

# The Monster in the Mirror... The US Network of Military Bases

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*In 2007, the late **Prof. Jules Dufour** raised concerns about US global deployment of military personnel and its network of military bases. The US views the world, he said, "as a vast territory to conquer, occupy and exploit." "Humanity is being controlled and enslaved" he argued by this network.*

*The US is dividing the world into geographic command units, like US Northcom or US Southcom, proved the US focus on global control.*

*Dufour mentions the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases (No Bases Network) as essential in achieving a cohesive, coordinated front against US global control. The No Bases Network, born at the conference in Ecuador (March 2007), was concerned about the expansion of US Network of bases, and specifically about the plan for renewal of permission of the US Military base in Manta. **Rafael Correa**, then president of Ecuador, was invited and he expressed there his decision to not renew permission for the base, a position that will be later included in Ecuador's new Constitution, approved by referendum in 2008, which specifically prohibits foreign military bases on Ecuador's soil. The Manta base was closed in September 2009. (1, 2)*

This year the Conference of the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases will take place in Baltimore, US (Jan. 12 to 14). It will have three keynote speakers: **Mr. Ajamu Baraka**, 2016 US Green Party candidate for vice president and current President of the Black Alliance for Peace; **Ms. Ann Wright**, Retired US Army Colonel and leading member of Veterans for Peace and CODEPINK; and, **Mr. David Vine**, Associate Professor of Anthropology, American University in Washington DC, and author of the 2015 book "Base Nation. How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and The World." (3)

The conference can increase awareness about organizing for peace. Since 9/11 we live ongoing conflicts and today the menace of war escalating into nuclear madness is higher and the US refuses to be rational provoking countries with nuclear capabilities like North Korea -Korean War ended in 1953 with a truce, no peace agreement has been signed. Propaganda, irrational thinking and permanent war seem acceptable, even normal. The US network of bases overseas has a life of its own and favor war rather than diplomacy. Politicians show lack of maturity, even common sense while in the press there is growing obsession with North Korea and Russia. Nuclear war means human annihilation; still, STRATCOM recommends irrationality and vindictiveness as proper strategy.



### From Forts to Bases Overseas

*“Since the end of WWII, the idea that our country should have a large collection of bases and hundreds of thousands of troops permanently stationed overseas has been quasi religious dictum of US foreign and national security policy.”* The policy underlying such belief is called “forward strategy.” Prof. Vine argues that in the minds of policy makers the need for overseas bases and troops is a given. They are expensive, up to 120 billion (Afghanistan and Iraq in 2012 raised the costs to U\$S 170 billion), taxpayers pay on average U\$S 10-40 000 more per year to station a member of the military abroad than in the US. (4)

There are costs beyond financial too. The families of military personnel suffer separation and frequent moves; one in 3 service women are now assaulted (sexually) and a huge number of these assaults take place overseas. Outside base gates there is prostitution relying on human trafficking, as in South Korea, and rapes against local population, as in Okinawa (Japan). There is also widespread environmental damage. US bases are built by displacing local population, as in Greenland and Diego Garcia; and they are 21 century colonialism, like Guam and Puerto Rico. US bases are often located in undemocratic countries, like Qatar and Bahrain; some are connected to mafia organizations, like in Italy; and some are linked to torture and imprisonment, like Guantanamo Bay and Abu Graib. (4)

The network of US bases facilitates wars that cost millions of lives. They contribute to increasing tensions, rather than stabilize dangerous regions, and discourage diplomatic solutions to conflicts. The network maintains the US in a state of permanent war, with an economy and government constantly preparing for battle. Notably, having bases and troops overseas is rooted in US history of frontier forts, crucial for western expansion and overtaking of Native-American lands. Fort Harmar was first (1785), soon others followed in what are Ohio and Indiana today. Each fort helped waves of US settlers move into Native American lands. In 1830 Andrew Jackson created the Indian Removal Policy forcing Natives to give up their lands east of the Mississippi River; this was to be the “very western edge of civilization” and the “permanent Indian frontier,” but soon after (1832-34) the Santa Fe and Oregon trails started and conquest continued. Expansion moved beyond, taking Mexican land (California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona and the Republic of Texas) and Oregon from Great Britain after 1846. By 1878 there was a network of 90 forts throughout the US. (4)

