

The Colossus of Baghdad: The 8th New Wonder of the World?

This last week, the Switzerland-based foundation, New7Wonders announced the chosen nominees for the new, seven wonders of the world[1], Brazil's Statue of Christ Redeemer, Peru's Machu Picchu, and Mexico's Chichen Itza pyramid were chosen together with the Great Wall of China, Jordan's Petra, the Coliseum in Rome and India's Taj Mahal. The sites were selected by a count of around a 100 million votes that were cast by individuals from all over the world via the Internet and cell phone, the nonprofit organization that conducted the poll said. I was proud as I read this list as these architectural marvels stand as monuments to the longevity, the ingenuity, and to the integrity of our species and the human spirit. However, at the same time, I was absolutely befuddled and amazed that the United States, Berger, Devine, Yaeger designed mammoth, The Colossus of Baghdad[2], was not crowned the 8th and biggest wonder of them all.

What I am referring to here is the American Embassy, the largest on the planet, still under construction on a 104 acre stretch of land along the banks of the Tigris River in the heart of the embattled Green Zone. This \$592 million complex, the size of 80 football fields, will include 20 buildings, including one classified, secure structure, six apartment buildings—housing for over 380 families, two office buildings, a school, a gym, a pool, palm-tree lined paths, and a food court. The embassy, when finished, will be the size of Vatican City and will have the population of a small town. Ironically, it is being built on the former site of one of Saddam Hussein's lavish palaces.

The magnitude and ostentatiousness of this complex is reminiscent of the grandiose and exotic architecture of pre-Bush/Cheney administration Baghdad. Saddam Hussein, when reconstructing portions of the Iraqi capital, flaunted his vision of kitsch Orientalism and infused into his building projects. After all, who can forget those huge, sculptured "Hands of Glory," a monument built in commemoration of Iraq's victory over Iran, holding 12 story high crossed swords. He was responsible for dotting what is now the green zone with scores of what Tom Englehardt, writer for Alternet.org, calls, "overheated, Disneyesque, Arabian Nights palaces" (Englehardt, 2007) that were filled with every luxury imaginable. These grotesque monstrosities stood in stark contrast to the remainder of Baghdad and Iraq, which was filled with a population of people who were growing increasingly desperate under the oppressive yolk on United Nations' sanctions.

Interestingly, the embassy is being built to be entirely self-sufficient. Construction materials were stockpiled on the site well in advance to avoid having to face the dangers and delays on Iraq roads. It will have its own water wells, electricity plant, and wastewater facility making it 100 percent self-sufficient and not dependant upon Iraq's unreliable utilities. The Washington post[3] recently reported that "virtually every bite and sip consumed in the embassy is imported from the United States, entering Iraq via Kuwait in a huge truck convoys that bring fresh and processed food, including a full range of Baskin-Robbins ice cream flavors, every seven to ten days" (Englehardt, 2007). The lead contractor on the project is a Kuwaiti firm, First Kuwaiti Trading and Contracting, and there a five undisclosed U.S. subcontractors. Justin Higgins, a spokesman said that the State Department is confident that "the embassy will be completed according to schedule and on budget" (Slavin, 2006).

Upon further researching the American Embassy project in Baghdad, I found myself entangled in a state of total perplexity. It presents to the knowledgeable and informed a mass of contradictions that all scream for resolution. First of all, the State Department, as cited earlier in this posting, stated that the embassy construction would be finished "according to schedule and on budget". If it does, it will be the only project in Iraq that has. I state this because a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee report[4] cited that many civil projects, including health clinics, water treatment facilities, and electrical plants, had to be scaled back or eliminated because of rising costs (three billion dollars) of securing worksites and workers (Lugar, 2004). In fact, this report went on to state, that no large scale, U.S. funded construction program in Iraq had met its schedule or budget. The Special Inspector General office, which Congress created to oversee U.S. projects Iraq, found that 25% of the nearly 21 billion allocated for Iraq reconstruction had been diverted to pay for security[5].

Secondly, the embassy's self sufficiency, having its own water wells, electricity plant and wastewater-treatment facility, "systems to allow 100 percent independence from city utilities," (Senate Report) is an insult to the Iraq people who "are unable to get electricity or running water (Aljazeera, 2007). Water is of primary concern. In Karbala, the mains have gone dry, and sewage is seeping above ground, contaminating crops in the region. In Baghdad, it is worse. Many of the sewer and water mains have been destroyed due to coalition bombing and have not been repaired. The parts of the system that remain intact have been severely affected by power blackouts and financial cuts that have restricted the effectiveness of pumping and filtration systems. Electricity presents a similar story.

