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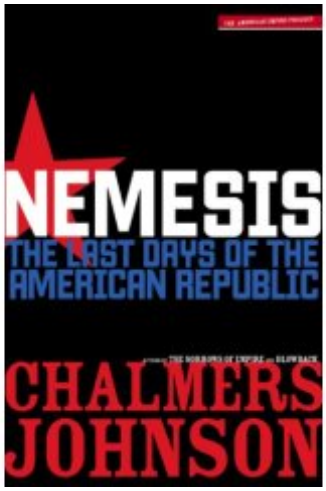
737 U.S. Military Bases = Global Empire

By Chalmers Johnson

With more than 2,500,000 U.S. personnel serving across the planet and military bases spread across each continent, it's time to face up to the fact that our American democracy has spawned a global empire.

The following is excerpted from Chalmers Johnson's new book, "Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic" (Metropolitan Books).



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; and by following the changing politics of global basing, one can learn much about our ever more all-encompassing imperial "footprint" and the militarism that grows with it.

It is not easy, however, to assess the size or exact value of our empire of bases. Official records available to the public on these subjects are misleading, although instructive. According to the Defense Department's annual inventories from 2002 to 2005 of real property it owns around the world, the Base Structure Report, there has been an immense churning in the numbers of installations.

The total of America's military bases in other people's countries in 2005, according to official sources, was 737. Reflecting massive deployments to Iraq and the pursuit of President Bush's strategy of preemptive war, the trend line for numbers of overseas bases continues to go up.

U.S. troop in Iraq

Interestingly enough, the thirty-eight large and medium-sized American facilities spread around the globe in 2005 -- mostly air and naval bases for our bombers and fleets -- almost exactly equals Britain's thirty-six naval bases and army garrisons at its imperial zenith in 1898. The Roman Empire at its height in 117 AD required thirty-seven major bases to police its realm from Britannia to Egypt, from Hispania to Armenia. Perhaps the optimum number of major citadels and fortresses for an imperialist aspiring to dominate the world is somewhere between thirty-five and forty.

Using data from fiscal year 2005, the Pentagon bureaucrats calculated that its overseas bases were worth at least $127 billion -- surely far too low a figure but still larger than the gross domestic products of most countries -- and an estimated $658.1 billion for all of them, foreign and domestic (a base's "worth" is based on a Department of Defense estimate of what it would cost to replace it). During fiscal 2005, the military high command deployed to our overseas bases some 196,975 uniformed personnel as well as an equal number of dependents and Department of Defense civilian officials, and employed an additional 81,425 locally hired foreigners.

The worldwide total of U.S. military personnel in 2005, including those based domestically, was 1,840,062 supported by an additional 473,306 Defense Department civil service employees and 203,328 local hires. Its overseas bases, according to the Pentagon, contained 32,327 barracks, hangars, hospitals, and other buildings, which it owns, and 16,527 more that it leased. The size of these holdings was recorded in the inventory as covering 687,347 acres overseas and 29,819,492 acres worldwide, making the Pentagon easily one of the world's largest landlords.

These numbers, although staggeringly big, do not begin to cover all the actual bases we occupy globally. The 2005 Base Structure Report fails, for instance, to mention any garrisons in Kosovo (or Serbia, of which Kosovo is still officially a province) -- even though it is the site of the huge Camp Bondsteel built in 1999 and maintained ever since by the KBR corporation (formerly known as Kellogg Brown & Root), a subsidiary of the Halliburton Corporation of Houston.

Halliburton Corporation's Houston offices

The report similarly omits bases in Afghanistan, Iraq (106 garrisons as of May 2005), Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, and Uzbekistan, even though the U.S. military has established colossal base structures in the Persian Gulf and Central Asian areas since 9/11. By way of excuse, a note in the preface says that "facilities provided by other nations at foreign locations" are not included, although this is not strictly true. The report does include twenty sites in Turkey, all owned by the Turkish government and used jointly with the Americans. The Pentagon continues to omit from its accounts most 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 overseas, but no one -- possibly not even the Pentagon -- knows the exact number for sure.