Outside the US, bases emerged in Guantanamo (Cuba) and Panama. In 1939 **Franklin D. Roosevelt** expressed an interest in getting new island bases in the Caribbean and by the

time the U.S. entered WWII there were new bases in 20 countries. Commercial and military planning developed together; *“Pan Am Airways secretly acquired basing right for the military throughout Latin America.”* Thus, new bases flourished in the war while Pan Am ensured for itself and US airlines a useful advantage when war ended. But, the end of WWII favored the rights of people, requiring a more cautious approach in showing power. Installations and periodic displays of *“military might”* ensured economic and political advantages for the US. It was a *“global economic access without colonies.”* (4)

In the 1980s under Carter there was build up in the Middle East. Later, the fall of the Soviet Union pressed the US to close about 60% of its bases bringing home 300 000 troops. But, in 1991 the Gulf War in Iraq, and in 2001-2003 the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, were excuse for renewing US overseas bases. Its format changed, “Little Americas” were substituted by smaller, strategic, and at times secretive sites called “Lily pads.” As forts worked in taking over Indian land, bases worked maintaining US power around the world. They are “the global cavalry of the 21C,” says Vine. As the number of giant Cold War-era bases shrunk, the smaller ones proliferated giving the US greater geographic scope. (4)

### **Costly Strategy: Displacement, Toxic Environments, Democracy, People and Money**

A good argument against US bases overseas is cost, including more than money. They do not favor stability or security, but undermine both, displace local populations at a high cost to them, cause environmental damage and favor alliances with dictators and the mafia contributing to spreading oppressive/repressive regimes rather than democracy. They favor prostitution, rape, the sexual abuse of women, a distorted view of masculinity and hurt US image abroad and people abroad and at home.

#### **Displacement**

The “strategic island concept” was the basis for growth and required small islands with good anchorage (for airstrips) and insulated from locals. The islands were under UK sovereignty and had to have “negligible” population. Chagos Islands fit both criteria; Diego Garcia was approved as a site. Local population was deported in stages in 1973 in cargo ships, most of them sleeping above guano (bird shit), and later abandoned on the docks of Mauritius and the Seychelles. Some compare these conditions to conditions in slave ships. Chagossians are people of color who two years after their removal still lived in abject poverty; the Washington Post named them true victims of an “act of mass kidnapping.” Similar things happened to the indigenous population of the Bikini islands, the island Culebra in Puerto Rico and to Viequeños, displaced to the center of their island. The US Army is familiar with displacing indigenous people; it has done its share in the US for more than 100 years. Indigenous people at home ended also traumatized and impoverished. (4)

#### **Toxic Environments**

Although the US military have been concerned about their environmental footprint, most bases cause profound environmental damage and significant risk to humans and the natural environment because of their activities. Bases store weapons and explosives containing toxic chemicals. There is pollution in the form of toxic leaks, accidental detonations and other accidents. Their carbon footprint is large for the number of people living and working there. Bases use massive amounts of fuel, oil, lubricants and other petroleum products for

training and exercises, and war time activities are even worse. Military bases are high consumers of heat, air conditioning and power. The US armed forces consume more oil everyday than the entire country of Sweden. (4)



Victim of Agent Orange

There is contamination in South Korea due to chemical, fuel and other toxic waste leaks and spills, and in some cases **deliberate burial** from US bases. In Diego Garcia the US military destroyed the island's reef with explosives removing tons of coral to build a runway, thousands of trees were clear cut and Agent Orange was used to clear jungle foliage, and, US naval vessels dumped waste and treated human sewage into the island protected coral lagoon for 30 years. In Okinawa 80 barrels containing dioxin and other contaminants were discovered buried under a soccer field close to two schools while Agent Orange was stored and buried at the base during the Vietnam War. In Philippines, when the US military left in 1992, there was unexploded ordnance, asbestos, heavy metals and leaking fuel tanks and dangerous pesticides. In Panamá there were 100 000 unexploded ordnance while mustard gas bombs were found in San Jose. Places under colonial or semi colonial rule faced some of the worst environmental damages from US bases. (4)

### **Democracy - Befriending dictators and in bed with the Mob**

A large scale study of US bases since 1898 confirmed that autocratic states have been consistently attractive as base hosts while democratic ones have not. US military interventions to protect US economic interests took place in Honduras, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama. The term "banana republic," coined by short story writer O. Henry, describes weak, marginally independent countries facing economic and political domination, a colony but in name. In 1954 the CIA used a banana plantation in Honduras to train a US backed mercenary army to overthrow the elected government of Guatemala because it had threatened the banana monopoly of the United Fruit Co, "Chiquita." In the 1980s The Tripartite, an unholy alliance created to support the Contras against the Sandinistas, had Honduras providing them sanctuary, Argentina being a "front" to hide US involvement while the US paid (from secret sales of weapons to Iran), and Israelis and Chileans trained them. The human costs were more than 270 disappeared in Honduras, 50 000 dead in Nicaragua, 75000 dead in El Salvador and 240 000 dead or disappeared in Guatemala -genocide. (4)

