

Permanent Bases the World Over: Behold the American Empire

by Tom Engelhardt via rialator - Tomdispatch.com *Friday, Jun 15 2007, 12:32am*

international / peace/war / other press

14 June, 2007

Finally, the great American disconnect may be ending.

Only four years after the invasion of Iraq, the crucial facts-on-the-ground might finally be coming into sight in this country -- not the carnage or the mayhem; not the suicide car bombs or the chlorine truck bombs; not the massive flight of middle-class professionals, the assassination campaign against academics, or the collapse of the best health-care service in the region; not the spiking American and Iraqi casualties, the lack of electricity, the growth of Shia militias, the crumbling of the "coalition of the willing," or the uprooting of 15 percent or more of Iraq's population; not even the sharp increase in fundamentalism and extremism, the rise of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the swelling of sectarian killings, or the inability of the Iraqi government to get oil out of the ground or an oil law, designed in Washington and meant to turn the clock back decades in the Middle East, passed inside Baghdad's fortified Green Zone -- No, none of that.



American 'town' in Balkans: Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo

What's finally coming into view is just what George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, the top officials of their administration, the civilian leadership at the Pentagon, and their neocon followers had in mind when they invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003.

But let me approach this issue another way. For the last week, news jockeys have been plunged into a debate about the "Korea model," which, according to the New York Times and other media outlets, the President is suddenly considering as the model for Iraq. ("Mr. Bush has told recent visitors to the White House that he was seeking a model similar to the American presence in South Korea.") You know, a limited number of major American bases tucked away out of urban areas; a limited number of American troops (say, 30,000-40,000), largely confined to those bases but ready to strike at any moment; a friendly government in Baghdad; and (as in South Korea where our troops have been for six decades) maybe another half century-plus of quiet garrisoning. In other words, this is the time equivalent of a geographic "over the horizon redeployment" of American troops.

In this case, "over the horizon" would mean through 2057 and beyond.

This, we are now told, is a new stage in administration thinking. White House spokesman Tony Snow

seconded the "Korea model" ("You have the United States there in what has been described as an over-the-horizon support role ... -- as we have in South Korea, where for many years there have been American forces stationed there as a way of maintaining stability and assurance on the part of the South Korean people against a North Korean neighbor that is a menace..."); Defense Secretary Robert Gates threw his weight behind it as a way of reassuring Iraqis that the U.S. "will not withdraw from Iraq as it did from Vietnam, 'lock, stock and barrel,'" as did "surge plan" second-in-command in Baghdad, Lt. General Ray Odierno:

("Q: Do you agree that we will likely have a South Korean-style force there for years to come?

Gen. Odierno: Well, I think that's a strategic decision, and I think that's between us and -- the government of the United States and the government of Iraq. I think it's a great idea.")

David Sanger of the New York Times recently summed up this "new" thinking in the following fashion:

"Administration officials and top military leaders declined to talk on the record about their long-term plans in Iraq. But when speaking on a not-for-attribution basis, they describe a fairly detailed concept. It calls for maintaining three or four major bases in the country, all well outside of the crowded urban areas where casualties have soared. They would include the base at Al Asad in Anbar Province, Balad Air Base about 50 miles north of Baghdad, and Tallil Air Base in the south."

Critics -- left, right, and center -- promptly attacked the relevance of the South Korean analogy for all the obvious historical reasons. Time headlined its piece: "Why Iraq Isn't Korea"; Fred Kaplan of Slate

waded in this way, "In other words, in no meaningful way are these two wars, or these two countries, remotely similar. In no way does one experience, or set of lessons, shed light on the other. In Iraq, no border divides friend from foe; no clear concept defines who is friend and foe. To say that Iraq might follow 'a Korean model' -- if the word model means anything -- is absurd." At his Informed Comment website, Juan Cole wrote, "So what confuses me is the terms of the comparison. Who is playing the role of the Communists and of North Korea?" Inter Press's Jim Lobe quoted retired Lieutenant-General Donald Kerrick, a former US deputy national security adviser who served two tours of duty in South Korea this way: "[The analogy] is either a gross oversimplification to try to reassure people [the Bush administration] has a long-term plan, or it's just silly."

None of these critiques are anything but on target. Nonetheless, the "Korea model" should not be dismissed simply for gross historical inaccuracy. There's a far more important reason to attend to it, confirmed by four years of facts-on-the-ground in Iraq -- and by a little history that, it seems, no one, not even the New York Times which helped record it, remembers.

How Enduring Are Those "Enduring Camps"?

