

## MORRIS BERMAN

Dark Ages in the U.S.

*Elliott Bay Bookstore, Seattle, WA 4 November 2011*

Morris Berman is a cultural historian and critic. He has taught at universities in North America and Europe. He is an award-winning author. Among his many books are “Twilight of American Culture,” “Dark Ages America,” and “Why America Failed.”

Despite the great pressure to conform in the U.S., to celebrate the U.S. as the best system in the world, the nation does not lack for critics. The last two decades have seen numerous works criticizing U.S. foreign policy, U.S. domestic policy, in particular the economy, the American educational system, the court system, the military/media/corporate influence over American life, and so on. I’ve learned a lot from reading these books. But two things in particular, at least in my view, are lacking and have a very hard time making it into the public eye—partly because Americans are not trained to think in a holistic or synthetic fashion, and partly because the sort of analysis I have in mind is too close to the bone, it’s too difficult for Americans to hear. It’s not a question of IQ; it’s on a kind of an ontological basis. It’s primal.

The first thing that these works lack is an integration of the various factors that are tearing the nation apart. In other words, these studies are institution-specific. You can read works on how the educational system doesn’t work, problems with the military, the economy, and so on. All that’s typical. The second thing I find lacking is a relationship to the culture at large, that is, to the values and behaviors of Americans on a daily basis. As a result, for me, these critiques are rather superficial; they don’t really go to the root of the problem.

The avoidance involved enables the work to be optimistic, and that places them, in fact, in the American mainstream. The authors often conclude their studies with practical recommendations as to how the particular institutional dysfunctions can be rectified. As a result, they’re not much of a threat. It’s usually a mechanical analysis with a mechanical solution. If the authors were to realize that these problems don’t exist in a vacuum but are related to all the other problems and are finally rooted in the nature of American culture itself, in its DNA, so to speak, the prognosis would not be so rosy, I don’t think.

Two examples for me. There are many one could take, but two examples for me are Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky. I admire them greatly. They’ve done a lot to raise domestic awareness in the U.S. of what’s going on to show that foreign and domestic policy are both wrong-headed and head in the wrong direction, dead ends, whatever. But both of these writers assume that the problem is coming from the top, in other words, from the Pentagon and the corporations. That’s basically the assumption they have. That’s partly true, of course. I don’t

deny that. But the problem for me is that it rests on a theory of false consciousness. In other words, the belief is that these institutions have pulled the wool over the eyes of the average American, that basically the average citizen is ultimately rational and well intentioned. I don’t know who they’ve been talking to. Maybe they haven’t been talking to anybody and that’s the problem. I don’t know. The idea is if you pull the wool off the eyes of these deluded individuals, the citizenry will spontaneously awaken, it will commit itself to some sort of populist, in the case of Moore, or, in the case of Chomsky, democratic socialist vision. Is that happening with Occupy Wall Street? That’s something we might want to discuss. What is going on and what is the significance of that?

But my question is, what if it turns out that the wool is the eyes? The so-called average citizen, as far as I can make out, in the U.S. really does, want, to quote Janis Joplin, a Mercedes-Benz—that’s the great American dream—and is probably grateful to corporations for supplying us with the oceans of consumer goods, to the Pentagon for protecting us from those awful Arabs lurking in the Middle East. So then, if you see that, then the possibilities of fundamental change appear to be quite small, because what would be called for in that case is a completely different set of institutions and a very different type of culture. And I doubt there’s much chance of that occurring. Even in the case of the Wall Street protests, we have to say, what’s the aim of that? America is what it is.

Surveying that critical scene, then, I find very few writers who see things synthetically or as an integrated whole and who further relate this to the nature of American culture itself. That being said, there are a few. I’m thinking of Sacvan Bercovitch, who wrote *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, or Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, or Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy*. The titles, I think, are very revealing. It’s also the case that a few eminent historians come to mind. C. Vann Woodward, William Appleman Williams, David Potter, Jackson Lears. There are those who are radical, in the sense of going down to the root of things. There are not many, but they do exist.

Bercovitch, for example, is a Canadian who taught American studies for decades at Harvard. He argues that as early as 1630 the colonists remain imbued with the idea that they were establishing a new nation under the direction of providence and reenacting the drama of the

Exodus in the Old Testament. So crossing the Atlantic was equivalent to crossing the River Jordan. They were entering the new world, Canaan, flowing with milk and honey. They rejected the decadence of England and Europe in general, that is, ancient Egypt. And they established a new order, the new Jerusalem. And all of this in accordance with God's will. Walter Hixson, a historian at the University of Akron, claims that American identity originally coalesced around the idea of the other, whoever it was, as being savage, and thus that our identity has always been based on war. We never really negotiated anything with anyone, as other nations found out, usually too late. Chris Hedges amplifies this notion by arguing that war gives Americans a reason for being, a meaning to their lives.

