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BLOG | Posted 11/17/2006 @ 08:14am

The Uncovered War: Permanent Bases in Iraq

TOM ENGELHARDT

Looked at [in a clear-eyed way](#), almost all the strategies floating around Washington at this moment for "redeployment" or "phased withdrawal" are not actual withdrawal plans. They are complex schemes for hanging on to some truncated imperial presence at the heart of the oil lands of the planet -- and as such are doomed to fail. Like Richard Nixon's Vietnamization program (which withdrew American ground forces while ratcheting up the use of American air power), these are [Iraqification](#) policies. But to grasp what they might actually mean, you need to be able to assess two key aspects of our Iraqi venture that mainstream newspapers essentially have not cared to cover--first and foremost, the permanent facts-on-the-ground the Bush administration has been so intent on building there since 2003.

As the [New York Times](#) revealed in a front-page piece by Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt on April 19, 2003, just after Baghdad fell, the Pentagon arrived in the Iraqi capital with plans already on the drawing board to build four massive military bases (that no official, then or now, will ever call "permanent"). Today, according to our former Secretary of Defense, we have 55 bases of every size in Iraq (down from over 100); five or six of these, including Balad Airbase, north of Baghdad, the huge base first named Camp Victory adjacent to Baghdad International Airport, and [al-Asad Airbase](#) in western Anbar province, are enormous -- big

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enough to be reasonable-sized American towns with multiple bus routes, neighborhoods, a range of fast-food restaurants, multiple PX's, pools, mini-golf courses and the like.

Though among the safest places in Iraq for American reporters, these bases have, with rare exceptions, gone completely undescribed and undiscussed in our press (or on the television news). From an engineering journal, we know that before the end of 2003, several billion dollars had already been sunk into them. We know that in early 2006, the major ones, already mega-structures, were still being built up into a state of advanced permanency. Balad, for instance, already handled the levels of daily air traffic you would normally see at Chicago's ultra-busy O'Hare and in February its facilities were still being ramped up. We know, from the reliable Ed Harriman, in the latest of his devastating accounts of corruption in Iraq in the London Review of Books, that, as you read, the four mega-bases always imagined as our permanent jumping-off spots in what Bush administration officials once liked to call "the arc of instability" were *still* undergoing improvement.

Without taking the fate of those monstrous, always-meant-to-be-permanent bases into account--and they are, after all, just about the only uniformly successfully construction projects in that country--no American plans for Iraq, whatever label they go by, will make much sense. And yet months go by without any reporting on them appearing. In fact, these last months *have* gone by with only a single peep (that I've found) from any mainstream publication on the subject.

The sole bit of base news I've noticed anywhere made an obscure mid-October appearance in a Turkish paper, which reported that the U.S. was now building a "military airport" in Kurdistan. A few days later, a UPI report picked up by the Washington Times had this: "Following hints U.S. troops may remain in Iraq for years, the United States is reportedly building a massive military base at Arbil, in Kurdish northern Iraq."

Kurdistan has always been a logical fallback position for U.S. forces "withdrawing" from a failed Iraq. But so far nothing more substantial has been written on the subject.

There is, however, another symbol of American "permanency" in Iraq that has gotten just slightly more attention in the U.S. press in recent months--the new U.S. embassy now going up inside Baghdad's well-fortified Green Zone and nicknamed by Baghdadis (in a sly reference to Saddam Hussein's enormous, self-important edifices) "George W's Palace." It's almost the size of Vatican City, will have its own apartment buildings (six of them) for its bulked-up "staff" of literally thousands and its own electricity, well-water, and waste-treatment facilities to guarantee "100 percent independence from city utilities," not to speak of a "swimming pool, gym, commissary, food court and American Club, all housed in a recreation building" and it's own anti-missile system. Ed Harriman tells us that it's a billion dollar-plus project--and unlike just about every other construction project in the country, it's going up efficiently and on schedule. It will be the most imperial embassy on the planet, not exactly the perfect signal of a sovereign Iraqi future.

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Again, few have had much to say about the embassy project here, a rare exception being an August *Dallas Morning News* editorial, "Fortress America: New Embassy Sends Wrong Message to Iraqis," that denounced the project: "America certainly needs a decent, well-defended embassy in Baghdad. But not as much as ordinary Iraqis need electricity and water. That our government doesn't seem to understand that reality could explain a lot about why the U.S. mission is in such trouble."

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Of course, as we learned in Vietnam, even the most permanent facilities can turn out to be impermanent indeed and even the best defended imperial embassy can, in the end, prove little more than a handy spot for planning an evacuation. But if the Iraq Study Group doesn't directly confront these facts-on-the-ground (as it surely won't), whatever acceptable compromises it may forge in Washington between an embedded administration and a new Congress, things will only go from truly bad to distinctly worse in Iraq.

Next: The Uncovered American Air War (Part 2)

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I think Mr Engelhardt is looking at "old news" and wondering why it isn't "new news".

