# STRANGE ATTRACTION:
## STORIES OF IMPERIAL DECLINE

BY IAN WILLIAMS

One can almost apply the children's game of rock, paper, scissors to the end of Rome. Did that world collapse when people began building with oak instead of marble? Did a shortage of paper for bureaucrats wrap up the world of antiquity? Did new Hunnic technology in the shape of much-improved bows and arrows bring down the republic?

And that indeterminacy about the end of an empire applies equally to the question of its very existence. Is there an American empire? And if so, is it falling? What might bring America to its knees—dependence on Middle Eastern oil and Asian computers? Modernist architecture or megadeficits? Unlike the case with Rome, which had to wait several centuries for barbarian "apologists" to celebrate its otherwise universally lamented passing, the putative fall of the American empire has critics worldwide exulting in anticipation. Many Americans, on the other hand, are bemused at the suggestion that their country ever had an imperial role at all.

**Books discussed in this essay:**

*Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire*, by Morris Berman
W. W. Norton, 416 pages, $25.95

*The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, by Peter Heather
Oxford University Press USA, 576 pages, $40

*Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*, by Charles S. Maier
Harvard University Press, 384pages, $27.95

*Europe After Rome: A New Cultural History 500–1000*, by Julia M. H. Smith
Oxford University Press USA, 400 pages, $35

*Mohammed and Charlemagne*, by Henri Pirenne
Dover, 304 pages, $14.95

Illustration by Lisa Haney

The Roman Empire inevitably shapes not only how we view history, but also how we look at the present and future. The Roman self-assessment as the sole, legitimate civilized empire surrounded by "lesser breeds without the law," as Rudyard Kipling intoned in "Recessional" (1897), can be found deep in European tradition, and even deeper in its Anglo-American offshoot. Although the Roman Empire rather pitifully cowered behind the city walls of Constantinople (and a few enclaves elsewhere along the Mediterranean coast) by its official end in 1453, the fall of that city and the death of its last emperor, Constantine Paleaologus, reverberated throughout Europe. The victorious Ottoman Sultan Suleiman paid tribute to the potency of his victim's title by usurping it, and styling himself *Kaiser-i-Rum*, caesar of Rome.

But nothing becomes an empire like its fall. We look upon its works with a sense of despair that such a mighty social edifice could fall so completely. Whether it is the Anglo-Saxon elegist on the ruins of the Roman city of Bath ("giants made it"), or Edward Gibbon "musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter," or even Isaac Asimov's reflections on history in his *Foundation* trilogy, the fall of Rome is behind the almost omnipresent Ozymandian nostalgia that permeates Western intellectual life. Even Tolkien's imaginary Middle-earth is a wistful echo of post-imperial collapse.

Although many of us—myself included—share in this fascination, one has to admit how odd it is that our generally accepted apogee of civilization was in fact a military dictatorship based on brutal aggression, conquest, and slave trading, whose most memorable entertainments were forcing people to kill each other or setting wild beasts to dismember them in front of large audiences. Why do we remain perennially enthralled by the Roman legacy? Charles Maier, the author of *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*, speaks of "the dirty little secret of empire": many of us at heart are fascinated with the successful exercise of power, even if we have to drape it in the fig leaves and laurels of culture, law, and civilization. Joseph Conrad's Marlow ambivalently describes the imperial adventure this way in the brilliant opening passage from *Heart of Darkness*: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only." Needless to say, that supposedly redeeming quality of the "idea" has vexed several generations of critics. Maier refers to our fascination with contemporary manifestations of national power. This kind of power—in Latin, *imperium*, which Maier points out means "power and command"—usually drapes itself in the sanctity of historical precedent.

Decadence and moral turpitude are not necessarily accurate auguries for imperial success or failure. Rome's expansion did not take place during a golden age of Republican virtue, but rather came accompanied by a spectacular explosion of Republican vice.

Another reason for our fascination is the eminently Orwellian one: the successful exercise of power rewrites history. Rome so thoroughly controlled its literary present that it has successfully dominated future perspectives—and with few exceptions, the barbarian point of view has not come down to us. Literary merits aside, this might be comparable to a future generation learning about the current American superpower strictly from Fox Television docudrama transcripts. Even as nationalist Germans in their 19th-century Teutonic nostalgia raised monuments to Hermann, the victor over Augustus's legions, everything they knew of him was as Arminius, from the Roman histories. Despite such *völkisch* recovered memories, Emperor Wilhelm II took the Roman title caesar—Kaiser—in emulation of the people who spent a millennium in combat with his Germanic forbears. And it was Latin that they learned in German gymnasiums, not Gothic.