All of this, to me, is much more sophisticated than some theory of false consciousness, some belief that Americans are fundamentally well intentioned and rational and it's just a question of removing the wool from their eyes. Instead, it essentially argues that we are and have been since our earliest days hopelessly neurotic, and that the belief that we can pursue a truly different path at this stage in the game is quite deluded and would require yanking out the American psyche by its roots. Ain't gonna happen.

I like that think that I fall in this latter category of historians, only because I think that it's this version of American history that's faithful to reality. There are a number of themes we could get into at this point, and I have examined some of them in the trilogy I wrote on the American empire. But you don't want me speaking for 12 or 14 hours, I'm sure, so let me just take one idea and elaborate on that.

There's an essay in this collection, *A Question of Values*, called "Locating the Enemy." In that essay I take an idea from Hegel, that of negative identity, by which Hegel did not mean a bad identity, he meant reactive. That is to say, a negative identity is one that's formed in opposition to something or someone else. It enables you to develop very strong ego boundaries, always pushing against an enemy. But since it's formed against opposition, says Hegel, it has no real content. It's just basically form. As a result, it looks strong, but it's actually weak because its self-definition is relational. "What would a master be," says Hegel, in a very famous passage in his work, "What would a master be without a slave?" Take away the slave, the master would have nothing to define themselves by.

So what I argue is that this concept of negative identity applies particularly well to the history of the American continent. Opposition, in whatever form, provided the colonists with a guiding narrative that enabled them to make sense of their lives. And since, as Bercovitch easily demonstrates, this was a religious narrative, as we just talked about from the Exodus, it didn't take much to turn that into a Manichaeian one, in

which the enemy, whoever he was, was the darkest of the dark. The target of this self-righteous hatred has metamorphosed over time, but the form, that of Manichaeian opposition, has remained the same. So native Americans were quickly seen as little more than savages, an obstacle to "civilization," and treated accordingly. Every Thanksgiving, we all sit down, carve up a turkey, and celebrate the genocide and near extinction of an entire indigenous people. Pass the squash.

The next target was the British, which surfaced during the American Revolution, although this was already present, obviously, when the Pilgrims left for America in 1620. Britain was decadent and corrupt, in the view of the colonists, hierarchical, organic, while we, citizens of the future, the United States, were essentially not British, not European, but republican, that is to say, antimonarchical. The terror and brutality that was visited upon the loyalists, which you should know was nearly a half a million people at that time, that is, roughly 30% of the population on the continent, those who did not go along with the simplistic black-and-white agenda, almost never gets discussed in American history books. It does in Canadian ones, it does in British ones, but never in American ones, or rarely. But it has been recorded. Constant intimidation, tarring and feathering, confiscation or burning of property, being driven from their homes, frequently murdered as "traitors." The most recent study and probably the most comprehensive is called *Liberty's Exiles*. It's by Maya Jasanoff, and probably they have it somewhere upstairs. There are very few American books in this genre, because they violate the myth of American innocence, which is very important for Americans in their own minds.

Moving right along, we come to Mexico, in 1846-48. This involved provoking a phony war and then stealing more than half of the entire country. Remember the Alamo. As in the case of the American Indians, it was convenient to cast the Mexican people as ignorant and undeveloped, as savages of some sort, lacking the go-go energy of U.S. capitalism. And, frankly, that stereotype persists down to the present day. Just read the American papers about drug crimes and all that sort of stuff. It's like 10% of what's going on in Mexico, if that. But that's the way that the U.S. likes to see Mexico. As in the case of the Native Americans, Mexicans were seen as being in the way of "progress"—and I use that word in quotes—of American manifest destiny, again, ordained by God.

The truth is that the Mexican government was quite aware of who they were dealing with. In the late 1820s, a Mexican commission wrote a secret report saying that Americans were "an ambitious people, always ready to encroach upon their neighbors, without a spark of good faith." We have that now. It's not classified anymore. Even without WikiLeaks I was able to get this and tell you about it. It's actually quoted in a book by Robert Kagan called *Dangerous Nation*. Virtually everybody viewed the

U.S. in this way, including the Spanish, the French, the Russians, and the British. French diplomats called the American populace “warlike” and “restless.”