The US has been consistently attracted by dictators; Vine believes it is because they provide access and sustainability for their bases. But dictators do more than this and are often put in

place by the US itself when their ideological interests are in sync. After WWII caution was required in expressing power so empire building discourse changed. Seventy three million people had died because of fascism, including military and civilians from Allied and Axis powers. Before WWII British empire building was direct offering no apologies. President Taft was similar:

“The day is not far distant when...the whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as by virtue of our superiority as a race, it already is ours morally.”

But after WWII such strategy was untenable. Still, the goals were the same, so someone had to complete dirty deeds when needed. Dictators and mobsters are good at this and asked few questions; discarding them when expired is easier because they work against the Law and are not liked by many. (4, 5, 6)

In Italy “*proliferation of US and NATO bases helped strengthen the political and economic power of criminal organizations.*” A relationship between the US military and the Camorra (Naples mafia) is not an aberration, Vine says, but a strategy the military used to keep cost manageable, military contracts encouraged cutting corners. The US base in Sicily is closely linked to the mafia since WWII when Sicilian born Lucky Luciano transformed it into a powerful and wealthy national crime syndicate in the US (commanding over drugs, prostitution and other criminal activities). Luciano was jailed, but released to help Navy officers to “protect” New York from Axis spies and saboteurs during WWII. After WWII he got clemency from NY governor and returned to Italy. His business in the US went to Vito Genovese, who came from Naples where he had been working with the US Army. The “exchange” worked well for both of them. (4)

In Naples the mafia receives military contracts in construction. In Sicily firms controlled by the Cosa Nostra gained similar contracts for the Comiso base, now closed. In the 1990s three major janitorial, grounds keeping and maintenance contractors at Sicily’s Sigonella naval base were shown to have mafia ties. “*Ties between the military and the Mafia may not have been simply the result of questionable oversight, but a deliberate decision,*” argues Vine. Gricignano and surrounding areas where Navy personnel live are at the center of the Camorra illegal dumping of garbage and toxic waste since the 1980s -a U\$S 20 billion a year illicit business. The Camorra solves the waste disposal problems of northern Italy businesses disposing of hazardous waste cheaply -burying refuse in illegal dumps, pumping chemicals into underground ditches and burning trash in secluded areas. The area is called “triangle of death” because of elevated levels of radiation, nitrates, bacteria, arsenic. Chemicals used in cleaning solvents have been found in the water, air and soil. The Navy is concerned; the Gricignano base prohibits sailors from using tap water and Italian produce is labeled by origin to avoid contaminants. (4)

### **People - Prostitution, Rape, Militarized Masculinity and Perks**

Commercial sex zones developed around US bases worldwide looking similarly: liquor stores, fast food outlets, tattoo parlors, bars, clubs and prostitution. Baumholder and Kaiserlautern (Germany), Kadena and Kin Town (Okinawa), even domestic ones like Fort Bragg (North Carolina) have red light districts. Overseas is worse. In South Korea “camptowns” are a critical part of the economy, male officials strategizing for GIs to spend their money there, and affect politics and culture. “*Our government was one big pimp for the US military,*” says a former sex worker. Filipina women fill most of the bars and clubs in South Korea today;



they come from a poorer country and need to send money home. Military contractors are involved as in Bosnia (1998) where DynCorp employees talked openly of buying women and the company leadership had connections with the mafia and took their employees to the brothels. A rape videotaped was never investigated; Kathryn Bolkovac, a Dyncorp employee part of UN police force, testified to stories of women trafficked from the east, forced into prostitution to pay debts, some terrified, she suspected beaten and tortured. (4)

In addition to “camptown” prostitution there is pervasive objectification of women in the military which plays a role in the victimization of locals, women in the military and at home partners and others. Environmental health expert, H. Patricia Hynes notes that sexual objectification shapes the epidemic of sexual assault and harassment so common in the military today. Pornography contributes and it is pervasive. Around two thirds of incidents of unwanted sexual contact take place in military installations while overseas bases are particularly dangerous. Much of the military leadership fails to grasp the nature of the problem, take steps to protect female troops and enforce its own laws. In the military rape is pandemic because females are considered inferior, often reduced to sex objects, while men are trained to enact a masculinity based on dominance over others considered inferior, weaker and deserving being dominated and abused. Men who spent time in the US military are more likely than their civilian counterparts to be imprisoned for sexual offences. A disproportionate number of men in the military have been victims of violence too, which makes them more likely to become abusers themselves. Beyond sexual abuse the rates of domestic violence in the military may be about 5 times the civilian rates. (4)

“Bases add facilities, fancier food, and recreational amenities: steak and lobster, flat screen TVs, Internet Connections...the military refer to these comforts collectively as “ice cream.” Right now...there is no ice cream at small outposts...but eventually...it is a building block process.”