At the moment, the Korea model is being presented as breaking news, as the next step in the Bush administration's desperately evolving thinking as its "surge plan" surges into disaster. However, the most basic fact of our present "Korea" moment is that this is the oldest news of all. As the Bush administration launched its invasion in March 2003, it imagined itself entering a "South Korean" Iraq (though that analogy was never used). While Americans, including administration officials, would argue endlessly over whether we were in Tokyo or Berlin, 1945, Algeria of the 1950s, Vietnam of the 1960s and 70s, civil-war torn Beirut of the 1980s, or numerous other historically distant places, when it came to the facts on the ground, the administration's actual planning remained obdurately in "South Korea."

The problem was that, thanks largely to terrible media coverage, the American people knew little or nothing about those developing facts-on-the-ground and that disconnect has made all the difference for years.

Let's review a little basic history here:

You remember, of course, the flap over Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki's February 2003 claim before a Congressional committee that "several hundred thousand troops" would be needed to effectively occupy a "liberated" Iraq. For that statement, the Pentagon civilian leadership and allied neocons laughed him out of the room and then out of town. Sagely pointing out that there was no history of "ethnic strife" in Iraq, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz termed Shinseki's estimate "wildly off the mark." His boss, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, concurred. "Far off the mark," he said and, when the general retired a few months later, pointedly did not attend the ceremony. After all, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were planning to take and occupy Iraq in a style that would be high-tech and, in manpower terms, lean and mean. Given an administration-wide belief that the Iraqis would greet American troops as liberators or, at least, make them at home in their country, they expected the occupation to proceed smoothly -- on a "Korea model" basis, in fact.

Here's what Washington Post reporter Tom Ricks wrote in *Fiasco*, his bestselling book about the occupation, on the administration's expectations that February: "[Paul] Wolfowitz told senior Army officers... he thought that within a few months of the invasion the U.S. troop level in Iraq would be thirty-four thousand, recalled [Johnny] Riggs, the Army general then at Army headquarters. Likewise, another three-star general, still on active duty, remembers being told to plan to have the U.S. occupation force reduced to thirty thousand troops by August 2003. An Army briefing a year later also noted that that number was the goal 'by the end of the summer of 2003.'"

At present, approximately 37,000 American troops are garrisoned in South Korea. In other words, the original plan, in manpower terms, was for a Korea-style occupation of Iraq. But where were those troops to stay? The Pentagon had been pondering that, too -- and here's where the New York Times has forgotten its own history. On April 19, 2003, soon after American troops entered Baghdad, Times reporters Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt had a striking front-page piece headlined, "Pentagon Expects Long-Term Access to Four Key Bases in Iraq." It began:

"The United States is planning a long-term military relationship with the emerging government of Iraq, one that would grant the Pentagon access to military bases and project American influence into the heart of the unsettled region, senior Bush administration officials say. American military officials, in interviews this week, spoke of maintaining perhaps four bases in Iraq that could be used in the future: one at the international airport just outside Baghdad; another at Tallil, near Nasiriya in the south; the third at an isolated airstrip called H-1 in the western desert, along the old oil pipeline that runs to Jordan; and the last at the Bashur air field in the Kurdish north."

The Pentagon, that is, arrived in Baghdad with at least a four-base strategy for the long-term occupation of the country already on the drawing boards. These were to be mega-bases, essentially fortified American towns on which those 30,000-40,000 troops could hunker down for a South-Korean-style eternity. The Pentagon was officially not looking for "permanent basing," as it slyly claimed, but "permanent access." (And on this verbal dodge, an administration that has constantly redefined reality to fit its needs has ducked its obvious desire for, and plans for, "permanency" in Iraq. As Tony Snow put the matter this way only the other day, "U.S. bases in Iraq would not necessarily be permanent because they would be there at the invitation of the host government and 'the person who has done the invitation has the right to withdraw the invitation.'")

When the reporting of Schmitt and Shanker came up in a Rumsfeld news conference, the story was essentially denied ("I have never, that I can recall, heard the subject of a permanent base in Iraq discussed in any meeting...") and then disappeared from the New York Times for four years (and most of the rest of the media for most of that time). It did not, however, disappear from Pentagon planning. Quite the contrary, the Pentagon began doling out the contracts and the various private builders set to work. By late 2003, Lt. Col. David Holt, the Army engineer "tasked with facilities development" in Iraq, was quoted in a prestigious engineering magazine speaking proudly of several billion dollars already being sunk into base construction ("the numbers are staggering"). Bases were built in profusion -- 106 of them, according to the Washington Post, by 2005 (including, of course, many tiny outposts).

