war culture can be seen not only in our foreign policy, but also in the details of how we live, both physically and emotionally.

Indulging in a fetish of commercialized privatism, we did away with the public realm, and with nothing left but private life in our private homes and private cars, we wonder what happened to the spirit of community. We created a landscape of scary places and became a nation of scary people.

The number of people living in gated communities went from four million in 1995 to sixteen million in 1998, which ought to tell us something. All of this is part of the militarization of America - an extension of the national security state.

Are there “roads not taken” that we can now revisit and recover, to our everlasting benefit? The garden city movement was one of the first challenges to the corporate ideology of the modern world; but without a complete reorientation of values, these types of communities would not be able to survive in a culture dominated by the drive for profit and expansion.

Moving against the corporate grain in the United States is almost impossible, which is why the few garden city towns remain curiosities, while the suburban home-and-highway formula spread dramatically.

## The State of the Union

The greatest obstacle to progressive change in the United States is probably the American people themselves. The sacred cow in the United States is the American people, to which politicians have to pay ritual homage if they value their careers.

They unquestioningly take their “truth” from the government, whereas in other countries grown-ups know there is no truth to suck on, and if you want it you have to go dig up the information for yourself. The people are not innocent of their rulers’ military expeditions.

While we have many admirable qualities and can be generous to a fault, we also possess a number of dark aspects that operate at a bedrock level, and that have led directly to the civilizational morass in which we now find ourselves.

One is immediately branded as being “un-American” if one breaks with the pack, which includes voicing any fundamental criticism at all. The American dream - basically shopping, radical individualism and the “religion of America” - is so fiercely held that it can be rightly characterized as an addiction.

Our violence as a people emerges in part from the subliminal and haunting awareness that as a belief system, this dream has become something of an illusion. Our “faith” is by now nothing more than MTV culture: individualism, consumerism, and hedonism.

Americans spend far more time in shopping malls than they do in Church. By 1987 the country has more malls than high schools. We are searching for our dreams and seek to fulfill them in stores. Anxiety about the dream also accounts, in part, for the powerful emergence of Christian fundamentalism in this country, which is a way to hang on to something transcendent, at least.

But Christian fundamentalism will not stave off the disintegration of our civilization and is more likely to hurry the process along. The results of our obsessive individualism show up in numerous international surveys of happiness that have been conducted in recent years, where Americans score badly.

It is really fascinating how, under the regime of American-style individualism, everybody loses and yet it continues to be celebrated as the greatest gift to the human race. America is happy in appearance, but full of moral doubts, and above all infinitely lonely.

Study after study of the effects of Americanization show that if a country buys the neoliberal package, the American way of life comes with it; this means wealth for a small upper class and a culture of competition, extreme individualism, and loneliness forced onto everybody else. This is the “freedom” we seek to export to the rest of the world.

There are many problems with this type of radical individualism, and one of the most pernicious, is that it eats away at the capacity to empathize. Americans treat one another quite badly on a daily basis almost as a matter of course.

America is a violent nation and the data bear this out. In response to the question “Is it acceptable to use violence to get what you want?”, 24 percent of Americans said yes, as compared with 12 percent of Canadians. Rates of childhood homicides, suicides, and fire-arm related deaths in the United States exceed those of the other twenty-five wealthiest nations in the world.

The homicide rate for American children is five times higher than for the children of those twenty-five nations combined. Whereas European opposition to the death penalty runs very deep, two-thirds of Americans are in favour of it.

Americans are big on retribution, it would seem; they believe that people sentenced to death are merely getting what they deserve. As of 2003, thirty-eight states had capital punishment. The poor are regarded as losers and an embarrassment; most Americans have little sympathy for them, and this is reflected in the lack of any real social safety net.

In general, Americans are simply not given to thinking empathically. Donald Rumsfeld showed no remorse at all for Abu Ghraib, and subsequently blew the whole thing off as being nothing in comparison to the terrorists' practice of beheading their victims - as if this were now the standard by which our actions should be judged.

Up and down the scale of the United States, a lack of empathy, an almost congenital inability to imagine the pain or the reality of the other, is bred in the bone. Torture goes on in prisons right here in the United States. Americans don't know much about this, and it is doubtful that many of them would care if they did.

Neither elected officials nor the public seem particularly worried that similar abuses to those of Abu Ghraib happen all the time right here at home. That the American public doesn't care is a recurrent theme in human rights groups' reports.

Not caring and not knowing go hand in hand. Lack of the most basic knowledge is so extreme in the United States that one has to wonder if we are talking about ignorance or just outright stupidity. 70 percent of American adults cannot name their senators or congressmen.

Sixty-three percent cannot name the three branches of government. Other studies reveal that uninformed or undecided voters of ten vote for the candidate whose name and packaging are the most powerful; colour is apparently a major factor in their decision.

A 2002 study of college students in California found that most freshmen were not able to analyze arguments, synthesize information, or write papers that were free of major language errors. Nonreaders now constitute more than half of the American population.

