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America's Empire of Bases

by Chalmers Johnson

As distinct from other peoples, most Americans do not recognize -- or do not want to recognize -- that the United States dominates the world through its military power. Due to government secrecy, our citizens are often ignorant of the fact that our garrisons encircle the planet. This vast network of American bases on every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire -- an empire of bases with its own geography not likely to be taught in any high school geography class. Without grasping the dimensions of this globe-girdling Baseworld, one can't begin to understand the size and nature of our imperial aspirations or the degree to which a new kind of militarism is undermining our constitutional order.

Our military deploys well over half a million soldiers, spies, technicians, teachers, dependents, and civilian contractors in other nations. To dominate the oceans and seas of the world, we are creating some thirteen naval task forces built around aircraft carriers whose names sum up our martial heritage -- Kitty Hawk, Constellation, Enterprise, John F. Kennedy, Nimitz, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Carl Vinson, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, John C. Stennis, Harry S. Truman, and Ronald Reagan. We operate numerous secret bases outside our territory to monitor what the people of the world, including our own citizens, are saying, faxing, or e-mailing to one another.

Our installations abroad bring profits to civilian industries, which design and manufacture weapons for the armed forces or, like the now well-publicized Kellogg, Brown & Root company, a subsidiary of the Halliburton Corporation of Houston, undertake contract services to build and maintain our far-flung outposts. One task of such contractors is to keep uniformed members of the imperium housed in comfortable quarters, well fed, amused, and supplied with enjoyable, affordable vacation facilities. Whole sectors of the American economy have come to rely on the military for sales. On the eve of our second war on Iraq, for example, while the Defense Department was ordering up an extra ration of cruise missiles and depleted-uranium armor-piercing tank shells, it also acquired 273,000 bottles of Native Tan sunblock, almost triple its 1999 order and undoubtedly a boon to the supplier, Control Supply Company of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and its subcontractor, Sun Fun Products of Daytona Beach, Florida.

At Least Seven Hundred Foreign Bases

It's not easy to assess the size or exact value of our empire of bases. Official records on these subjects are misleading, although instructive. According to the Defense Department's annual "Base Structure Report" for fiscal year 2003, which itemizes foreign and domestic U.S. military real estate, the Pentagon currently owns or rents 702 overseas bases in about 130 countries and HAS another 6,000 bases in the United States and its territories. Pentagon bureaucrats calculate that it would require at least \$113.2 billion to replace just the foreign bases -- surely far too low a figure but still larger than the gross domestic product of most countries -- and an estimated \$591,519.8 million to replace all of them. The military high command deploys to our overseas bases some 253,288 uniformed personnel, plus an equal number of dependents and Department of Defense civilian officials, and employs an additional 44,446 locally hired foreigners. The Pentagon claims that these bases contain 44,870 barracks, hangars, hospitals, and other buildings, which it owns, and that it leases 4,844 more.

These numbers, although staggeringly large, do not begin to cover all the actual bases we occupy globally. The 2003 Base Status Report fails to mention, for instance, any garrisons in Kosovo -- even though it is the site of the huge Camp Bondsteel, built in 1999 and maintained ever since by Kellogg, Brown & Root. The Report similarly omits bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, and Uzbekistan, although the U.S. military has established colossal base structures throughout the so-called arc of instability in the two-and-a-half years since 9/11.

For Okinawa, the southernmost island of Japan, which has been an American military colony for the past 58 years, the report deceptively lists only one Marine base, Camp Butler, when in fact Okinawa "hosts" ten Marine Corps bases, including Marine Corps Air Station Futenma occupying 1,186 acres in the center of that modest-sized island's second largest city. (Manhattan's Central Park, by contrast, is only 843 acres.) The Pentagon similarly fails to note all of the \$5-billion-worth of military and espionage installations in Britain, which have long been conveniently disguised as Royal Air Force bases. If there were an honest count, the actual size of our military empire would probably top 1,000 different bases in other people's countries, but no one -- possibly not even the Pentagon -- knows the exact number for sure, although it has been distinctly on the rise in recent years.