Those bases and embassy WERE part of the "old Iraq plan" that the Administration drew up...that probably ended sometime after 2004.

In a year, or so, they will be empty shells, taken over by various militias or whatever form the "Government of Baghdad" takes...but they're certainly not going to be "Ft. Apaches" with contingents of Marines fighting off Iraqi insurgents like the Airborne guys surrounded at Bastogne in 1944.

They WERE part of the old Iraq plan of Bush & Co....now, they're white elephants who will probably be converted to "Museums of the Imperialist American War"....not used by any American soldier or diplomat.

Posted by **MASK** 11/17/2006 @ 08:40am | [ignore this person](#)

MASK,

I am a firm adherent to the notion that "seeing is believing". When I see U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq, then I will believe it. You are right, initial U.S. planning was to stay in Iraq forever. However, how do we know that that is not still the plan, stay in Iraq forever? With Democrats in Congress hiding behind the Baker/Hamilton Commission and playing the cynical game that it's Bush's problem let him deal with it, that puts the President in the driver's seat doesn't it? What makes you think Bush's plan for Iraq still isn't stay forever with huge mega bases and such?

Posted by **POSEIDON** 11/17/2006 @ 08:53am | [ignore this person](#)

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Posted by **POSEIDON** 11/17/2006 @ 08:53am

It's UNSUSTAINABLE, politically. NOBODY wants to stay.

No Repub wants to "inherit" Iraq in 2008 and they're going to push Bush into a "Baker-Hamilton" cross-bred with "Murtha". Dems scared s***less of being linked to Iraq collapsing under a pull-out, but they can't keep playing WORD GAMES on the war, or their base will kill them.

If Bush keeps "stay the course which is not 'stay the course'"...his own Party will desert him and "hint" that they might "go along" with the liberal Dems on "serious investigations" (i.e. impeachment bills).

I don't see anyway we're not re-deployed to Kurdistan (maybe western Iraq) and Kuwait before Christmas 2007 (and the real start to the 2008 Primaries).

Posted by **MASK** 11/17/2006 @ 09:05am | [ignore this person](#)

Tom sums it all up in this nutshell from (gasp) Texas- "America certainly needs a decent, well-defended embassy in Baghdad. But not as much as ordinary Iraqis need electricity and water. That our government doesn't seem to understand that reality could explain a lot about why the U.S. mission is in such trouble."

45 dead this month, no closer to victory. Cakewalk. When does the music stop?

Posted by **CRABWALK** 11/17/2006 @ 09:23am | [ignore this person](#)

Does Chimpy have his plastic turkey ready to fly?

Posted by **CRABWALK** 11/17/2006 @ 09:24am | [ignore this person](#)

Pentagon is going to ask Congress for \$127-160B more for 2007 (on top of the \$70B already approved for 2007).

It's costing just a tad more than the vaunted "think tanks" and Wolfowitz said it would cost back in 2002!

But hey, let's repeal the estate tax and make the top heavy tax cuts permanent because it's not fair that the current population should have to actually pay for the war....it's fairer if future generations should have to pay!

Posted by **FREEDOMPLEASE** 11/17/2006 @ 10:34am | [ignore this person](#)

Mask,

Since when is "UNSUSTAINABLE" mean anything to George W. Bush? If we were talking about anyone else but Bush I might agree with you. Although your logic is very sound, it does not stand up to scrutiny with the current White House and Congressional occupants. I would wager that American troops will be in full combat mode by the beginning of the 2008 primaries "Redeployment" is another euphemism for "stay the course". The only sure fire way to end the war is withdrawal. Anything else less than that is stay the course lite.....

Posted by **POSEIDON** 11/17/2006 @ 10:51am | [ignore this person](#)

Some sort of US led (not UN, not NATO led) major presence will be in place up to and including the 2008 elections.

You think that Hillary, Obama, McCain, Gulliani or whoever want to dilute the Emperor level powers now concentrated in the Executive branch by withdrawing???

Hell, McCain is calling for MORE troops!

Posted by **FREEDOMPLEASE** 11/17/2006 @ 11:00am | [ignore this person](#)

CRABWALK,

Liberation and liberal democracy were never the real reasons for the war to begin with. Those were just inserted in as throw enough mud to the wall and see what sticks policy. Let's go through the litany, shall we?

1. Weapons of Mass destruction 3. America was in imminent danger from attack by Iraq (unmanned arial vehicles) 3. Ties to terrorists groups, namely Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda 4. Alleged ties to the Sept 11 War against Terror 5. Remake the Middle East 6. Fight them there so we don't fight them here 7. Liberate Iraqis from Saddam Hussein 8. Establish Democracy in Iraq 9. Stop terror groups from getting their hands on the oil in Iraq 10. Stop the Iranians from taking control of Iraq 11. Establish safety for the state of Israel

Must we go on? I am quite sure that there are about 100 more rationales rolled out since last night for this war on Bush's list that I have forgotten to mention.....

Posted by **P O S E I D O N** 11/17/2006 @ 11:01am | [ignore this person](#)

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