The average Baghdad home only "has electricity four hours a day"(Slavin, 2007) and the whole power grid

"could collapse any day" (Associated Press, 2007). Power supplies are sporadic at best and are now down to just a few hours a day. I find this fact absolutely unbelievable because the American effort to restore electricity in Baghdad began on April 12, 2003, three days after American troops entered the city. Yet recently, four years after the invasion, a whole province south of Baghdad has had no water or power at all for three days, and there have been four nationwide blackouts during this same period (Hurst, 2007). This lack of basic services is particularly severe as the average daily temperatures reach between 110 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

In direct contrast to the conditions the rest of Iraq is expected to endure is the American Embassy building site that has so much power that it is floodlighted at night so work can continue 24 hours a day. Bottled water is shipped in every seven to ten days from Kuwait via convoys (to see what some American soldiers in these convoys do with this bottled water see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9A_vxIOB-I) that bring tons of fresh vegetables, meats, and Baskin-Robbins ice cream into the compound (DeYoung, 2007). No wonder the local Iraqis call the embassy George W's palace. These delays in the restoration of basic services have undercut U.S. credibility in the region and deepened the suspicion and distaste Iraqis, now impatient for the improvements to their lives promised by the overthrow of their "brutal" dictator by their "liberators" from the United States, now feel towards their "American occupiers". "The people are fed up," says Qassim Hussein, a 31-year old day laborer from Karbala, "There is no water, no electricity, and there is nothing but death" (Associated Press, Aug 4, 2007). Mohammed, an ex-jewelry shop owner in Saddam's Iraq now living in poverty as a refugee has similar thoughts for he states that after the U.S.-led invasion, "the human being is [now] nothing. There is no value to human life. And you want to live with them [the Americans]?"

Thirdly, the Bush administration's stated strategy for Iraq after the invasion included: bringing democracy and freedom to the Iraqi people, rebuilding infrastructure, efforts to boost the Iraqi economy, initiatives to create jobs, and incentives for Iraqi industry and trade (Bush, 2004). This was probably a good strategy for, after all, common sense dictated that after the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and the dismantling of its (brutal but stable) government, the country would need repairs, economic recovery, jobs, and basics like water and sewage systems, and it would need them quickly. With the coming of U.S. troops and the promised delivery of democracy and freedom to Iraq, one would expect that all the generic fundamentals of American style capitalism would have immediately been put into place, as they were in Japan after World War II. These fundamentals would, of course, include: the privatization of national companies, legal and economic conditions favorable to entrepreneurship and the creation of small business, the downsizing of the central government, and the release of thousands of civil servants on the government payroll, a complete restructuring of the country's tax and finance laws, and a culture conducive to private investment. "After all", the average, redneck, Joe Schmo American would say, "these are the things that made America great, right? They should be good enough for some poor, backward Arabs".

The reality of the situation is that the economic policies the United States imposed on post-occupation Iraq were not this generic form of capitalism. Instead, they included, as we shall see, some of the most radical business-state rules imaginable—procedures that developing countries have vehemently resisted for over a decade, i.e. Venezuela. It should be blatantly obvious to any lay person that when an alien, quasi-democratic policy is artificially imposed by force on a radically different culture, one that has long been oppressed by tyranny, that shock would inevitably result, economic discomfort would have to be endured, displacement would be commonplace, anger would be widespread, civil unrest would ensue, and resistance would inevitably be bred. As we are now all painfully aware of, this is exactly what happened in Iraq (Holland, 2006) where ideology has triumphed over commonsense and practicality and, as a result, the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been shattered and economically founded.

In this war, Iraqis have not just been the victims of bombs and bullets; they have also been injured by the extreme economic procedures perpetuated by the United States and its Western allies. Implemented and put in place by the Bush administration, the corporate globalization model that has inspired Iraq's radical new economy is causing the average citizen extreme economic hardship and has stimulated resentment and distrust of the Iraqi and American governments. L. Paul Bremer, when he was in charge of the Iraqi governing council, recognized this as he wrote that "restructuring inefficient state enterprises requires laying off workers... and opening markets to foreign trade, [has] put enormous pressure on traditional retailers." "Globalization," he continued, "has [had] immediate negative consequences for many people... causing political and social tensions [but it is] good for the economy and society in the long run (Holland, 2006)," Putting "free markets" ahead of caring for the needs of the occupied citizenry (the best practices of any post-conflict reconstruction) in Iraq has spawned the current insurgency. What I would say to the United States Administration is this, "Well duh, Paul, George, Dick, it would seem to me that causing immediate economic upheaval and destroying the quality of life for the majority of Iraqis immediately upon the country's arrival is probably not a good way to win their hearts and minds, what do you think? I would think that purple thumbs are meaningless if, to get them, I have to end up losing my livelihood, my home, and the basic necessities of life such as food, water, and electricity.