For their occupants, these are not unpleasant places to live and work. Military service today, which is voluntary, bears almost no relation to the duties of a soldier during World War II or the Korean or Vietnamese wars. Most chores like laundry, KP ("kitchen police"), mail call, and cleaning latrines have been subcontracted to private military companies like Kellogg, Brown & Root, DynCorp, and the Vinnell Corporation. Fully one-third of the funds recently appropriated for the war in Iraq (about \$30 billion), for instance, are going into private American hands for exactly such services. Where possible everything is done to make daily existence seem like a Hollywood version of life at home. According to the Washington Post, in Fallujah, just west of Baghdad, waiters in white shirts, black pants, and black bow ties serve dinner to the officers of the 82nd Airborne Division in their heavily guarded compound, and the first Burger King has already gone up inside the enormous military base we've established at Baghdad International Airport.

Some of these bases are so gigantic they require as many as nine internal bus routes for soldiers and civilian contractors to get around inside the earthen berms and concertina wire. That's the case at Camp Anaconda, headquarters of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, whose job is to police some 1,500 square miles of Iraq north of Baghdad, from Samarra to Taji. Anaconda occupies 25 square kilometers and will ultimately house as many as 20,000 troops. Despite extensive security precautions, the base has frequently come under mortar attack, notably on the Fourth of July, 2003, just as Arnold Schwarzenegger was chatting up our wounded at the local field hospital.

The military prefers bases that resemble small fundamentalist towns in the Bible Belt rather than the big population centers of the United States. For example, even though more than 100,000 women live on our overseas bases -- including women in the services, spouses, and relatives of military personnel -- obtaining an abortion at a local military hospital is prohibited. Since there are some 14,000 sexual assaults or attempted sexual assaults each year in the military, women who become pregnant overseas and want an abortion have no choice but to try the local economy, which cannot be either easy or pleasant in Baghdad or other parts of our empire these days.

Our armed missionaries live in a closed-off, self-contained world serviced by its own airline -- the Air Mobility Command, with its fleet of long-range C-17 Globemasters, C-5 Galaxies, C-141 Starlifters, KC-135 Stratotankers, KC-10 Extenders, and C-9 Nightingales that link our far-flung outposts from Greenland to Australia. For generals and admirals, the military provides seventy-one Learjets, thirteen Gulfstream IIIs, and seventeen Cessna Citation luxury jets to fly them to such spots as the armed forces' ski and vacation center at Garmisch in the Bavarian Alps or to any of the 234 military golf courses the Pentagon operates worldwide. Defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld flies around in his own personal Boeing 757, called a C-32A in the Air Force.

Our "Footprint" on the World

Of all the insensitive, if graphic, metaphors we've allowed into our vocabulary, none quite equals "footprint" to describe the military impact of our empire. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Richard Myers and senior members of the Senate's Military Construction Subcommittee such as Dianne Feinstein

(D-CA) are apparently incapable of completing a sentence without using it. Establishing a more impressive footprint has now become part of the new justification for a major enlargement of our empire -- and an announced repositioning of our bases and forces abroad -- in the wake of our conquest of Iraq. The man in charge of this project is Andy Hoehn, deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy. He and his colleagues are supposed to draw up plans to implement President Bush's preventive war strategy against "rogue states," "bad guys," and "evil-doers." They have identified something they call the "arc of instability," which is said to run from the Andean region of South America (read: Colombia) through North Africa and then sweeps across the Middle East to the Philippines and Indonesia. This is, of course, more or less identical with what used to be called the Third World -- and perhaps no less crucially it covers the world's key oil reserves. Hoehn contends, "When you overlay our footprint onto that, we don't look particularly well-positioned to deal with the problems we're now going to confront."