Shortly after, that same framework was applied by the North to the American South. It was a lazy, do-nothing society sitting in the way of progress. As I discuss in a chapter in *Why America Failed*, it was not northern opposition to slavery that triggered the Civil War. Later on, obviously, it became an important unifying theme or rallying cry. I’m sure that critics of the book will say I’m pro-slavery or something. I can see it now, really. But these people are not that bright, and they’re not into nuance. It’s not their thing. But it could well be argued that without the war slavery would have continued for several decades more. Probably that’s the case, although some historians have argued that it’s not true. But the more fundamental conflict was a clash of cultures. It was the slow, easy way of the South as opposed to the restless economic expansion of the North both sides regarded the other as the devil incarnate. And the result was the loss of 625,000 lives and a massive destruction of the South, epitomized by Sherman’s march to the sea, which was violent beyond belief. Those scars still exist. As far as the South goes, the war is not really over. You just have to travel through the South to see that. The resentment runs very deep. And it’s because their way of life was never acknowledged as having any validity at all.

The Germans were next, although that’s an opposition that seems thoroughly justified. We got that one right. And then the godless communists, of course. The conversion of the Russians from ally to enemy occurred almost overnight. And it isn’t difficult to see why. With the Axis powers out of the picture, there had to be an enemy in place to fill the resulting vacuum. And although the USSR as a regime was quite repressive—we all know that—it did not, as George Kennan was later to argue, have to be cast as the ultimate enemy, because its real goal was in securing its borders. That was really it. KGB files that came open after the fall of the Soviet Union revealed that Russia’s real fear was not of the U.S., but of a rearmed Germany. That was really the major thing in their minds that they were scared about. However, there was no attempt to negotiate anything with Russia. As Stalin pointed out as early as 1946, for the Americans negotiation actually meant capitulation. That was the American idea of negotiation, that the other side simply lie down, roll over. In any case, the Cold War kept the U.S. busy for decades. And the so-called perimeter defense, which held that any disturbance in the world was a cause for U.S. military action, led to the disasters of Iran, Guatemala, Vietnam, Chile, and so on. A long and unhappy list, well documented by Stephen Kinzer in his book *Overthrow* and William Blum in his book *Killing Hope*.

Of course, the psychological structure of negative identity led to a crisis when Soviet Union finally

collapsed. Suddenly we had no one to define ourselves against. The Gulf War of 1991 helped fill the gap for a time, but the Clinton years were largely meaningless. Without an enemy, we had no idea who we were, so we filled the space with O. J. Simpson and Monica Lewinsky, and that sort of kept us busy for several years.

Finally, the Islamic world did us the greatest favor imaginable: It attacked us. Overnight, terrorism replaced communism as the crucial buzzword. Bush Jr., like Reagan in characterizing the Soviet Union, said this is ultimate evil, it’s a contest between good and evil, it’s a crusade, not a good word to use if you’re talking to the Arab world. There was no possible discussion of American foreign policy in the Middle East as having played a role in these events. In fact, the notion was tantamount to treason. Susan Sontag, who said it in *The New Yorker* shortly after, lost her job. Even today, you can’t talk in those terms. These people are evil and insane, end of discussion. They’re savages.

To this day, under the Obama administration, you should be aware, your tax dollars pay for workshops that teach the police and the military that Islam is an evil religion out to destroy America, and which must therefore be destroyed first. I don’t know if you’re aware of this. But if you don’t believe me, go to [truthdig.com](http://truthdig.com), Chris Hedges’ column of May 9, in which he names names: who are giving these workshops, how much they’re receiving, to whom they are giving these workshops, the funding. It’s all there. Once again, civilization and the savages. That’s the model.

Kennan tried to warn the American government that making a monolith out of communism was a big mistake, that there were huge conflicts, for example, between Russia and China. But since Manichaeism requires cardboard figures, American presidents, from Truman on, paid no attention to his advice.

A similar thing now exists with respect to Islam. It turns out that only about 10% of American Muslims are religious. In this sense they’re like the Jews: It’s basically social. You go to the mosque, you meet people. That’s really what it’s about. Of the 10% who are religious, the tiniest minority are jihadists. But when your identity is a negative one in the Hegelian sense, this type of nuance has to be kept out of everyone’s consciousness. For example, Americans tend to regard Pakistan as a dark and awful place, the country that hid Osama bin Laden and protected him from American troops and so on or that harbors al-Qaeda operatives—hence our drone strikes in that country that mostly kill civilians, making the president really a war criminal, basically—or that it’s in league with the Taliban and so on.