Perks for military personnel are tempting but basic; but, perks at overseas bases are greater for the generals and the admirals, who often enjoy personal assistants, chefs, vehicles, and private planes. There are cases, like African Command commander General William Ward where multiple forms of misconduct were found, free meals, tickets to musicals, including billing the government for hundreds of thousands of dollars of personal travel and more. (4)

### **Money matters**

The costs of overseas bases are high; they include from airplane tickets for family members and shipping of belongings, to housing, costs of living allowances, temporary accommodations, meals, per diems, and the building of schools, clinics, churches and more. The average cost of running an overseas Air Base without personnel is U\$S 200 million, twice the cost of running it in the US. Air Force personnel overseas cost U\$S 40 000 more per person than in the US. The military ship tens of thousands of vehicles to and from bases overseas, costing about U\$S 200 million/year. The Pentagon Overseas Cost Summary for 2012 was U\$S 22.7 billion. But Anita Danes, an economist, estimated the cost much higher in 2009 at US\$ 250 billion. Vine decided working a conservative estimate including costs the Pentagon did not include and reached U\$S 71.7 billion per year. When he added costs from the War Budget (U\$S 96.9 billion) the total estimate was close to US\$ 170 billion, a bit closer to Danes’ and much higher than the Pentagon’s. (4)

Every base built overseas is a theft from American society, Vine argues. The costs to host

countries are also high; and, there are financial expenses like money spent cleaning the environmental damage caused but also soundproofing homes and paying damages for crimes committed by US troops. There are also the **Costs of Rising Hostility**, the damage done by US bases to the US international reputation and its standing in the world. Only some benefit: contractors. KBR (latest incarnation of Brown & Roots) received contracts for more than U\$S 44 billion while the Supreme Group (transporting/serving meals) received contracts for U\$S 9 billion –the Pentagon now says Supreme overbilled them. Agility Logistics with contracts for U\$S 9 billion was indicted on criminal charges for U\$S 6 billion in false claims and price manipulation. Furthermore, even though contractors enjoyed billions in taxpayer funds many used legal and illegal means to minimize US taxes paid on profits, using offshore subsidiaries for this. (4)

### **The Threat of Nuclear War or When “Crazy” Rules**

The risk of using nuclear weapons increases with increasing aggressiveness and war. **John LaForge** points to headlines in American newspapers giving the impression that using nuclear weapons can be legal. They are not, he says: any use of nuclear weapons would be indiscriminate and illegal by definition. *International covenants, treaties, and protocols forbid indiscriminate destruction, attacks that are disproportionate to a military objective, and weapons’ effects that “treacherously wound,” harm neutral states, or do long-term damage to the environment.* There is a huge difference between conventional and nuclear weapons he argues. The later cannot be used without committing war crimes:

“Any government which adopts a defense policy implying such an attack is therefore inciting its own forces to commit war crimes on a gigantic and suicidal scale.”



John E. Hyten (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

**John E Hyten**, the US (STRATCOM) Strategic Command Chief general, was in the news discussing the use of nuclear weapons; he would be in charge of nuclear forces in a war. (7)

A 1995 STRATCOM report mentioned as detrimental for the US to portray itself as “too rational” recommending instead projecting an “irrational and vindictive” national persona with some “potentially ‘out of control’” elements. I guess we are there now. The hegemonic principle in place means the US and its allies “*should possess an offensive nuclear capacity to destroy their enemies denied to other nations, and can flout international law and their foreign obligations on a whim.*” As Joshua Cho argues, the US has unleashed far more violence and aggression abroad and the latest international poll found that “the US is considered the greatest threat to world peace, beating out all other competitors—including North Korea—by decisive margins.” He adds, “A casual examination of the United States’ record abroad can yield similar damning conclusions: the United States is the world’s nuclear menace, not North Korea.” (8) Thus, we are looking at the monster in the mirror: it is us! That is the US and its Western allies, including Canada.

### **Notes**

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