

Where the Sun Never Sets

Tom Engelhardt

In the course of any year, there must be relatively few countries on this planet on which US soldiers do not set foot, whether with guns blazing, humanitarian aid in hand, or just for a friendly visit. In startling numbers of countries, American soldiers not only arrive, but stay interminably, if not indefinitely. Sometimes they live on military bases built to the tune of billions of dollars that amount to sizeable American towns (with accompanying amenities), sometimes on stripped down forward operating bases that may not even have showers. When those troops don't stay, often American equipment does—carefully stored for further use at tiny "cooperative security locations," known informally as "lily pads" (from which US troops, like so many frogs, could assumedly leap quickly into a region in crisis).

At the height of the Roman Empire, the Romans had an estimated 37 major military bases scattered around their dominions. At the height of the British Empire, the British had 36 of them planetwide. According to Pentagon records, in fact, there are 761 active American military "sites" abroad.

The fact is : the Pentagon garrisons the planet north to south, east to west, and even on the seven seas, thanks to various fleets and US massive aircraft carriers which, with 5,000-6,000 personnel aboard—that is, the population of an American town—are functionally floating bases.

Even now, in the wee hours, the Pentagon continues its massive expansion of recent years; America spends militarily as if there were no tomorrow; still building bases as if the world were American oyster.

Remember the 1990s when the US was hailed—or perhaps more accurately, Washington hailed itself—not just as the planet's "sole super-power" or even its unique "hyper-power," but as its "global policeman," the only cop on the block? As it happened, US leaders took that label seriously and the central police headquarters, that famed five-sided building in Washington DC, promptly began dropping police stations—*aka* military bases—in or near the oil heartlands of the planet (Kosovo, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait) after successful wars in the former Yugoslavia and the Persian Gulf.

As those bases multiplied, it seemed that Americans were embarking on a new, post-Soviet version of "containment." With the USSR gone, however, what the White House strategists were containing grew a lot vaguer and, before 9/11, no one spoke its name. Nonetheless, it was, in essence, Muslims who happened to live on so many of the key oil lands of the planet.

Yes, for a while US also kept intact its old bases from the triumphant megawar against Japan and Germany, and then the stalemated "police action" in South Korea (1950-1953)—vast structures which added up to something like an all-military American version of the old British Raj. According to the Pentagon, US still has a total of 124 bases in Japan, up to 38 on the small island of Okinawa, and 87 in South Korea. (Of course, there were setbacks. The giant bases US built in South Vietnam were lost in 1975, and then US troops were peaceably ejected from major bases in the Philippines in 1992.)

But imagine the hubris involved in the idea of being "global policeman" or "sheriff" and marching into a Dodge City that was nothing less than Planet Earth itself.

Almost 70 years after World War II, the sun is still incapable of setting on the American "empire of bases"—in Chalmers Johnson's phrase—which at this moment stretches from Australia to Italy, Japan to Qatar, Iraq to Colombia, Greenland to the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, Rumania to Okinawa. And new bases of various kinds are going up all the time. For instance, an American missile system is slated to go into Poland and a radar system into Israel. That will mean Americans stationed in both countries and, undoubtedly, modest bases of one sort or another to go with them. (The Israeli one—"the first American base on Israeli territory"—reports Aluf Benn of Haaretz, will be in the Negev desert.)

There are 194 countries on the planet (more or less), and officially 39 of them have American "facilities," large and/or small. But those are only the bases the Pentagon officially acknowledges. Others simply aren't counted, either because, as in the case of Jordan, a country finds it politically preferable not to acknowledge such bases; because, as in the case of Pakistan, the American military shares bases that are officially Pakistani; or because bases in war zones, no matter how elaborate, somehow don't count. In other words, that 39 figure doesn't even include Iraq or Afghanistan. By 2005, according to the *Washington Post*, there were 106 American bases in Iraq, ranging from tiny outposts to mega-bases like Balad Air Base and the ill-named Camp Victory that house tens of thousands of troops, private contractors, Defense Department civilians, have bus routes, traffic lights, PXes, big name fast-food restaurants, and so on.