What would Americans say if they read in the newspapers—and you can’t in American newspapers. Just last June I happened to be in London and I picked up a copy of *The Guardian*. There was an article about a very popular TV show in Pakistan that’s run by a sort of Jon

Stewart type comedian. He pokes fun at the government and at Muslim fundamentalism. One would not think that. He hosts groups—there's one group that has a song called "Burqa Woman," which is based on Roy Orbison's song, "Pretty Woman." It's the same music. So that song goes, "Burqa woman, walking down the street/Burqa woman, with your sexy feet," Because that's all you can see. This did not get picked up by the American press, because basically it complicates the picture. Then the enemy is the not totally black, you see. It would open up a questioning of who we are beyond a nation in opposition to something, and that means the game would be up. So we don't want that.

Marshal McLuhan once wrote that "All forms of violence are quests for identity." I love that line. "All forms of violence are quests for identity." More recently, David Shulman, who is a professor of humanities at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote, "There is nothing more precious than an enemy, especially one whom you have largely created by your own acts and who plays some necessary role in the inner drama of your soul." Boy, does that characterize an awful lot of what's going on.

What is the American soul? Do we actually have one? It's an interesting question. Beyond opposition, what defines the U.S. This emptiness at the center makes our quest for identity especially violent, especially acute. The policy we pursue is always one of scorched earth, of shock and awe. That's how we handle things. That means, at least to me, that in the fullness of time, it was we who proved to be the savages, not the savages. It's interesting that the theme of Paul Auster's novels, if you've read any of his work, is that American society is incoherent that, it lacks a true identity, and that it's nothing more than a hall of mirrors. He's been saying that for decades, and by and large Americans don't know who Paul Auster is and they don't read him. Auster is tremendously popular in Europe. He's been translated into more than 20 languages. Those are the bulk of his sales. Americans are not interested in this kind of perception.

Criticism is not possible in a Manichaeic world, of course, and the U.S. is very good at marginalizing writers who attempt to write a critique of the country in a fundamental way. Overt censorship, as a result, is not really necessary. I get this question all the time when I talk in Latin America. Aren't your works censored? I said, there's no need for it, the flood of information is so huge, how am I even going to get noticed? It would be like a sledgehammer to kill a fly. Why would they even bother? Famous last words.

The result is that of, as in the famous Goya painting—which, if you go to Madrid, go to the Prado—"Saturn Devouring His Son," "*Saturno devorando a su hijo*." it's really powerful. 1818. It's really a horrifying painting. You have to see this. But the U.S. is now imploding; it's now eating itself alive. That's what's been going on. I argue this in *Dark Ages America*, in 2006. The

data for this that have accumulated since then are quite enormous. There is not a single American institution that is not seriously corrupt. I could document this for hours, but, again, you've got other things to do. Let me just cite a few examples.

First, Ronald Dworkin, one of America's leading intellectuals, did an essay a few months ago in *The New York Review of Books* showing that the Supreme Court has become a court of men and not of laws. In the case of five out of the nine justices, he says, decisions are made in advance in a right-wing political direction, and then the justification for the decisions is trotted out after the fact, even though it often violates the Constitution. What kind of a court is this? It's a kangaroo court.

Number two, in the book *Academically Adrift*, sociologist Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa report that after two years of college 45% of American students haven't learned anything, and after four years 36% haven't learned anything. Included in what they didn't learn is any kind of critical, analytical reasoning ability, skills. They don't have it. They don't know what the difference is between an argument and an opinion, and they don't know what evidence is. They literally have no idea. Most of the students, when asked, defined their college experience as social rather than academic or intellectual. That was what they were there for: to meet people, make friends, drink a lot of alcohol, and so on and so forth. Half the students in the study said they hadn't taken a single course in the previous semester that required more than 20 pages of writing. A third said they hadn't taken a course requiring more than 40 pages of reading. What were they doing? Watching videos?

A Marist Poll released July 4 of this year showed that 42% of American adults are unaware that the U.S. declared its independence in 1776. Forty two percent. And when you go to the below-30 age group, it rises to 69%. Twenty-five percent of Americans don't know from which country the U.S. seceded. Bulgaria? Ghana? A recent *Newsweek* poll revealed that 73% of Americans can't give the official version of why we fought the Cold War, let alone the real version. But they can't give the official version. And 44% are unable to say what the Bill of Rights is. A poll taken in the Oklahoma public school system—this is just a few months ago—turned up the fact that 77% of the students didn't know who George Washington was. Seventy-seven percent. In a number of cities libraries have closed for lack of funding, but I also think it's probably for lack of interest. Who wants to bother with books?