Once upon a time, you could trace the spread of imperialism by counting up colonies. America's version of the colony is the military base. By following the changing politics of global basing, one can learn much about our ever larger imperial stance and the militarism that grows with it. Militarism and imperialism are Siamese twins joined at the hip. Each thrives off the other. Already highly advanced in our country, they are both on the verge of a quantum leap that will almost surely stretch our military beyond its capabilities, bringing about fiscal insolvency and very possibly doing mortal damage to our republican institutions. The only way this is discussed in our press is via reportage on highly arcane plans for changes in basing policy and the positioning of troops abroad -- and these plans, as reported in the media, cannot be taken at face value.

Marine Brig. Gen. Mastin Robeson, commanding our 1,800 troops occupying the old French Foreign Legion base at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti at the entrance to the Red Sea, claims that in order to put "preventive war" into action, we require a "global presence," by which he means gaining hegemony over any place that is not already under our thumb. According to the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, the idea is to create "a global cavalry" that can ride in from "frontier stockades" and shoot up the "bad guys" as soon as we get some intelligence on them.

"Lily Pads" in Australia, Romania, Mali, Algeria . . .

In order to put our forces close to every hot spot or danger area in this newly discovered arc of instability, the Pentagon has been proposing -- this is usually called "repositioning" -- many new bases, including at least four and perhaps as many as six permanent ones in Iraq. A number of these are already under construction -- at Baghdad International Airport, Tallil air base near Nasariyah, in the western desert near the Syrian border, and at Bashur air field in the Kurdish region of the north. (This does not count the previously mentioned Anaconda, which is currently being called an "operating base," though it may very well become permanent over time.) In addition, we plan to keep under our control the whole northern quarter of Kuwait -- 1,600 square miles out of Kuwait's 6,900 square miles -- that we now use to resupply our Iraq legions and as a place for Green Zone bureaucrats to relax.

Other countries mentioned as sites for what Colin Powell calls our new "family of bases" include: In the impoverished areas of the "new" Europe -- Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria; in Asia -- Pakistan (where we already have four bases), India, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and even, unbelievably, Vietnam; in North Africa -- Morocco, Tunisia, and especially Algeria (scene of the slaughter of some 100,000 civilians since 1992, when, to quash an election, the military took over, backed by our country and France); and in West Africa -- Senegal, Ghana, Mali, and Sierra Leone (even though it has been torn by civil war since 1991). The models for all these new installations, according to Pentagon sources, are the string of bases we have built around the Persian Gulf in the last two decades in such anti-democratic autocracies as Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

Most of these new bases will be what the military, in a switch of metaphors, calls "lily pads" to which our troops could jump like so many well-armed frogs from the homeland, our remaining NATO bases, or bases in the docile satellites of Japan and Britain. To offset the expense involved in such expansion, the Pentagon leaks plans to close many of the huge Cold War military reservations in Germany, South Korea, and perhaps Okinawa as part of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's "rationalization" of our armed forces. In the wake of the Iraq victory, the U.S. has already withdrawn virtually all of its forces from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, partially as a way of punishing them for not supporting the war strongly enough. It wants to do the same thing to South Korea, perhaps the most anti-American democracy on Earth today, which would free up the 2nd Infantry Division on the demilitarized zone with North Korea for probable deployment to Iraq, where our forces are significantly overstretched.

In Europe, these plans include giving up several bases in Germany, also in part because of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's domestically popular defiance of Bush over Iraq. But the degree to which we are capable of doing so may prove limited indeed. At the simplest level, the Pentagon's planners do not really seem to grasp just how many buildings the 71,702 soldiers and airmen in Germany alone occupy and how expensive it would be to reposition most of them and build even slightly comparable bases, together with the necessary infrastructure, in former Communist countries like Romania, one of Europe's poorest countries. Lt. Col. Amy Ehmman in Hanau, Germany, has said to the press "There's no place to put these people" in Romania, Bulgaria, or Djibouti, and she predicts that 80% of them will in the end stay in Germany. It's also certain that generals of the high command have no intention of living in backwaters like Constanta, Romania, and will keep the U.S. military headquarters in Stuttgart while holding on to Ramstein Air Force Base, Spangdahlem Air Force Base, and the Grafenwöhr Training Area.