All in all, the great mass of our countrymen talk, act, and "reason" as though their crania contained chopped liver rather than gray matter. We are dealing with people who are almost childlike in their understanding of what is going on in the world. They also, it must be added, don't really give a damn. George W. Bush is no historical accident, and future presidents are going to be variations on this theme, which is grounded in a widespread cultural pattern.

When we contemplate America's downward trajectory, it's rather difficult to imagine the nation's suddenly reversing course. Although it would be a fabulous turn of events, it is nevertheless very unlikely that the solution to the American dilemma can come from within America itself. The zeitgeist, it would seem, is moving on.



## Empire Falls

We are in a state of advanced cultural disintegration, or what might be termed spiritual death. Given the emptiness, alienation, violence, and ignorance that are now pervasive in America, it is hard to imagine where a recovery would come from.

As far as civil liberties go, the development and proliferation of extremely sophisticated surveillance technologies changes the picture considerably. These compromise the privacy of the individual out of existence, and the technology is clearly here to stay.

Once in practice, it is very difficult to pull back from its employment; close governmental and even corporate observation of the citizenry; along with the massive collection of data, has now become the norm. All of this makes repression easy and change difficult.

We seem to have passed from a nation of laws to a nation of men. This is the first time in our history, for example, that we rewrote the law to make torture legal. Nor had there been any widespread objection on the part of the American people to these developments.

The “war on terror” is really a permanent state of war, without a clear objective and without a specific enemy. The risk is that so-called emergency restrictions will become a permanent fixture of American life.

It is also very likely that we shall eventually be attacked again, probably with nuclear weapons, in which case, all bets are off. “Tolerant pluralism” will definitely not be the order of the day.

In the process of decline a civilization may, from time to time, rally for a while; but it is the overall trajectory, the structural properties of the situation, that ultimately determine the outcome.

Our days of hegemony, and probably even leadership would seem to be over. A genuine rebound would require an internal assessment of values and social structure, and a reversal of the deep social, economic, and political polarization of the last forty years.

Jimmy Carter tried something like this and was booted out of office for his efforts, inasmuch as the American people much prefer fantasy to reality. As we progress through the centuries, the parallels between contemporary America and late-empire Rome, and the subsequent slide into the Dark Ages, become increasingly suggestive.

As the sun finally sets on the Anglo-American empire, who - if anybody - will live in the light of a new sun, another day? Since the late 1940s, the United States has been deliberately engaged in an imperial project and anyone who would hold the office of the presidency has to be willing to serve that end. All presidents have to promote the national security state, both domestically and in American foreign policy, if they wish to attain and hold onto power. On the domestic front the gulf between rich and poor widened dramatically.

The upshot was that the United States would rule the world, but under camouflage - a kinder, gentler imperialism. But the bottom line is that it, and only it, would rule. Clinton saw to it that the cruel and murderous sanctions against Iraq were kept in place.

Not surprisingly, the objection to the new world order finally materialized in the streets of Seattle in 1999, not from within the ranks of the democratic party. Finally, it is difficult to make a partisan case

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against the Bush Jr. administration for its use of the military for diplomatic purposes when Clinton was doing much the same thing, albeit in a subtler way.

If you don't act as steward and promoter of the national security state, your chances of occupying the White House are less than zero. It was perfectly fine to say Iraq was a strategic error or that it was "mismanaged", but under no circumstances could you point out that it was an illegal and immoral neocolonial adventure.

The real agenda of the Bush administration was to create a kind of soft fascism, a presidential dictatorship or one-party system that presides over a de facto Christian plutocracy, and that has managed to squelch all opposing voices.

Americans are ensconced in a world of fantasy that was deliberately and successfully promoted by the Bush administration. The Bush administration was free to engage in what Orwell called "reality control" and "newspeak", according to which, if the facts don't fit the mythology, you just deny the facts. Bush's attitude toward the factual world in general was one of hostility and rejection. He made fraud and fantasy foundations of his administration. His own belief in something appeared to be evidence for him that it was true.

Popular culture in America consists of large masses of people who are unable to think for themselves, operate out of an emotive basis, confuse entertainment with education, and desperately want to be "filled" from the outside.

The ascendancy of fascism might be a lot less inexplicable than we think, and its attraction a lot more plausible in certain contexts than we can imagine at this particular moment. The opposite of the Enlightenment is tribalism and groupthink. More and more, this is the direction in which the United States is going.

But we would be missing the point if we were to conclude that ignorance or stupidity by themselves kept Bush in the White House. They were crucial to his reelection, to be sure, but tribalism is hardly the prerogative of the ignorant and the stupid.

Many intelligent people voted for Bush. When the limbic system takes over, it's about fear, testosterone, and the logic of "either you're with us or against us". In such circumstances a high IQ counts for nothing. There is in short more than one way of being dumb.

The result is that the Enlightenment is now skating on very thin ice. Reason is always worth fighting for because its opposite brings with it the end of freedom and a massive assault on the human spirit. Who then will inherit the mantle of world leadership, as American hegemony begins to fade?

The two most popular contenders that are bandied about are China and the European Union. The myth of American economic superiority continues to be trumpeted by the American news media even while the data tell another story. The American century is ending and the Asian one is dawning, and there is a good bit of data to support this prediction.