Peter Heather's book is a refreshing way to look at Rome—from the barbarian point of view. His previous works have focused on the Goths, whose arrival marked the beginning of the end for the empire, albeit, as he makes clear, that was not their original intention. He thus avoids the reflexive view of "Romans good, barbarians bad" that permeates classicist perceptions. "I have no truck with the idea (originating with the Romans themselves of course) that the Roman Empire represented a higher order of society, after whose demise the only possible way to go was downwards," he declares. He also avoids the common Anglo-Saxon perception that the curtain came down in 410 CE, when Alaric sacked

Rome and Honorius allegedly pulled Roman forces out of Britain. There were men and women born that year in Western Europe who died of old age, considering themselves Romans and living in an essentially Roman polity.

Declines and falls are usually retrospective definitions, and—apart from the perennial feeling, attested through history, that the younger generation is always in the process of going to the dogs—they are not always so apparent to contemporaries as they are afterward to systemizing historians with points to make. Gibbon, taking his cue from earlier polemicists, saw decadence and soft living as among the causes of the fall of Rome in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1788). Paradoxically, he saw an excess of Christianity as a major dynamic, while far more numerous Christian commentators saw the collapse as punishment for insufficient faith. Gibbon also saw a long decline preceding the fall. In fact, recent historical analysis such as Heather's suggests that the fall was not so inevitable—and that it was actually precipitated by a series of foolish imperial decisions that exacerbated economic and military changes. Heather, Henri Pirenne, Julia Smith, and others also suggest that for many people, possibly a majority, the Dark Ages were not quite as dark as classicists have persuaded us.

On the other hand, Morris Berman, who has written of our culture's impending doom before in *The Twilight of American Culture* (2000), has now stepped up the urgency of his analysis: the Dark Ages have already befallen America, presaging the imperial fall. His jeremiad berates fast food, Disneyland, modernist architecture, automobile-driven urban planning, and social paranoia. This catalog is convincing enough, and it echoes what many critics of contemporary American society have been saying for some time. But the biggest problem of all, as Berman sees it, is U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which he identifies as the "linchpin of the American downfall." This echoes earlier sentiments by such historians as Pirenne who, writing on the eve of World War II, saw the advent of Arab power in the Mediterranean as the real terminal point for Roman civilization in Western Europe.

While Berman accurately charts the disconnect between the economic, diplomatic, and social power of America and its ability to build and maintain its empire, despite the ample historiographic precedent to support his thesis, he is not on firm ground about the enervating influence of decadence and impoverished culture. Sad to say, decadence and moral turpitude are not necessarily accurate auguries for imperial success or failure. Rome's expansion did not take place during a golden age of Republican virtue, but rather came accompanied by a spectacular explosion of Republican vice. Corruption, predatory looting, savagery, and indeed conspicuous consumption characterized the Roman Empire during its most expansive imperial phase. In addition, since it was the senatorial class who wrote the histories, one can easily forget that the early emperors were champions of the plebs against the aristocracy, and consolidated their following with generous distributions of imperial loot. While some Romans clustered to hear Ovid or Virgil declaim their verses during the "Golden Age," far more of them—including the poets and statesmen—turned up at the Coliseum to watch violent, bloody spectacles. Moralists quite often miss the point that a successful imperial mindset precludes culture and morality as we usually accept them, involving as it does the invasion and conquering of foreign countries—not to mention the subsequent enslavement and exploitation of their peoples.

However, the innate hypocrisy of empire is that imperial powers usually claim to represent a superior morality to "the other," the so-called barbarians beyond the frontier who become a perverse justification for imperial power when they react ungratefully to attempts to dominate them. There are certainly echoes of that now in America's lonely hegemony as the world's sole superpower. Berman quotes Joseph Schumpeter's heavy irony, "Rome was always being attacked by evil-minded neighbors," and points out the parallels to a massively armed and preemptively aggressive America. In "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904), the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy explains how the concept of the Other helps define an empire. He describes messengers arriving at the imperial court to report on the disappearance of the threat:

> And now, what's going to happen to
> us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of
> solution.