The new high school curriculum in American history in Texas does not have any units on Washington, Adams, or Thomas Jefferson, but it does have a study unit on Estee Lauder. It was like reading *The Onion*. When I first read that, I said, Oh, this is a joke. But satire has become reality in the U.S. I saw it, I think, in *Common Dreams*. I looked more closely. That article appeared in *The Austin*

*Statesman*. It really is true. And I've been thinking of writing a letter to the board of education in Texas suggesting that they eliminate the unit on Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which I'm sure they don't have anyway, and put in a major unit on Kim Kardashian. You laugh, but it's only a couple of years away. Satire becomes reality in the U.S. Why not? You go to [cnn.com](http://cnn.com) and there articles about Kim's rear-end, her psoriasis, her wedding, her divorce. Why not? If Estee Lauder can make, I don't see why Kim should be excluded.

Three, in the aftermath of the crash of 2008, the very people who promulgated the ideology that led to the crash got appointed the President's economic advisers. The fox now guards the henhouse. Lawrence Summers, Tim Geithner, Ben Bernanke, the whole crowd. Not a single Wall Street financial leader has faced jail. Major corporate figures who brought the economy down were, in fact, awarded huge bonuses. Some secured prestigious appointments at places such as Johns Hopkins University and the Brookings Institution. I couldn't get a job as a janitor at the Brookings Institution. Let's be clear about that. Meanwhile, the very practices that led to the crash, such as derivatives, credit default swaps, and all that sort of stuff are now being pursued with more vigor than they were prior to the crash. It's not that they say, "Oh, we can't do this." No, no. It's more of the same. Paul Krugman asks, somewhat rhetorically, "How is it that in the wake of the obvious failure of casino capitalism and neoliberalism, the blame for the crash is not put on the banks, which received, finally, bailouts of roughly \$19 trillion, and the corporations, but on the public sector." So you have the crash because of the private sector and all the blame directed to the government.

Fourth, between 1987 and 2007 the number of Americans that are so disabled by mental disorders that they qualified for supplementary security income or Social Security disability insurance increased 2.5 times, so that one out of every six Americans now falls into this category. For children the increase is 35 times during the same period. That's our future. Mental illness is now the leading cause of disability among the child population of the United States. A survey of American adults conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health over 2001-2003 found that 46% of them met the criteria of the American Psychiatric Association for being mentally ill. Ten percent of Americans over the age of 6 now take antidepressants. Actually, it stretches back to at least age 4 now. Toddlers are taking Prozac. And I read elsewhere that in the global market, in terms of volume of sales, American consumption of antidepressants is two-thirds of the entire world's consumption. So here's a country with less than 5% of the world's population taking 67% of the antidepressant drugs. This has got to tell you something about the U.S.

Some time ago—actually, it was a friend of mine in England, when I was there. She is an art consultant. She

lived for many years in New York City. She bought a plaque when she was there. There's no Woolworth's, but it was a store like Woolworth's. The plaque says, "Evenings at 7:00 in the Parish Hall." That's the title. And underneath it it says, "Monday, alcoholics; Tuesday, abused spouses, Wednesday; eating disorders; Thursday, drug addiction; Friday, teen suicide, Saturday, soup kitchen; and then finally, the Sunday sermon at 9:00 a.m., 'America's Joyous Future.'" Yes, we have some joyous future coming up.

Five, the infrastructure in the U.S. is crumbling and there's no money to fix it. Also, in some cases ideological opposition to fixing it is very strong. Apparently the levies of New Orleans are in the same shape now that they were before Katrina. I read an article some time ago about the attempt to address this. I don't know whether it was on the municipal level of New Orleans or the state level. I can't remember exactly. And I didn't save the article. But the councilmen stated that they did not want to move on it because it would require a cooperative effort, and this, they said, meant socialism. So apparently working together is equivalent to socialism, and it's better to risk another Katrina than to have that. It doesn't get dumber than that.

Number six, the national debt now stands at more than \$14 trillion. The official figure for poverty and hunger is 45 million citizens, but in fact that's based on criteria that are pretty much obsolete. In fact, something like 200 million Americans live from paycheck to paycheck, if they can get a job. As far as that goes, don't believe those figures about 9% unemployment. It's close to 20% in real figures. This is verified by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. If you go to the Web site of the U.S. Department of Labor, you will find it. It's like 18%, which means that one out of five Americans is out of work, and economists say there's little chance they're going to find it for another 10 years. Not a rosy prospect.

