

Final phase transition?

Three years ago American cultural historian **Morris Berman** published a fierce indictment of the end of the American age. But did Berman get it right? Cultural observer, **Tom De Zengotita** while admiring the reach of Berman's argument, councils caution. (Note, this piece was written some time before the last US election!)

Dark Ages America, The Final Phase of Empire
by Morris Berman, WW Norton, 2007

Dark Ages America; the Final Phase of Empire is a passionate indictment of American culture, American society—and American people. In anger and despair, Morris Berman assembles his bill of particulars, makes his case—and then makes it again. The central chapters are cogent, convincing, and accessible, and very valuable in consequence. In them, Berman reaches back to the country's origins and draws upon the history of its policies, foreign and domestic, with special emphasis on the century just past. He pulls together a vast array of sources to show that the United States cannot escape its share of responsibility for 9/11, no matter how stubbornly it may insist upon its ersatz innocence, rooted in ignorance and indifference toward the rest of the

world. I know of no single source one could turn to—or pass on—that tells this complex story as clearly as Berman does in these chapters.

With an anchoring gesture backwards towards imperial ventures of the 18th and 19th centuries, Berman outlines America's foreign policy since WWI and then describes in some detail the connections between US actions between WWII and the events of 9/11. He sets up the Cold War context generally, but rightly focuses on CIA engineered coups in Guatemala, Chile, and, most of all, Iran—and then, by way of a tragic rendering of the story of Israel, he describes US support for the Contras, for Saddam Hussein, and for the mujahadiin in Afghanistan in the 80s. When he brings us at last to the first Gulf war, 9/11, and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, it is impossible to avoid the thrust of the narrative. American empire has been a fact for a long time, and the invasion of Iraq, like the war in Vietnam, is no aberration. Indeed, Berman argues, it represents a culmination and a turning point, an assertion of unilateral authority that only seemed to occur at the zenith of US power. In reality, he says, it marks the beginning of the end, the fatal moment of hubristic overreach. Decline and fall are now inevitable.

That is Berman's thesis. And—though, of course, time will tell—his case is credible.

Berman weaves US economic interests into this story quite seamlessly but—and this is one of the book's best qualities—not reductively. Berman knows