Some of these bases are, in effect, "American towns" on foreign soil. In Afghanistan, Bagram Air Base, previously used by the Soviets in their occupation of the country, is the largest and best known. There are, however, many more, large and small, including Kandahar Air Base, located in what was once the unofficial capital of the Taliban, which even has a full-scale hockey rink (evidently for its Canadian contingent of troops).

In Washington, US garrisoning of the world is so taken for granted that no one seems to blink when billions go into a new base in some exotic, embattled, war-torn land. There's no discussion, no debate at all. News about bases abroad, and Pentagon basing strategy, is, at best, inside-the-fold stuff, meant for policy wonks and news jockeys. There may be no subject more taken for granted in Washington, less seriously attended to, or more deserving of coverage.

Americans have, of course, always prided themselves on exporting "democracy," not empire. So empire-talk hasn't generally been an American staple and, perhaps for that reason, all those bases prove an awkward subject to bring up or focus too closely on. When it came to empire-talk in general, there was a brief period after 9/11 when the neoconservatives, in full-throated triumph, began to compare US to Rome and Britain at their imperial height (though Americans were believed to be incomparably, uniquely more powerful). It was, in the phrase of the time, a "unipolar moment." Even liberal war hawks started talking about taking up "the burden" of empire or, in the phrase of Michael Ignatieff, now a Canadian politician but, in that period, still at Harvard and considered a significant American intellectual, "empire lite."

On the whole, however, those in Washington and in the media haven't considered it germane to remind Americans of just exactly how Americans have attempted to "police" and control the world these last years.

In the spring of 2004, a journalism student this writer was working with emailed a clip, dated October 20, 2003—less than seven months after American troops entered Baghdad—from a prestigious engineering magazine. It quoted Lt Col David Holt, the Army engineer "tasked with facilities development" in Iraq, speaking proudly of the several billion dollars ("the numbers are staggering") that had already been sunk into base construction in that country. American journalists, however, hardly noticed, even though significant sums were already pouring into a series of mega-bases that were clearly meant to be permanent fixtures on the Iraqi landscape. (The Bush administration carefully avoided using the word "permanent" in any context what-soever, and these bases were first dubbed "enduring camps.")

Within two years, according to the *Washington Post* (in a piece that, typically, appeared on page A27 of the paper), the US had those 106 bases in Iraq at a cost that, while unknown, must have been staggering indeed. Just stop for a moment and consider that number : 106.

Not surprisingly, this year, US negotiators finally offered the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki its terms for a so-called status of forces agreement, evidently initially demanding the right to occupy into the distant future 58 of the bases it has built.

It has always been obvious that any discussion of Iraq policy in this country, of timelines or "time horizons," drawdowns or withdrawals, made little sense if those giant facts on the ground weren't taken into account. And yet one has to search the US press carefully to find any reporting on the subject, nor have bases played any real role in debates in Washington or the nation over Iraq policy.

Thomas Ricks of the *Washington Post* and Guy Raz of *NPR*, visited a single US mega-base, Balad Air Base, which reputedly has a level of air traffic similar to Chicago's O'Hare International or London's Heathrow, and offered substantial reports on it. But, they, like the cheese of children's song, stand alone. In the last five years Americans tuning in to their television news have ever been able to see a single report from Iraq that gave a view of what the bases US has built there look like or cost. Although reporters visit them often enough and, for instance, have regularly offered reports from Camp Victory in Baghdad on what's going on in the rest of Iraq, the cameras never pan away from the reporters to show the gigantic base itself.

More than five years after ground was broken for the first major American base in Iraq, this is, it seems to many, a remarkable record of media denial. American bases in Afghanistan have generally experienced a similar fate.