Seven, the President now has the right, although it violates the Geneva Accords, to designate any American citizen or, actually, anyone on the planet an enemy and have him or her assassinated. In fact, that recently happened on September 30. Obama had two American citizens, Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, murdered. And one can say, "Well, they were al-Qaeda supporters," and so on. First of all, that's not proven. And the second thing is, so what if they were? The Constitution says you have a right to have your day in court, not a right to get rubbed out. There's no worry about that on the part of the government. And furthermore, American citizens don't care. It doesn't make any difference to them.

In an essay entitled "America Has Disappeared"—this was posted on Truthdig 18 July—Chris Hedges writes, "Torture, prolonged detention without trial, sexual humiliation, rape, disappearance, extortion, looting, random murder, and abuse have become, as in Argentina during the Dirty War, part of our own subterranean world

of detention sites and torture centers. ...We know of at least 100 detainees who died during interrogation at our “black sites”.... There are probably many, many more whose fate has never been made public. Tens of thousands of Muslim men have passed through our clandestine detention centers without due process. ‘We tortured people unmercifully,’ admitted retired General Barry McCaffrey. We probably murdered dozens of them..., both the armed forces and the C.I.A.’” So tens of thousands of Americans are being held in super-maximum security prisons now, where they’re deprived of contact with anyone and psychologically destroyed. Undocumented workers are rounded up and they vanish from their families for weeks or months. Militarized police units break down the doors of some 40,000 Americans every year and haul them away in the dead of night as though they were enemy combatants. And, of course, as you know, habeas corpus no longer exists.

Once again, Philip Green comments on this. “A people that accepts as a normal course of events the bombing of civilians, torture, kidnapping, indefinite detention, assassinations, secret governments at home and covert wars abroad has lost touch with the moral basis of civil society.” A good description of us today, I think.

Eight, the U.S. military, which soaks up 50% of the discretionary budget, is apparently unable to win two wars in two small countries. In fact, it has not had a serious victory since World War II, after which it decided to play it safe and stick to tinpot dictators and minor nations.

Number nine, an U.S. intelligence report released in 2007 called “Global Trends 2025”—you can download it on the Web—predicts a steady decline in American dominance over the coming decades, with U.S. leadership eroding “at an accelerating pace in political, economic, and cultural arenas.” To my knowledge, the President has never mentioned this report, nor has anyone in public office.

Ten, on July 19 of 2010, the *Washington Post* reported that 854,000 people work for the National Security Agency, the NSA, in 33 building complexes amounting to 17 million square feet of space in the D.C. metro area. Every day collection systems at the NSA intercept and store 1.7 billion emails and phone calls of American citizens in what amounts to a vast domestic spy system. Writing in *The New Yorker* on May 23 of this year, Jane Mayer reported that the NSA has three times the budget of the CIA and has the capacity to download every 6 hours electronic communications equivalent to the entire contents of the Library of Congress. Every 6 hours. They also developed a program called Thin Thread that enables computers to scan the material for key words, and they collect the billing records and the dialed phone numbers of everyone in the country. In violation of communications laws, AT&T, Verizon, and Bell South were only too happy to open their electronic records to the government. I have to say that at the height of its insanity,

the Stasi in East Germany—you know that *Das Leben der Anderen, The Lives of Others*—was spying on one out of every seven citizens. The U.S. is now spying on seven out of every seven citizens. Everybody in this room, your emails, your phone calls, it’s all recorded.

Eleven, you can now go to jail in the U.S. simply for speaking. In the late July of this year, environmental activist Tim DeChristopher was sentenced to two years in prison for his repeated declaration that environmental protection required civil, that is to say, nonviolent, disobedience. One wonders if the same judge, Dee Benson, would have also put Rosa Parks and Mahatma Gandhi in jail had he been around during their lifetimes.

Number twelve. This is my favorite. This was also in July of this year. Somehow this was symbolic, it seemed to me, of what’s happened to America in the last 60 years. Police in Georgia shut down a lemonade stand being run by three girls aged 10 to 14 who were trying to save up money for a trip to a local water park. The police said that they didn’t know what was in the lemonade and, in addition, that the girls needed a business license, a peddler’s permit, and a food permit in order to run the stand. It turns out that the permits cost \$50 a day. Kind of counterproductive as far as the girls were concerned.