In some cases, foreign countries themselves have tried to keep their U.S. bases secret, fearing embarrassment if their collusion with American imperialism were revealed. In other instances, the Pentagon seems to want to play down the building of facilities aimed at dominating energy sources, or, in a related situation, retaining a network of bases that would keep Iraq under our hegemony regardless of the wishes of any future Iraqi government. The U.S. government tries not to divulge any information about the bases we use to eavesdrop on global communications, or our nuclear deployments, which, as William Arkin, an authority on the subject, writes, " [have] violated its treaty obligations. The U.S. was lying to many of its closest allies, even in NATO, about its nuclear designs. Tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, hundreds of bases, and dozens of ships and submarines existed in a special secret world of their own with no rational military or even 'deterrence' justification."

In Jordan, to take but one example, we have secretly deployed up to five thousand troops in bases on the Iraqi and Syrian borders. (Jordan has also cooperated with the CIA in torturing prisoners we deliver to them for "interrogation.") Nonetheless, Jordan continues to stress that it has no special arrangements with the United States, no bases, and no American military presence.

The country is formally sovereign but actually a satellite of the United States and has been so for at least the past ten years. Similarly, before our withdrawal from Saudi Arabia in 2003, we habitually denied that we maintained a fleet of enormous and easily observed B-52 bombers in Jeddah because that was what the Saudi government demanded. So long as military bureaucrats can continue to enforce a culture of secrecy to protect themselves, no one will know the true size of our baseworld, least of all the elected representatives of the American people.

In 2005, deployments at home and abroad were in a state of considerable flux. This was said to be caused both by a long overdue change in the strategy for maintaining our global dominance and by the closing of surplus bases at home. In reality, many of the changes seemed to be determined largely by the Bush administration's urge to punish nations and domestic states that had not supported its efforts in Iraq and to reward those that had. Thus, within the United States, bases were being relocated to the South, to states with cultures, as the Christian Science Monitor put it, "more tied to martial traditions" than the Northeast, the northern Middle West, or the Pacific Coast. According to a North Carolina businessman gloating over his new customers, "The military is going where it is wanted and valued most."

Former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, US Presidnet George W. Bush, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

In part, the realignment revolved around the Pentagon's decision to bring home by 2007 or 2008 two army divisions from Germany -- the First Armored Division and the First Infantry Division -- and one brigade (3,500 men) of the Second Infantry Division from South Korea (which, in 2005, was officially rehoused at Fort Carson, Colorado). So long as the Iraq insurgency continues, the forces involved are mostly overseas and the facilities at home are not ready for them (nor is there enough money budgeted to get them ready).

Nonetheless, sooner or later, up to 70,000 troops and 100,000 family members will have to be accommodated within the United States. The attendant 2005 "base closings" in the United States are actually a base consolidation and enlargement program with tremendous infusions of money and customers going to a few selected hub areas. At the same time, what sounds like a retrenchment in the empire abroad is really proving to be an exponential growth in new types of bases -- without dependents and the amenities they

would require -- in very remote areas where the U.S. military has never been before.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was obvious to anyone who thought about it that the huge concentrations of American military might in Germany, Italy, Japan, and South Korea were no longer needed to meet possible military threats. There were not going to be future wars with the Soviet Union or any country connected to any of those places.

In 1991, the first Bush administration should have begun decommissioning or redeploying redundant forces; and, in fact, the Clinton administration did close some bases in Germany, such as those protecting the Fulda Gap, once envisioned as the likeliest route for a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. But nothing was really done in those years to plan for the strategic repositioning of the American military outside the United States.

By the end of the 1990s, the neoconservatives were developing their grandiose theories to promote overt imperialism by the "lone superpower" -- including preventive and preemptive unilateral military action, spreading democracy abroad at the point of a gun, obstructing the rise of any "near-peer" country or bloc of countries that might challenge U.S. military supremacy, and a vision of a "democratic" Middle East that would supply us with all the oil we wanted. A component of their grand design was a redeployment and streamlining of the military. The initial rationale was for a program of transformation that would turn the armed forces into a lighter, more agile, more high-tech military, which, it was imagined, would free up funds that could be invested in imperial policing.

What came to be known as "defense transformation" first began to be publicly bandied about during the 2000 presidential election campaign. Then 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq intervened. In August 2002, when the whole neocon program began to be put into action, it centered above all on a quick, easy war to incorporate Iraq into the empire. By this time, civilian leaders in the Pentagon had become dangerously overconfident because of what they perceived as America's military brilliance and invincibility as demonstrated in its 2001 campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda -- a strategy that involved reigniting the Afghan civil war through huge payoffs to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance warlords and the massive use of American airpower to support their advance on Kabul.