In much of the American foreign policy establishment, there was similar consternation at the fall of the Soviet Union. The communists were, like Cavafy's barbarians, "a kind of solution." With the disappearance of Communism, the entity of "Islamic fundamentalism," more recently refined as "Islamofascism," has begun to fill the gap left by barbarians and Reds alike. As Berman sees it, our imminent imperial collapse has as much to do with the clumsiness of our response to the Arab region as it does with any inherent threat from

the Arabs themselves. Berman likens current U.S. policy in the Middle East to "a man with a headache convinced [that] he can make it go away by repeatedly hitting himself over the head with a hammer."

Charles Maier discusses at length the question of what precisely constitutes an empire, and he considers previous examples in order to assess the exact status of present-day American power. One salient point of comparison involves the notion of territorial frontiers—and the imperial need to protect such borders against those perceived to threaten them. But the reality of exercising imperial power is usually more complicated. He sees the American empire as having "multiple zones of control." These zones are "hegemonic" in Europe and Latin America—potentially direct, for example, in the Caribbean, and more or less covert in the places where the CIA exerts control by coup or proxy military occupation. The fuzzy forms of this kind of control are part of the Anglo-Saxon political tradition: at its height, the self-proclaimed British Empire had colonies, dependencies, dominions, mandates, and trucial states (those areas where the crown claimed to act in an advisory capacity only). Even in India, half the princely states were nominally independent. But no one was in any doubt that in the end, London called the shots. While British (and French) powers later supported modest efforts for the welfare of their imperial subjects, Washington is absolved of any obligation by the lack of a direct constitutional connection to—or acknowledgement of—any of its foreign dominions. Regarding the United States' variegated package of command and control, Maier provocatively suggests that "whether we deem it empire may well depend on its duration."

Some of the most interesting parts of Maier's book cover the brusque way in which Washington self-righteously dismantled the twin pillars, political and financial, of its own British predecessor's imperial house, with a view to inheriting the assets. Within two years of VE Day, Washington made its dollar loan conditional on London making the pound convertible. The resulting run on the Bank of England, followed two years later by devaluation, marked the beginning of a terminal decline of the pound as a reserve currency, and of the financial power that had underwritten British imperial might for two centuries. As Maier and others have shown, this supplanting of a rival and building an alternative empire was cloaked in anti-imperialist rhetoric, just as Rome and Macedonia depicted themselves as fighters against Asian despotism. In the face of less acceptable alternatives—such as Russian hegemony—the British reluctantly acquiesced in their own replacement as an imperial power and went remarkably quietly into that good night. As a palliative, they "built an entire postwar foreign policy on their own belief that they really do enjoy a special relationship [with the U.S.] based on Oxford hospitality and a willingness to commit manpower to common military efforts."

There are good reasons for the continuing British influence on thoughts about American empire. Not only were they English-speaking, but almost as soon as the British had an acknowledged empire, they were declining it along with Latin nouns in their elite public schools. Rudyard Kipling, bard of empire, was also the Cassandra who, informed with Rome's example, foresaw how it would end in "Recessional":

> Far-called, our navies melt away;
> On dune and headland sinks the fire:
> Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
> Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
> Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
> Lest we forget—lest we forget!

Despite such forewarnings, the British Empire, like Rome, showed a reluctance to turn the lights out as the end came. It persisted in an increasingly metaphysical form as both nominal subjects and rulers continued a set of polite not-quite fictions, but not-quite facts, either, to disguise the real decline. In 1914, London assumed with little challenge that the British declaration of war applied to the whole empire, including the self-governing dominions, and while in 1939 that was still generally true, De Valera's Eire—still technically part of the empire—remained neutral while several other dominions declared war in their own right. India and Pakistan could both remain Commonwealth members even as they fought wars with each other, both with generals speaking pukka British accents. Australia, technically ruled by the Queen, could fight in Vietnam, while British Premier Harold Wilson resisted LBJ's bullying and kept Britain out. Queen Elizabeth has no fewer than 16 ambassadors representing her various Commonwealth avatars in the United Nations.

By the time of the Falklands, even the old white dominions were sympathetic bystanders when Margaret Thatcher dispatched her hastily cobbled-together armada to teach the South Americans a lesson. With the exception of such atavistic blasts, the last trump for the old empire was Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson's financially motivated decision to pull British forces in 1956 from east of Suez. But the ghosts linger. What will future archeologists make of the 21st-century coins from around the globe that still show the

Queen's head—even in the republic of Fiji. In effect, the British Commonwealth, until late in the 20th century, gave Victoria's empire a shadowy half-life, very reminiscent of Western Europe in the years that were once mistakenly known as the Dark Ages. The global dispersion of the Queen's head on currency could almost persuade future archaeologists that the British Empire outshone the American imperium into the 21st century, which indicates the pitfalls of an overly formalistic approach to empire.