And finally, baker’s dozen, number thirteen, the deepest locus of corruption, it seems to me, is the American soul. I have to say again, it’s a question of macrocosm and microcosm. On page 56 of *Why America Failed*, I wrote, “As George Walden writes in his aptly titled study, ‘God Won’t Save America: Psychosis of a Nation,’ ‘The peculiarities of nations, good and bad, tend to reflect the temperaments and qualities of their peoples. As Plato remarked, where else would they have come from?’” At that point, when my editor, several months ago was working over the manuscript, at this point he wrote in the margin, “This is the turning point of the book.” This is it: this is the hinge point of the whole thing.

So as far as evidence for that goes, Jonathan Sheldon, in an article in *The Nation* October 17, talking about some of the meetings for Republican candidates, Ron Paul had apparently said something like he would recommend that anybody who got sick and didn’t have health insurance, it’s his risk, after all. And Wolf Blitzer asked him, “So he should just die?” That was the implication. And there were cheers from the crowd at this point. They roared in approval. They also applauded enthusiastically when Rick Perry reported that the state of Texas had murdered, 235 criminals on death row. That also brought enthusiastic cheers.

There is so much of this material now. Most recently, there was an article in *The New York Times* about a law firm, Steven J. Baum, located near Buffalo, New York. It’s commonly referred to as a foreclosure mill firm. It does the dirty work for banks in evicting people and so on. A year ago, Halloween 2010, they had a Halloween party and the staff showed up with their costumes being

homeless people. They dressed as the people that they themselves evicted. Here are the pictures. So the people dirtied their faces and they had signs, “Will Work for Food.” This was funny to them. Of course, the firm immediately denied it, but the pictures are online. Deny away.

Although he doesn’t get into the issue of negative identity per se, the French writer Denis Duclos, who is a director of the CNRS, the research institute in Paris, pegged the problem of the obsession with having an enemy and the violence that results from that in his book of 1994 *Le Complexe du loup-garou, The Werewolf Complex*. In his epilogue to the 2005 edition, Duclos writes that “America is always dependent on a werewolf figure, a dark, savage beast that’s out to destroy it. The beast,” he says, “changes in content, but the form is always the same. At the center of this,” he says, “is a terrible fear that Americans have of emptiness, which is an anxiety of not existing, and they disguise this with a hyperactive optimism.” Have a nice day. “A curious society,” he writes, “a people who don’t know who they really are. Like the Romans, they see themselves under siege.” And, he says, “This could finally trigger a fascist populism,” which, of course, we’re seeing with the Tea Party. “The American fear of the monster,” he writes, “has always marked its history, whether this exists on the inside or the outside. This leads to isolating the country in a sort of collective psychosis that can only contribute to international instability.”

In fact, that’s how most of the world sees us. A few years ago there was an international poll that asked the question, “Which nation do you believe is the greatest threat to world peace?” The United States and Israel said Iran, and everybody else said the United States. Writing in *Der Spiegel* last August, the German journalist Jakob Augstein argues that the U.S. is basically a failed state; it’s not part of the West anymore, and that Europe needs to keep its distance from what is a very different and apparently, his word, “insane” political culture. There is, he concludes, no deliverance in sight for the U.S.

What does mental health mean in an individual case? It’s at least this: That a person knows his or her personal narrative and is able to see it from the outside and, as a result of this transparency, at least try to do something about it. Perhaps the same thing is true of a nation or a civilization. I don’t know. But what I know is that there is very little understanding in the U.S. as to what the underlying narrative is, or even the fact that there is an underlying narrative. This seems to escape most Americans, almost all.

There’s also very little interest in thinking about national identity or lack of same in anything more than a superficial way, which is provided, for example, by *The New York Times*. In such a situation, change is simply not possible. The odds that we’re going continue on this unconscious path are overwhelming. We saw it with the

tenth anniversary of 9/11. It was still a repeat of, This happened from the outside. We didn’t do anything. We never overthrew the regime of Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 in Iran that led to this endless Islamic resentment of us. Oh, no, that had nothing to do with it. In that sense, my work is indeed pointless. I’m a writer and social critic. I can’t stop the plane from crashing. Nobody can. But I’m rather like the engineer who surveys the wreckage and locates the black box and takes it apart and writes up the report, the postmortem. And that, I believe, does have some small value, because finally we need to know why America failed.