So what does all of this have to do with our Colossus of Baghdad, plenty! Early in the Iraq takeover, the

American Administration announced plans to employ the bulk of Iraq's regular army to rebuild Iraq's critical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges. The original plan called for the United States to pay the salaries of Iraqi soldiers to perform this work, thus ensuring- at least in the immediate term- against their return to civilian life without any gainful employment. Yet, instead, in their infinite wisdom, L. Paul Bremer, in concert with the Bush administration, made it illegal for the government of Iraq to favor local Iraqi business or Iraqi workers for reconstruction work— this includes the officers and enlisted men of the Iraqi Army. This meant that all those angry and heavily armed men were now unemployed and, because of Bremer's order #39, could now not even find work rebuilding their own country or working on the monstrous American embassy. This act in one swift stroke killed the State Department's detailed plans for post war Iraq and created circumstances in which the insurgency could flourish and gain popular support (Holland, 2007).

In addition to the above knucklehead move, Bremer, as his first order as Director of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance and head of the [Coalition Provisional Authority](#) had been to De-Ba`athify Iraqi Society. To do this, it fired 120,000 senior civil servants to clean out the government of holdovers from Saddam's Ba'ath party, not because they were a party to Saddam Hussein's crimes, but because they could have stood in the way of the economic transformation (Holland, 2006). Please, do not think of these civil servants as the overweight, poorly dressed and pasty skinned men and women you see at the social security office or the Internal Revenue Service. These were mostly Sunni Arab men who were accustomed to influence and who all had compulsory military training and caches of military weapons. These individuals were freshly put out of work and facing a new order of Shiite rule. If you coalesce these civil servants together with the unemployed Iraqi Army soldiers and mix in both groups being angry at the United States for their loss of position, status, and livelihood, it does not take much imagination to see who the insurgency in Iraq is and why conditions are they way they are now.

In addition, Congress appropriated \$592 million in the emergency Iraq budget awarded last year. Most of it has gone to a Kuwait builder, First Kuwaiti Trading and Contracting, the lead contractor on the American Embassy project, with the rest awarded to six undisclosed American companies. This meant that local firms, local workers, and small, local businesses were completely left out of the plans to rebuild the country's public infrastructure. Experts call this 'Local Ownership' and consider it crucially important in occupations to win public support. As a result, the Bush initiatives to create jobs that initially sounded good on the surface and made for good press, have had just the opposite effect— they are robbing the country of opportunities for the average Iraqi to work.

For example, for security reasons, the embassy is being built entirely by imported labor. The American hired contractor, First Kuwaiti General Trading and Contracting Company, linked to human-trafficking allegations by a Chicago Tribune[6] investigation last year, hired a workforce of 900 almost entirely Asian workers who live and work on the site. In a country where half of the population is out of work, this action by the United States is, no doubt, stirring up hatred in the Iraqi people. In this same vein, after the American Embassy in Baghdad is finished, for security reason, it is highly unlikely that the cooks, janitors, serving staff, and anyone else directly serving the personal needs of the Americans will be Iraqi either. In addition, security concerns bar any purchase of Iraqi food. The embassy provisions are supplied under a U.S. government contract with Houston-based KBR, which separately provides similar services to the military in Iraq.

Obviously, it is not a good thing for the Iraqi farm industry that virtually every bite and sip consumed in the embassy is imported from the United States. It is good, however, for the multinational corporations that are admired by the Bush Administration, dominated by big business ideologues, under the plans to "globalize" Iraq's economy. These "reformers" are more interested in enriching their corporate allies than in helping restore the quality of life to the average Iraqi. This is obviously why First Kuwaiti Trading and Contracting is the lead contractor building the embassy rather than some local Iraqi firm.

So, it appears then, that instead of focusing on restoring jobs and the basics like electricity, water, and sewage systems, the Bush Administration, in the building of its monstrous and grotesque government palace, has, in its neoliberal economics laboratory, stitched together its globalist creation out of dead parts of the Iraqi economy. A recent comment from one of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's top aides confirms these radical policies as he claimed that in Iraq, the United States "is embarrassing the Iraqi government by violating human rights and treating his country like an " experiment in a U.S. lab[7]" (Associated Press, 2007). Perhaps this is the undefined reason hundred of thousands of Iraqi refugees are flooding into neighboring countries looking for jobs, a home, and some semblance of a normal existence and quality of life.

