

The Billion-Dollar Baghdad Embassy

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Global Research, April 20, 2006

Countercurrents.org 20 April 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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That's the estimate, though only half of it has been appropriated so far, a billion dollars to build a new embassy in Iraq. It will be the largest on the globe, the largest the world has ever seen, the size of Vatican City in Italy.

U.S. embassies typically cover ten acres. This one, a 104-acre complex, will be comprised of 21 buildings, its own water wells, an electricity plant and wastewater-treatment facility that makes the huge compound completely independent of Iraq, whose "interim government" sold the land to the U.S. in October 2004. Terms of the agreement do not appear to be readily accessible.

The massive compound will include two major diplomatic office buildings, homes for the ambassador and his deputy, apartment buildings for staff, and a recreational facility that will provide a swimming pool, gym, commissary, food court and American Club.

In this case, the devil is less in the details than in the monumental size and cost of the endeavor. The likeness to a small fortified city is frightening to those who object to a permanent presence of the U.S. in Iraq, already destroyed by American bombs and depleted uranium, and the core of such fear lies in the question of WHY the U.S., already dangerously in debt back home and dangerously despised in Iraq and most of the mideast, is pounding its chest with such a noisy bravado. Is this the finale of "Shock and Awe"?

Those working in the embassy-city are protected by extraordinary security, overseen by U.S. Marines. Structures will be reinforced to 2.5 times the standard. There will be five high-security entrances as well as an emergency entrance/exit, according to a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee report.

Foreign relations? Presumably the hope was at some point to look for olive branches, the U.S. and Iraq shaking hands and agreeing to go back to "go" and start all over. So from whom is such vast and expensive protection necessary? Were we ever within even shouting distance of being "liberators"? What kind of thinking would pour so much into a country that the White House says we want to turn over to the Iraqis as soon as possible? After all, we're the folks who brought "freedom" to Iraq. So why this elaborate expenditure at the same time that the people of the U.S. have finally awakened and turned against the invasion and occupation of a country that we now know never posed a threat to the U.S. or anyone else?

It's a hair past income tax time. Shouldn't those of us who filed have a word to say about where our checks are going? We've said, "No more. We want out as soon as possible." And yet the building goes on, about a third completed as of this writing.

Shall we take comfort in Mr. Bush's reassurances and hope he has a secret plan? Shall we

look at the bright side and wonder how this impressive compound of compounds would work as an orphanage for the children whose parents we've blown to bits?

This is a notable expenditure. It costs as much as it does to bomb mud huts in the desert each week. We, the dwindling middle class, are paying for it, and paying through the teeth. And we're not paying sums like this for something that's meant to be temporary.

Of our neocon acquaintances and non-political friends we might ask: Can you read about this construction, look at the numbers involved, think of the homeless, disease-ridden people of Iraq, suffering from the highest unemployment of their lives and often having difficulty finding clean water, and then truly believe that the U.S. went to the Garden of Eden to help the Iraqi people?

We are hearing from the war supporters that we don't hear the GOOD news, that the media presents only the BAD news. Thus, with this gargantuan but hush-hush project, we have to conclude that the construction of a permanent presence, an enormous watchtower over the entire mideast (and its oil) is the good news.

But it's quiet out there, a thick buffer between the people who now want this insanity to end and the sound of hammers and chain saws building walls, and more walls, and more. Surely to a once-proud Iraqi civilian, every wheelbarrow of mortar dragged across the new pavement that covers much of ancient Babylon is a symbol of unending loss.

(Thanks to AP correspondent Charles Hanley for providing the statistics and descriptions of the new embassy. See his full report at

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20060414/ap_on_re_mi_ea/iraq_new_embassy_2)

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