## Q&A

The question is, we tend to vilify the enemy, whoever that is. Is there something special about the U.S. that creates that pattern? And I would say yes, for the reason that Marshall McLuhan gave, that violence reflects a search for identity. We don’t know who we are. We never did. And the notion that we were republican or anti-monarchical, those ideals of the 18th century really blew away like dandelion spores by the time the war of independence was over. The U.S. has always been—this is the theme of *Why America Failed*—a hustling culture. Basically, if your goal in life is more, then you have no goal. Because once you have more, then there’s always more. It never ends. So who are we and what are we doing? And once you have that kind of emptiness at the center, you’re going to be quite violent. De Tocqueville talked about this in *Democracy in America*. He said Americans are really strange. They live in a perpetual state of self-adoration; they’re always saying how fabulous they are. And he said, if you challenge that, they get very fierce, very quickly. This is 1831. Not too bad. Not too shabby an assessment.

The question is, I must have some observations about how we’re going to get out of this mess. I get letters on my blog regularly, especially from young people, what should I do? And I say, “What do you think is waiting for you 30 to 40 years down the line, when there’s no Social Security, no Medicare, no social safety net whatsoever and we are making yet another war on some verkakte country on the other side of the planet and spending trillions of dollars to do that? And if we run out of countries, we’re going to invade Antarctica and clean up those communistic penguins that are creating problems for the U.S. There’s no end to this. We don’t know how to do anything else. And the chances that we have, quite honestly, of turning this around are roughly the chances that we would have of turning around an aircraft carrier in a bathtub. So, quite frankly, not only is there no way out, but I would recommend you get out.

Things will only get worse in the U.S. And frankly, they could get very ugly. They could get quite nasty. And I think that it's not very unusual to think that maybe 10-15 years from now a book like this couldn't be sold, couldn't be published. So as time goes on, who knows what's going to happen? The Occupy Wall Street movement is an interesting thing to concern, but the general tendency in the U.S. as far as revolution goes is that it would occur from the right, not from the left. I don't think that's too far-fetched. It makes me edgy, I have to say. But I don't have a crystal ball.

The question is not everybody can leave the U.S. What do you do if you're trapped here? There are three possibilities. One is that you could change the country, turn it totally upside down. That's not a possibility. The second is that you leave. The third is, if you can't, you have to do a kind of inner emigration. And that's what the monastic option was about. In other words, you have to find on a local basis, which I never was able to do, communities, groups, grass-roots organizations, study groups, whatever it is, that enable you to work toward the preservation of what's good in the culture, and then you take your chances in terms of what's going to happen. It's obviously an important question. But that's what I would recommend, fully undertaking the monastic option. You can live in a certain way, you can try to influence the people around you, you can organize in a local sense. What else do you have? But on a local level there are some possibilities. I never found it myself, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

I've always admired, for example, the Scandinavian countries in terms of how they've arranged their economy, but I am impressed by the fact that those countries are uniformly white, and so there's a homogeneity that makes it easier to get along. We don't have that luxury in the U.S., if that's a luxury. They've arranged their economy a certain way. It certainly is a deeply embedded psychological trait. The only thing is that there also have been deliberate cultivations of not doing that. And the U.S., as far as I know, is not interested in that at all. You would think they could do it, because we don't lack for a class of intelligent people in the U.S. But somehow those voices' getting heard is very difficult.

The question is, what about our conquering Hitler and fighting World War II and that we triumphed and that was important. All that's true. But the problem is that that was an unusual war. And what the right wing in the U.S. has convinced the rest of the country is that every war we get into is like that. So Ho Chi Minh was Hitler and Saddam Hussein was Hitler. They're all Hitler. That becomes the model of war. When in fact there was only one Hitler and one war like that. That's why I said, in the case of our opposition to Germany, that's the one case that I think we were justified, that it really was the darkest of evil and that

we had to defeat it. I doubt I would be here without that. So that's fine, that's great. The only trouble is that it is not representative of the wars we have fought since 1945, even though every time Chamberlain, appeasement, Hitler are trotted out as reasons for us to go and kick the crap out of whatever—Grenada or something. Whatever it is we're going to do, it's Hitler redux, and we're going to repeat the same story.

Outro music – Kronos Quartet: White Man Sleeps #1

*For information about obtaining CDs, MP3s, or transcripts of this or other programs, please contact:*

David Barsamian

Alternative Radio

P.O. Box 551

Boulder, CO 80306-0551

(800) 444-1977

info@alternativeradio.org

[www.alternativeradio.org](http://www.alternativeradio.org)

©2012