Fourth, the president, in his press conference of May 24, 2007, stated that the United States "was there [in Iraq] at the invitation of the Iraqi government...It's their government's choice. If they were to say, leave, we would leave... If they were to make the request, we wouldn't be there". The scope and the magnitude of the embassy make these statements difficult, if not impossible, to believe. An article posted June 20, 2006 in The Nation[8] states

This gigantic complex does not square with the repeated assertions by the people who run the American government that the United States will not stay in the country after Iraq becomes a stand alone, democratic entity.

An "embassy" in which 8000 people labor, along with the however many thousands of military personnel necessary to defend them, is not a diplomatic outpost. It is a base. A permanent base (Hoffman, 2006).

The president's words above are ridiculous. Against the current backdrop of sectarian violence and misery, runaway unemployment and middle class displacement, malnutrition, and unprecedented illness of Iraqis, an American Embassy-palace, the likes of which has never seen before, has risen. The complex is bigger than anything Saddam Hussein ever built (McGrory, 2006) and is equally, exotic, grandiose, and decadently luxurious (the only thing it is missing is the antelopes and lions of Uday's private zoo). The United States, now known as the new Rome in some parts of the Middle East, seems to find nothing wrong in the ironic symbolism of building this plush and regal complex on the site of one of Saddam's former arrogant dream palaces and their architect claiming that the complex will be visible from space, will cover an area larger than Vatican city, and will be big enough to accommodate four Millennium domes while all the while claiming that they are bringing liberation and democracy to Saddam's oppressed peoples.

Hence, because of the scope and extreme size of this complex, I assert, similarly as the Nation article cited above does, that the Bush Administration does not have nor has it ever had the intention of turning this Embassy or anything else over to the Iraqi government if they asked us to leave. Nor would this Administration turn over the four super military complexes, the Al Asad air base, Balad, Camp Taji, and Tallil air base, priced at approximately 231 million apiece, to the Iraqis if they asked us to. The assertion by the President that his administration would just does not have any credibility whatsoever. It is more realistic to assume, as most analysts do, that the desire to establish a long-term military presence in Iraq was always one of the reasons behind the 2003 invasion (White, 2007).

A model that is more realistic and closer to what I believe is the truth has been put forth by Robert Gates, the US defense secretary who states, "what I'm thinking in terms of is some mutual agreement where some force of Americans... is present for a protracted period of time" (US mulls long-term stay in Iraq) Justin Higgins, of the state department, confirms Gates commentary with his statement, "there's going to be a fairly sizable commitment to Iraq by the U.S. government in all forms for several years" (Hanley, 2006)[9]. These statements were the result of the findings of the Baker-Hamilton Study group that fundamentally endorsed the Pentagon's occupation mentality that envisioned 50,000 to 60000 remaining in Iraq for years to come. This would explain the major investments in the military bases and massive embassy complex. Joseph Gerson, a historian of American military bases give us a logical reason for this conclusion, he states "the Bush administration's intention is to have a long-term military presence in the region. The invasion of Iraq... was designed to transform the oil rich nation into an unsinkable U.S. aircraft carrier from which U.S. attacks and military interventions could be launched to "discipline" oil rich Iran, Syria, and others who might challenge U.S. regional hegemony, terrorizing potential rivals... with high tech and potentially nuclear "shock and awe" destruction" (2007). Jimmy Carter, a former president and humanitarian, concurs with Gerson's writing for he has stated that,

There are people in Washington... who never intend to withdraw military forces from Iraq and they are looking ten, 20, 50 years in the future... the reason that we went into Iraq was to establish a permanent military base in the gulf region, and I never heard any of our leaders say that they would commit themselves to the Iraqi people that ten years from now there will be no military bases of the United States in Iraq (Carter, 2005).

All of these statements directly contradiction comments made by both the president, which were seen earlier, and those made by the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al Maliki, who, under the false pretense that America would one day redraw its forces and go home, has said that American troops can leave "anytime they want (Associated Press, 2007).