While the British tried to pretend to an empire even when it had gone, the United States has carefully disclaimed any such thing even when it manifestly has been and is now an imperial power. Both Maier and Berman wrestle with the quantum indeterminacy of the American empire, and with its anti-imperialist rhetoric, which, as they both point out, so often involved a determination to break down and supplant other empires (that were more honest in their self-description). Like the British in many parts of Africa and India, the United States has usually used indirect rule—but it has practiced imperium with gusto. Despite Teddy Roosevelt's enthusiastic espousal of the more bumptious aspects of Kiplingism and the "white man's burden,"—the latter inspired by the U.S. conquest of the Philippines—Kipling's reflections on the penalties and perils of the imperial adventure tend to be overlooked.

There is a big problem with this American denial of empire and history. Without an honest look at American campaigns, both overt and covert, we are condemned to living in a perpetually whitewashed present that leaves little room for thinking seriously about

# HEDGE-APPLES

BY KEITH RATZLAFF

First I have to talk about the sycamore,
its white vein among the brown oaks.
How it stays alive
by stripping its bark
as if willingly,
how it is too silvery,
too large-boned and Nordic,
too tall, too beautiful.
How even though it is native—
one of us—it would be the first
to leave town if it could.

But what I mean is the Hedge-apple,
the tree the French called
*bois d'arc* for its suppleness,
the English, Osage-orange
for its curdled fruit big as softballs.
How it migrated from Texas,
a diaspora. How it looks lost
today in Iowa, by the reservoir
in a circle of its own
freakish yellow seeds.

I wish I meant the nuthatch
gliding up an ash trunk,
or geese, their chaos on the pond,
their coherence in the air, or deer
loping through the trees like athletes
who think everyone loves them.

But I mean the Hedge-apple,
its strange orange wood
with the cowlick grain, its fruit
that bounces off the frozen ground
and can't be buried here.
Let me fall like that,
in the open, uncovered,
too yellow, too knobbed,
too useless for anyone to care,
too heavy, too far from home,
too ugly for the earth.
Please. Like that exactly.

the future. The wars of conquest, the genocide of native American populations, and the repopulation that took much of Mexico, or indeed the Philippines, may have been euphemized as Manifest Destiny, but until Americans understand that it looked then and looks now like imperial aggression to the defeated—or, indeed, to bystanders—they will not really be able to understand how much of the world perceives the United States of America. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this imperial abnegation on the part of the indisputably imperial power of the age is that it makes it all the more difficult to detect signs of the end. As Berman notes, in some detail, there are clear signs of imperial overreach for a nation that spends half the world's military budget—and has to borrow to do it. In the end, Rome simply could not afford the huge military machine it had developed, and its attempts to maintain it led to increasingly desperate gambles. The parallels are obvious to all but a society that has Panglossianism as its state religion.

Indeed, Heather's book shows just how much of Rome's collapse was fiscal as it was military. He does so in a lively and engaging style calculated to annoy the more abstruse scholastics, both of the Classicist and the Modern sociological schools. He points out that while the provincial elites had wholeheartedly adopted Romanness, most of the population lived at barely subsistence level: "In political terms, the number of people benefiting from Empire's existence was small." In fact, that was one reason for the wholehearted adoption of imperial standards by the provincial elites. The massive military machine existed to put physical surety behind legal guarantees of landowners' property rights. In the third and fourth centuries, the need to maintain that military apparatus led to a centralization of government, and landowners with ambitions increasingly realized them in the bureaucracy of empire. As with China and, later, Britain, the qualifications for social and fiscal promotion were an expensively acquired knowledge of the classics, and a familiarity with a Latin that was already archaic, compared with the vernacular versions spoken in the camps and streets.

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Unconsciously emulating Rome's imperial practice, the reformed "public schools" of the British high imperial era offered scholarships "on merit," meaning proficiency in Latin and Greek, which presupposed an expensive and therefore exclusive grounding in them. Similarly, the costs for citizens like St. Augustine of such an expensive education assured an oligarchy with some internal features of meritocracy.

Heather points out the degree to which the empire generated changes in its neighbors. Trade, subsidies to tribal chiefs, and the need for slaves and military manpower transferred techniques and capital over the lines. With few exceptions, the barbarians who came over the border had more in common with Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande than with the archetypal forces of barbarism and chaos that lurk in the back of our historical imagination. They wanted a place in the sun, and usually they could negotiate their immigration on mutually acceptable terms with the imperial authorities.