One reason why the Pentagon is considering moving out of rich democracies like Germany and South Korea and looks covetously at military dictatorships and poverty-stricken dependencies is to take advantage of what the Pentagon calls their "more permissive environmental regulations." The Pentagon always imposes on countries in which it deploys our forces so-called Status of Forces Agreements, which usually exempt the United States from cleaning up or paying for the environmental damage it causes. This is a standing grievance in Okinawa, where the American environmental record has been nothing short of abominable. Part of this attitude is simply the desire of the Pentagon to put itself beyond any of the restraints that govern civilian life, an attitude increasingly at play in the "homeland" as well. For example, the 2004 defense authorization bill of \$401.3 billion that President Bush signed into law in November 2003 exempts the military from abiding by the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

While there is every reason to believe that the impulse to create ever more lily pads in the Third World remains unchecked, there are several reasons to doubt that some of the more grandiose plans, for either expansion or downsizing, will ever be put into effect or, if they are, that they will do anything other than make the problem of terrorism worse than it is. For one thing, Russia is opposed to the expansion of U.S. military power on its borders and is already moving to checkmate American basing sorties into places like Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The first post-Soviet-era Russian airbase in Kyrgyzstan has just been completed forty miles from the U.S. base at Bishkek, and in December 2003, the dictator of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, declared that he would not permit a permanent deployment of U.S. forces in his country even though we already have a base there.

When it comes to downsizing, on the other hand, domestic politics may come into play. By law the Pentagon's Base Realignment and Closing Commission must submit its fifth and final list of domestic bases to be shut down to the White House by September 8, 2005. As an efficiency measure, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has said he'd like to be rid of at least one-third of domestic Army bases and one-quarter of domestic Air Force bases, which is sure to produce a political firestorm on Capitol Hill. In order to protect their respective states' bases, the two mother hens of the Senate's Military Construction Appropriations Subcommittee, Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) and Dianne Feinstein, are demanding that the Pentagon close overseas bases first and bring the troops now stationed there home to domestic bases, which could then remain open. Hutchison and Feinstein included in the Military Appropriations Act of 2004 money for an independent commission to investigate and report on overseas bases that are no longer needed. The Bush administration opposed this provision of the Act but it passed anyway and the president signed it into law on November 22, 2003. The Pentagon is probably adept enough to hamstring the commission, but a domestic base-closing furor clearly looms on the horizon.

By far the greatest defect in the "global cavalry" strategy, however, is that it accentuates Washington's impulse to apply irrelevant military remedies to terrorism. As the prominent British military historian, Correlli Barnett, has observed, the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq only increased the threat of al-Qaeda. From 1993 through the 9/11 assaults of 2001, there were five major al-Qaeda attacks worldwide; in the two years since then there have been seventeen such bombings, including the Istanbul suicide assaults on the British consulate and an HSBC Bank. Military operations against terrorists are not the solution. As Barnett puts it, "Rather than kicking down front doors and barging into ancient and complex societies with simple nostrums of 'freedom and democracy,' we need tactics of cunning and subtlety, based on a profound understanding of the people and cultures we are dealing with -- an understanding

up till now entirely lacking in the top-level policy-makers in Washington, especially in the Pentagon."

In his notorious "long, hard slog" memo on Iraq of October 16, 2003, Defense secretary Rumsfeld wrote, "Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror." Correlli-Barnett's "metrics" indicate otherwise. But the "war on terrorism" is at best only a small part of the reason for all our military strategizing. The real reason for constructing this new ring of American bases along the equator is to expand our empire and reinforce our military domination of the world.

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Chalmers Johnson's latest book is *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (Metropolitan), published as part of the American Empire Project. His previous book, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, has just been updated with a new introduction.

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