The *Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, which was published back in 2000 to a singular lack of attention—until, of course, the attacks of 9/11, after which it became a bestseller, adding both "blowback" and the phrase "unintended consequences" to the American lexicon.

By the time *The Sorrows of Empire : Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic*, the second volume in Blowback Trilogy, came out in 2004, reviewers, critics, and commentators were all paying attention. The heart of that book focused on how the US garrisons the planet, laying out Pentagon basing policies and discussing specific bases in remarkable detail. This

represented serious research and breakthrough work, and the book indeed received much attention here, including major, generally positive reviews. Startlingly, however, not a single American mainstream review, no matter how positive, paid any attention, or even really acknowledged, the chapters on the bases, or bothered to discuss the US as a global garrison state. Only three years later did a major reviewer pay the subject serious attention. When Jonathan Freedland reviewed *Nemesis*, the final book in the Trilogy, in the *New York Review of Books*, he noticed the obvious and, in a discussion of US basing policy, wrote, for instance :

"Johnson is in deadly earnest when he draws a parallel with Rome. He swats aside the conventional objection that, in contrast with both Romans and Britons, Americans have never constructed colonies abroad. Oh, but they have, he says; it's just that Americans are blind to them. America is an 'empire of bases,' he writes, with a network of vast, hardened military encampments across the earth, each one a match for any Roman or Raj outpost."

In the US, military bases really only matter, and so make headlines, when the Pentagon attempts to close some of the vast numbers of them scattered across this country. Then, the fear of lost jobs and lost income in local communities leads to headlines and hubbub.

Of course, millions of Americans know about the bases abroad firsthand. In this sense, they may be the least well kept secrets on the planet. American troops, private contractors, and Defense Department civilian employees all have spent extended periods of time on at least one US base abroad. And yet no one seems to notice the near news blackout on America's global bases or consider it the least bit strange.

In a nutshell, occupying the planet, base by base, normally simply isn't news. Americans may pay no attention and yet, of course, they do pay. It turns out to be a staggeringly expensive process for US taxpayers. Writing of a major 2004 Pentagon global base overhaul (largely aimed at relocating many of them closer to the oil heartlands of the planet), Mike Mechanic of *Mother Jones* magazine online points out the following: "An expert panel convened by Congress to assess the overseas basing realignment put the cost at \$20 billion, counting indirect expenses overlooked by the Pentagon, which had initially budgeted one-fifth that amount."

And that's only the most obvious way Americans pay. It's hard for American people even to begin to grasp just how military (and punitive) is the face that the US has presented to the world, especially during George W Bush's two terms in office. (Increasingly, that same face is also presented to Americans. For instance, as Paul Krugman indicated recently, the civilian Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA] has been so thoroughly wrecked these last years that significant planning for the response to Hurricane Gustav fell on the shoulders of the military's Bush-created US Northern Command.)

In purely practical terms, though, Americans are unlikely to be able to shoulder forever the massive global role the Pentagon and successive administrations have laid out. Sooner or later, cutbacks will come and the sun will slowly begin to set on the American base-world abroad.

In the Cold War era, there were, of course, two "superpowers," the lesser of which disappeared in 1991 after a lifespan of 74 years. Looking at what seemed to be a power vacuum across the Bering Straits, the leaders of the other power prematurely declared themselves triumphant in what had been an epic struggle

for global hegemony. It now seems that, rather than victory, the second superpower was just heading for the exit far more slowly.

As of now, "the American Century," birthed by *Time/Life* publisher Henry Luce in 1941, has lasted but 67 years. Today, one has to be in full-scale denial not to know that the twenty-first century—whether it proves to be the Century of Multipolarity, the Century of China, the Century of Energy, or the Century of Chaos—will not be an American one. The unipolar moment is already so over and, sooner or later, those mega-bases and lily pads alike will wash up on the shores of history, evidence of a remarkable fantasy of a global Pax Americana.
□□□