By the end of the fourth century, their desire to get the walls of the empire behind them was greatly exacerbated by the arrival of the Huns, a tribe of barbarians from central Asia. Heather concludes that the Huns' new technology made the difference. Of course, in any contest between settled peasants and nomad pastoralists, in the short term the latter have major advantages—they can always ride away, leaving the farmers dead in the smoking ruins of their villages. To that, the Huns added a bow that was not only composite, but designed specifically for mounting an assault while riding full speed on horseback. It was longer than earlier horse bows, but asymmetrical so that the lower half would not tangle in the horse and its accoutrements. A small historical detail, perhaps, but one that forced many a Goth to cross the Danube in search of asylum rather than loot. (In fact, the looting was done mostly by a local Roman commander named Lupicinus while Emperor Valens's army was busy to the east, fighting the Parthians.)

Former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once noted that neither the Roman Empire nor the United States had any patience for diplomacy, which is "perceived by an imperial power as a waste of time and prestige and a sign of weakness." Heather suggests it was as much a failure of Roman diplomacy to adapt to changed circumstances that led to the end, as

it was of military power. The peace pact that followed the disastrous (for the Romans) battle of Adrianople, in which the mistreated Goths successfully took their revenge, was as important for the precedent as for the effects. The Goths now provided armies and not just individual recruits. Even so, Heather points out, although "the traditional integrity of the Roman state had been breached," Rome was "still a long way from imperial collapse." In fact, the empire struck back vigorously and often, for more than a century. If Gibbon is taken as a guide and we accept the Byzantine claims to succession, that century becomes more than a millennium. Rejecting "the old game of singling out a single date for unique significance," Heather sees in the years before the deposition of the last Western emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476 CE "an extraordinary rush of events that saw the Empire go from somewhere to nowhere in less than a decade," which he considers the culmination of elements set in motion by Hunnic pressure a century before.

More than military defeat, the invasions eroded the resource and tax base for the Roman state and reduced its flexibility and ability to respond. Heather points out that patriotism was a negotiable quality for the landed elite, who rapidly came to terms with the new military commanders, usually "barbarians" who moved in. On the other hand, archaeological evidence suggests that the late empire, far from being decadent, overtaxed, and unproductive, was in fact enjoying comparative prosperity, and agriculture was enjoying a boom.

Local Roman elite acquiescence in the barbarian takeover was easier because so little changed, particularly at first. The newly arrived tribes with their kings maintained the structures of the Roman state, in fact probably with more fiscal economy, since they lived off land allocated to them, rather than taxation as had their Roman military predecessors. Most of them even acknowledged the "sovereignty" of successive Roman emperors.

Heather concludes ringingly that Rome's "Germanic neighbors had responded to its power in ways that the Romans could never have foreseen. There is in all this a pleasing denouement. By virtue of its unbounded aggression, Roman Imperialism was ultimately responsible for its own destruction." However, I suspect that he has sacrificed his own balance for a memorable conclusion, albeit one that harmonizes well with Berman's predictions for the United States.

Rome had created its successors; the enemy had indeed become us. Across Western Europe, Roman law, taxes, and education remained the basis of the society that directly succeeded actual Roman political power. The so-called barbarian successors saw themselves in Roman terms, and in most cases ended up speaking Latin.

One characteristic of late antiquity's Latin composition is an overly ornate and easily parodied writing style, often feigning erudition, and which bears a remarkable similarity to modern academic sociological and literary-critical writing. It is sad that Julia Smith, a person of genuine erudition and with an interesting story to tell, should obscure *Europe After Rome* with the stylistic tropes of modern academia, not least since it often seems so extraneous to her content and to much of writing. For example, "In 500 [CE] Europe was post-imperial, but not thereby post-Roman," is a lapidary summary of the argument she shares with Heather, as compared with the sesquipedalian obviousness that says writing "encodes speech in a widely shared repertoire of visual signs that represent the sounds that combine to form words." This would exclude Chinese pictograms, but you see the point. Occasional clunky prose aside, Smith maps with an engaging mixture of anecdote and analysis just how the early medieval age grew organically out of late antiquity without a crash, nor even much of a whimper, as societies adjusted to the new circumstances. Indeed, her panoramic view of the period shows the complexities of the cultures, which, if monetarily disadvantaged in comparison with the gold standard Roman era, still did at least an equally good job of feeding their people.