For a while, to avoid the taint of that word "permanent," the major American bases in Iraq were called "enduring camps" by the Pentagon. Five or six of them are simply massive, including Camp Victory, our military headquarters adjacent to Baghdad International Airport on the outskirts of the capital, Balad Air Base, north of Baghdad (which has air traffic to rival Chicago's O'Hare), and al-Asad Air Base in the Western desert near the Syrian border. These are big enough to contain multiple bus routes, huge PXes, movie theaters, brand-name fast-food restaurants, and, in one case, even a miniature golf course. At our base at Tallil in the south, in 2006, a mess hall was being built to seat 6,000, and that just skims the surface of the Bush administration's bases.

In addition, as the insurgency gained traction and Baghdad fell into disarray as well as sectarian warfare, administration planners began the building of a massively fortified, \$600 million, blast-resistant compound of 20-odd buildings in the heart of Baghdad's Green Zone, the largest "embassy" on the planet, so independent that it would have no need of Iraq for electricity, water, food, or much of anything else. Scheduled to "open" this September, it will be both a citadel and a home for thousands of diplomats, spies, guards, private security contractors, and the foreign workers necessary to meet "community" needs.

The Media Blind to the Bases

From 2003 to the present, the work building, maintaining, and continually upgrading these bases (and their equivalents in Afghanistan) has never ended. Though the huge base-building contracts were given out long ago, consider just a couple of modest contracts of recent vintage. In March 2006, Dataline, Inc. of Norfolk, Virginia was awarded a \$5 million contract for "technical control facility upgrades and cable installation," mainly at "Camp Fallujah, Iraq (25 percent), Camp Al Asad, Iraq (25 percent), [and] Camp Taqaddum, Iraq (25 percent)." In December 2006, Watkinson L.L.C. of Houston was awarded a \$13 million "firm-fixed-price contract for design and construction of a heavy aircraft parking apron and open cargo storage yard" for al-Asad Airbase, "to be completed by Sept. 17, 2007." In March 2007, Lockheed Martin Integrated Systems was awarded a \$73 million contract to "provide recurring requirements such as operations and maintenance support for base local area network, commercial satellite communication, technical control facility, and circuit actions, telephone, land mobile radio and both inside and outside cable plant installations. ... at 13 bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and six other nations which fall in the United States Central Command Area of Responsibility."

And major base-building may not be at an end. Keep your eye on Iraqi Kurdistan.

According to Juan Cole, the Kurdish press continues to report rumors that American base-building activities are now switching there. Little is known about this, except that some in Washington consider Iraqi Kurdistan an obvious place to "redeploy" American troops in any future partial withdrawal or draw-down scenarios.

These, then, were the Bush administration's facts-on-the-Iraqi-ground. Whatever anyone was saying at any moment about ending the American presence in Iraq someday or turning "sovereignty" over to the Iraqis, for American reporters in Baghdad, as well as the media at home, the "enduring" nature of what was being built should have been unmistakable -- and it should have counted for something. After all, those American bases, like the vast embassy inside the Green Zone (sardonically dubbed by Baghdadis, "George W's Palace"), were monstrous in size, state-of-the-art when it came to communications and facilities, and meant to support large-scale American communities -- whether soldiers, diplomats, spies, contractors, or mercenaries -- long term. They were imperial in nature, the US military and diplomatic equivalents of the pyramids. And no one, on seeing them, should have thought anything but "permanent."

It didn't matter that those bases were never officially labeled "permanent." After all, as the Korea model (now almost six decades old) indicates, such bases, rather than colonies, have long been the American way of empire -- and, with rare exceptions, they have arrived and not left. They remain immobile gunboats primed for a kind of eternal armed "diplomacy." As they cluster tellingly in key regions of the planet, they make up what the Pentagon likes to call our "footprint."

As Chalmers Johnson has pointed out in his book *The Sorrows of Empire*, the United States has, mainly since World War II, set up at least 737 such bases, mega and micro -- and probably closer to 1,000 -- worldwide. Everywhere, just as Tony Snow has said, the Americans would officially be "invited" in by the local government and would negotiate a "status of forces agreement," the modern equivalent of the colonial era's grant of extraterritoriality, so that the American troops would be minimally subject to foreign courts or control. There are still at least 12 such bases in Korea, 37 on the Japanese island of Okinawa alone, and so on, around the globe.

Since the Gulf War in 1990, such base-creation has been on the rise. The Bush, Clinton, and younger Bush administrations have laid down a string of bases from the old Eastern European satellites of the Soviet Union (Romania, Bulgaria) and the former Yugoslavia through the Greater Middle East (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates), to the Horn of Africa (Djibouti), into the Indian Ocean (the "British" island of Diego Garcia), and right through Central Asia (Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan, where we "share" Pakistani bases).