World Trade Center under attack on 9-11

In August 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld unveiled his "1-4-2-1 defense strategy" to replace the Clinton era's plan for having a military capable of fighting two wars -- in the Middle East and Northeast Asia -- simultaneously. Now, war planners were to prepare to defend the United States while building and assembling forces capable of "deterring aggression and coercion" in four "critical regions": Europe, Northeast Asia (South Korea and Japan), East Asia (the Taiwan Strait), and the Middle East, be able to defeat aggression in two of these regions simultaneously, and "win decisively" (in the sense of "regime change" and occupation) in one of those conflicts "at a time and place of our choosing."As the military analyst William M. Arkin commented, "[With] American military forces ... already stretched to the limit, the new strategy goes far beyond preparing for reactive contingencies and reads more like a plan for picking fights in new parts of the world."

A seemingly easy three-week victory over Saddam Hussein's forces in the spring of 2003 only reconfirmed these plans. The U.S. military was now thought to be so magnificent that it could accomplish any task assigned to it. The collapse of the Baathist regime in Baghdad also emboldened Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to use "transformation" to penalize nations that had been, at best, lukewarm about America's unilateralism -- Germany, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Turkey -- and to reward those whose leaders had welcomed Operation Iraqi Freedom, including such old allies as Japan and Italy but also former communist countries such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. The result was the Department of Defense's Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy, known informally as the "Global Posture Review."

President Bush first mentioned it in a statement on November 21, 2003, in which he pledged to "realign the global posture" of the United States. He reiterated the phrase and elaborated on it on August 16, 2004, in a speech to the annual convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Cincinnati. Because Bush's Cincinnati address was part of the 2004 presidential election campaign, his comments were not taken very seriously at the time. While he did say that the United States would reduce its troop strength in Europe and Asia by 60,000 to 70,000, he assured his listeners that this would take a decade to accomplish -- well beyond his term in office -- and made a series of promises that sounded more like a reenlistment pitch than a statement of strategy.

"Over the coming decade, we'll deploy a more agile and more flexible force, which means that more of our troops will be stationed and deployed from here at home. We'll move some of our troops and capabilities to new locations, so they can surge quickly to deal with unexpected threats. ... It will reduce the stress on our troops and our military families. ... See, our service members will have more time on the home front, and more predictability and fewer moves over a career. Our military spouses will have fewer job changes, greater stability, more time for their kids and to spend with their families at home."

On September 23, 2004, however, Secretary Rumsfeld disclosed the first concrete details of the plan to the Senate Armed Services Committee. With characteristic grandiosity, he described it as "the biggest re-structuring of America's global forces since 1945." Quoting then undersecretary Douglas Feith, he added, "During the Cold War we had a strong sense that we knew where the major risks and fights were going to be, so we could deploy people right there. We're operating now [with] an entirely different concept. We need to be able to do [the] whole range of military operations, from combat to peacekeeping, anywhere in the world pretty quickly."

Though this may sound plausible enough, in basing terms it opens up a vast landscape of diplomatic and bureaucratic minefields that Rumsfeld's militarists surely underestimated. In order to expand into new areas, the Departments of State and Defense must negotiate with the host countries such things as Status of Forces Agreements, or SOFAs, which are discussed in detail in the next chapter. In addition, they must conclude many other required protocols, such as access rights for our aircraft and ships into foreign territory and airspace, and Article 98 Agreements. The latter refer to article 98 of the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute, which allows countries to exempt U.S. citizens on their territory from the ICC's jurisdiction.

Such immunity agreements were congressionally mandated by the American Service-Members' Protection Act of 2002, even though the European Union holds that they are illegal. Still other necessary accords are acquisitions and cross-servicing agreements or ACSAs, which concern the supply and storage of jet fuel, ammunition, and so forth; terms of leases on real property; levels of bilateral political and economic aid to the United States (so-called host-nation support); training and exercise arrangements (Are night landings allowed? Live firing drills?); and environmental pollution liabilities.

When the United States is not present in a country as its conqueror or military savior, as it was in Germany, Japan, and Italy after World War II and in South Korea after the 1953 Korean War armistice, it is much more difficult to secure the kinds of agreements that allow the Pentagon to do anything it wants and that cause a host nation to pick up a large part of the costs of doing so. When not based on conquest, the structure of the American empire of bases comes to look exceedingly fragile.

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