It is somewhat surprising that neither Smith—nor Heather, for that matter—refer in their works to the historian Henri Pirenne, whose book *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937) may inadvertently bring a cheer to the political scientist Samuel Huntington and his fellow fans of the clash-of-civilizations theory. Pirenne, whose work still provokes debate 70 years after his death, saw the disintegration of Rome not with the arrival and dominance of the northern barbarians, but with the arrival of the Muslim Arabs in the seventh century. Pirenne demonstrated that Arab control of the Mediterranean broke down the trading world of Western Europe. While the Germanic invaders became Christians, the Arabs brought their faith with them, and even if, especially in the early days, Islam looked simply like yet another Christian heresy, its fundamentalism militated against absorption. The Arabs appropriated Roman (and Greek) technology and methods, but they maintained a distinct identity that prevented even the more token acceptances of Rome's weak authority.

After the Arabs seized control of the Mediterranean, spices, paper, oil, silk, and many other previously common commodities disappeared from the records and tax rolls of the West. In a precursor of contemporary vestigial British Commonwealth ties, the Frankish kings had minted Roman coins with imperial images right up to the beginning of the seventh century. After the Arabs, they moved from the gold standard to a silver-based currency—and inscribed images of their own heads on them. "Gold resumed its place in the monetary system only when spices resumed theirs in the normal diet," Pirenne points out. Commerce provided liquidity for an economy otherwise restricted to local subsistence with payment of dues in kind.

Pirenne even suggests that the disruption of the papyrus supply effectively halted the old Roman administration that had hitherto kept the successor kingdoms solvent. Hugely more expensive parchment and vellum were now the writing materials of choice, and they were too scarce to use for interoffice memos. A paper-dependent bureaucracy was surely heading for rapid extinction, not least since many of the commodities it was recording and taxing were also disappearing. As Smith points out, producing one volume of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* required the skins of thirty dead animals, and the Lindisfarne Gospels implied the slaughter of no fewer than 150 calves.

Insofar as the Dark Ages were dark, they may have been so because paper did not survive, and our knowledge of their time and the preceding world of antiquity depends very much on the choices that scribes and patrons made about what was worth transcribing onto more durable vellum. Apart from the Christian texts, those choices reflected the classics of elite education, which of course took the Roman self-assessment as, well, gospel. Despite Roman self-absorption, their law, literature, administrative standards, and even economic practices survived by centuries the end of direct military and political power.

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Even so, the idea of "after us, darkness" remains one of the more potent imperial myths. Sadly, mere facts are unlikely to dispel such a deeply engrained and powerful metaphor.

There are many lessons from Rome particularly germane to contemporary Americans. One of the most important is that the fall of an empire is not necessarily the end of civilization. People who disagree with us, or compete with us, are not necessarily barbaric. However, 9/11 and its aftermath revealed the presence and power of a dedicated group in the United States clearly imbued with apocalyptic visions of imperial fall. Berman quotes the poet Robert Lowell to make his point about the consequences of decisions made in the name of empire "as we enter the Dark Ages in earnest":

> Pity the planet, all joy gone
> from this sweet volcanic cone;
> peace to our children when they fall
> in small war on the heels of small
> war—until the end of time
> to police the earth, a ghost
> orbiting forever lost
> in our monotonous sublime.

This is a poetic but apt description of the Defense Planning Guidance (a policy statement of the U.S. Department of Defense) and the works of the Project for the New American Century, which megalomaniacally consider how to continue American military imperium in the face of declining economic power. Maier points out: "The Pax Romana, the Pax Britannica, and presumably the Pax Americana are purchased with blood in the decades of their creation and dismantling. Whether the order they guarantee in the interim is worth the intervals of violence depends on how long the period of stability lasts." Sadly, while there may well be an Imperium Americanum, the last five years show few signs of a pax to accompany it.

The evidence from Britain—and, indeed, from fifth-century Rome—would suggest that the majority of Americans will take some time to notice that their day has been and already gone. Indeed, the empire will fall with many Americans never admitting that it ever existed, even though they will certainly notice the difference. To the influential, consciously imperial minority in the United States that revels in its power, Maier cautions that

> for all the rhetoric of a "burden," it is often psychologically fulfilling for those who run it and provides a good living for those who justify it. It is not easy to give it up or to see one's larger-than-life international status reduced to the mundane distributive issues of the post-imperial state. Nonetheless, as the British and the Dutch have learned, and as Americans shall eventually have to as well, there can be a rewarding civic existence once the hegemonic or imperial hour has passed. ●