Bases have followed our little wars of recent decades. They were dropped into Saudi Arabia and the small Gulf emirates around the time of our first Gulf War in 1991; into the former Yugoslavia after the Kosovo air war of 1999; into Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the former Central Asian SSRs after the Afghan war of 2001; and into Iraq, of course, after the invasion of 2003 where they were to replace the Saudi bases being mothballed as a response to Osama bin Laden's claims that Americans were defiling the holiest spots of Islam.

In effect, when it came to bases in the post-9/11 years, the emphasis was, on the one hand, encircling Russia from its former Eastern European satellites to its former Central Asian SSRs and, on the other hand, securing a series of bases across the oil heartlands of the planet, a swath of territory known to the administration back in 2002-2003 as "the arc of instability." Iraq was, obviously, but part -- though a crucial part -- of such imperial dreaming about how to dominate the planet. And yet the military ziggurats that made those dreams manifest, and all the billions of taxpayer dollars and the obvious urge for "permanence" that went with them, were largely left out of mainstream reporting on, debate about, or discussion of the occupation of Iraq.

Iraq as Korea, 2003-2007

The administration remained remarkably tightlipped about all this building activity and what it

might mean -- beyond periodic denials that any such efforts were "permanent"; and, with rare exceptions, even when journalists reported from Camp Victory or other major bases, they never managed to put them on the reportorial landscape. Those bases -- and the colossus of an "embassy" that went with them -- just weren't considered all that important.

Perhaps for reporters and editors, used to an inside-the-Beltway universe in which the United States simply could not act in an imperial manner, the bases were givens -- like the American way of life. Evidently, for most reporters, there was, in a sense, nothing to notice. As a consequence, there has been endless discussion about Bush administration "incompetence" (of which there has been plenty), but not the quite competent planning that left such structures impressively on the Iraqi landscape. If the subject wasn't exactly blacked-out in the United States, it did, at least, undergo a kind of whiteout.

So much about Iraq was up for discussion, but the preponderant evidence on the ground, so utterly solid, carried no weight. It was evidence of nothing. For American reporters, as for American Secretaries of Defense, the full-scale garrisoning of Planet Earth is simply not a news story. As a result, most Americans have had next to no idea that we were creating multibillion dollar edifices on Iraqi soil meant for a near eternity.

Remarkably enough, when asked late last year by pollsters from the Program on International Policy Attitudes whether we should have the "permanent" bases in Iraq, a whopping 68 percent of Americans said no. But when the issue of bases and permanency arises at all in our press, it's usually in the context of Iraqi "suspensions" on the subject. (Oh, those paranoid foreigners!) Typically, the Los Angeles Times

cited Michael O'Hanlon, an oft-quoted analyst at the Brookings Institution, saying the following of the President's endorsement of the Korea model: "In trying to convey resolve, [Bush] conveys the presumption that we're going to be there for a long time.... It's unhelpful to handling the politics of our presence in Iraq." No, Michael, the bases are our politics in Iraq.

Generally, the Democrats and their major presidential candidates line up with O'Hanlon. And yet no significant Democratic proposal for "withdrawal" from Iraq is really a full-scale withdrawal proposal. They are all proposals to withdraw American combat brigades (perhaps 50,000-60,000 troops) from the country, while withdrawing most other Americans into those giant bases that are too awkward to mention.

Suddenly, however, discussion of the "Korea model" has entered the news and so put those bases -- and the idea of a permanent military presence in Iraq -- in the American viewfinder for what may be the first time. You only have to look at Iraq today to know that, like so much else our imperial dreamers have conjured up, this fantasy too -- of a calming Iraq developing over the decades into a friendly democracy, while American troops sit tight in their giant base-towns -- is doomed to one kind of failure or another, while the oil lands of the planet threaten to implode.

The Korea model is just one of the administration's many grotesque, self-interested misreadings of history, but it isn't new. It isn't a fantasy the President and his top officials have just stumbled upon in post-surge desperation. It's the fantasy they rumbled into Baghdad aboard back in 2003. It's the imperial fantasy that has never left their minds from that first shock-and-awe moment until now.

Give them credit for consistency. On this "model," whatever it may be called, the Bush administration bet the store and, on it, they have never wavered. Because of some of the worst reporting on an important topic in recent memory, most Americans have lived out these last years in

remarkable ignorance of what was actually being built in Iraq. Now, perhaps, that great American disconnect is beginning to end, which may be more bad news for the Bush administration.

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