The Chinese economy has been doubling in size every ten years, which is astounding. A 2004 study by the investment firm Goldman Sachs predicted the Chinese economy would be the world's biggest by the early 2040s. There is absolutely no indication that China's emergence as a superpower will herald a better world.

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The number of beggars on China's streets has risen dramatically, and in the countryside the number of farmers living in poverty went up by eight hundred thousand during 2003 alone.

The kitsch and crap of American culture is fast being produced in China. By 2003 Wal-Mart had thirty one outlets in China, complete with the firm's characteristic exploitation of labour. Instead of buying pancakes from street vendors, young families now crowd into McDonalds and KFC, while the walls of metro stations are lined with ads for cell phones and stylish clothing.

The Chinese goal is to give everyone a refrigerator, a television set and CD player, plenty of telephones and lots of toys for the kids. The Chinese are starting to work ungodly hours to pay for all of this, and their lives aren't necessarily better. Indeed, more and more, the culture of China seems to be awash in power, money, and bullshit.

All this just seems like old wine in new bottles: a consumer capitalist regime complete with kitsch corruption, class divisions, and a questionable quality of life. An economic powerhouse, but possibly not much else.

Some have argued that it will be the European Union, rather than China, that will replace the United States as the world's dominant power. The GDP of the European Union is nearly 30 percent of that of the world's, and more than six times that of China.

Despite opposition from the United States and Great Britain, the European Union is moving in the direction of having a military force capable of operating autonomously - that is, without American or NATO interference - and the plan is to build a command headquarters near Brussels.

The sheer sensibleness of the European approach, its savvy internationalism, and perhaps its more solid currency are going to look a lot better than American arrogance and violence.

Europe may come closest to offering its citizens the best lifestyle currently available on the planet.

While the American norm is to throw one's life away in a frantic, workaholic competition for money and power, Europeans take time to savor what life is really all about.

Their cities are beautiful and organic, designed for human beings, not for corporations and commuters. But America will not rest until it has turned the globe into replicas of itself. No triumph, that. Europe is certainly not perfect, but it is far more humane.

There is a conscious attempt, both official and unofficial, to work less. Germans now spend 12 percent less time on the job than they did in 1979 and frankly regard leisure as a right. In 1993, The EU declared forty-eight hours of work to be a weekly maximum, and France subsequently cut its workweek to thirty-five hours.

A survey taken in 1999 revealed that 77 percent of temp workers in the EU had chosen to work fewer hours so as to have time for family, hobbies, and rest. Why slave away for corporate culture when it is nothing more than the crystallization of the stupidity of a group of people at a given moment?

Some sociologists have argued that Americans have no choice, that they have to work like slaves, given the absence of pensions, subsidized college education, universal health care, paid vacations and maternity leave, and the other benefits that Europeans take for granted.

Having bought into a pernicious philosophy that everyone has to make it on their own, that there is and should be no free lunch, that these sorts of benefits are "socialistic" and therefore evil, Americans have

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only themselves to blame for a life riddled with pervasive insecurity, which leaves them without a moment to breathe.

For Europeans, economic growth is a means, not an end - something Americans literally cannot fathom. Numerous polls have shown that Europeans are only too happy to pay high taxes to get social services in return, and they understand that their lower rates of child poverty, incarceration, illiteracy, homicide, suicide, and the like are the result of this.

It's even more ironic when we consider the fact that Europe may be pulling ahead of America on the economic front.

So many Americans possess what might be called a kind of "life stupidity"; they haven't a clue as to what the good life really is. They think it amounts to a single word: more. But the European culture of leisure is being seriously threatened, in large part because of American economic pressure.

German workers, like their French counterparts, have been forced to give up the thirty-five-hour week, and work forty to forty-two hours a week without extra pay. There were huge protests in Germany over this and similar developments are taking place across the EU.

In France, newspapers that serve as intellectual vehicles are starting to lose circulation, and the tradition of knowledge as an end, rather than a means, is starting to die out. Provincial America has been grafted onto a provincial Europe, in which beauty is preserved as a "cultural product".

As the American empire rolls mindlessly on, attempting to convert the entire world to its way of life, the loss of what is truly human is going to be pretty heavy. It would be good to think that things can be turned around, that the nation will wake up, but all the signs indicate just the reverse.

The issue is not utopia but something that supports a more authentic way of life. It may be the case that in order for the world to be healed and restored, the United States may have to be pushed off center stage; and this may be a good thing, from the viewpoint of the entire world.

Too many of America's values in the early twenty-first century are corrosive, and unless the nation can do some rather elaborate soul searching, it needs to lose influence in the rest of the world. A world awash in suburbs and shopping malls, television and sensationalism, cell phones and Burger King, Prozac and violence, fundamentalist Christianity and sink-or-swim ethics, is no vision for the future.

When you consider the contemporary hatred of knowledge and Enlightenment thinking, and the subliminal awareness that we have become unmoored and are basically failing as a nation, you have a rather potent brew on your hands.

The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary. And what about the very small percentage of Americans who see through this charade?

Clearly, the support for a non-frontier-chasing, nonimperialist America is quite miniscule in this country. There is no warding off the dark age; all the evidence points in that direction.