So, it seems pretty clear that this whole Iraq adventure, did, in fact, have an ulterior motive— taking up permanent military residence in the Middle East. This is not an aberration or a fluke. During the past six decades, Gerson tells us "the U.S. has slowly constructed a network of military bases and access agreements that extends across North Africa to the Persian Gulf nations and [upwards to] Turkey and onward to the atoll of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean" (2007). These, plus the U.S. troops and bases that have been placed in Europe, supposedly under NATO command, have all been part of a process to build up an imperial infrastructure, with this new Baghdad "embassy" citadel as its center in the midst of the world's most important commodity— oil, the wealth and lifeblood of modern culture. As we have seen, the embassy is remarkably ostentatiously outsized for Iraq (80 football fields vs. the average American embassy at about 10 acres) Can it then, in any meaningful and rational sense, be considered an embassy, and if so, an embassy to whom? As an outpost, this vast compound reeks of one thing: imperial pomposity and privilege. It was never meant to be an embassy representing a democracy within a once oppressed land. From the initial conception, it was to be the imperial control center suitable only for the planet's sole "hyperpower" that had managed to force, manipulate, and coerce itself into control of the oil resources of the globe. It was Washington's dream, fit to house the leader of a new Pax Americana— an all powerful, Roman style emperor (Juhasz, 2006).

During Bush the First's reign, Desert Storm was fought to help create a "New World Order" in which the United States, with its vision of a Neo-Roman empire with America at its apex, consolidated its near total control over Middle East Oil Reserves. First it bombed Iraq back into a pre-industrial age and complete submissiveness, and, then, used Saddam to provide the justification it needed to expand its military presence across the Middle East. Thousands of U.S. warriors, operatives, and their awesome and deadly weapons, technology far beyond the capabilities of anything in the region to deter them, were deposited in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (Gerson, 2007). These actions by Bush the Elder would set the stage for what his son was to do next.

Following the interlude of the Clinton years, which practiced a similar agenda on Eastern Europe, Bush the Second came to power and his administration immediately implemented a particularly radical model of corporate globalization. In this maturing of his New World Order agenda, military might and full-scale invasion was now being teamed with the advancement of the administration's extreme and manipulative economic policies. This new model is particularly imperial. Under its auspices, an administration would no longer just simply remove and replace the head of a regime (as it did in Panama and Grenada) if it finds uncooperative. Instead, it uses military invasion to fundamentally transform a country's political and economic structure, followed by an occupation the purpose of which is to maintain the altered structure by changing the laws of these foreign nations to service the empire's needs. This is the undefined definition of imperialism, and, as an agenda, it has been promoted by the members of the current administration, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Libby, Khailzad, Perle, Zoellick, and Bolton and the like who were all participants in the Project for the New American Century. This group is seeking to use American military power to establish a Pax Americana— "American Peace" – which is based upon an older Roman model that had, at its center, an all powerful emperor who ran his kingdom on 50 percent slave labor, who eliminated all guarantees of civil liberties for its citizens, and who curbed democratic participation while, at the same time, maintained the appearances of a participatory, representative government so he could make the elites feel like they retained the prestige of serving the government, the public, and civil life. To do this, the Emperor kept the Roman Senate and the representatives of the people in place, but he only appointed those individuals he wanted in place who would serve his interests. The rest of the empire was overseen from regionally based citadels by military overlords who kept the "peace" through perpetuating enormous amounts of war and bloodshed as other nations and peoples were forced to acquiesce. Internally, however, he kept the peace for 200 years by pouring large amounts of money into public services such as building aqueducts, providing services, supporting public thought, and circuses (public entertainments) (Juhasz, 2006).

Bush and the New American Century gang has chosen all of the worst elements of this Roman Imperial model to emulate: the slow assault of personal civil liberties and the movement toward a one party, non representative government. Even the most conservative Republican columnist or talk radio host will readily admit that G. W. Bush has succeeded in consolidating more and more power under his control than any president in modern history. He did this while, at the same time, increasing the number of people in the United States existing in the lower income brackets, people who, in a modern new form of slavery, have to work continuously in order to meet such basic needs as health care, and, unfortunately, often are unable to. The administration has also chosen to ignore the best parts of what the Roman Empire did for its citizens by not putting any resources into public education, public resources, or public services. What, pray tell, has our current administration done to improve the lives of the average American citizen on its watch? Nothing. Everything it has done has furthered the interests of multinational corporations, the elites, and globalization. Furthermore, just as the Pax Romana did not create peace, neither has the Pax Americana as acts of deadly terror have increased every year of the Bush administration. They increased more than three fold between 2003 and 2004 (Juhasz, 2006).

Earlier in this blog, the question was asked, can the mammoth American Embassy being built in Baghdad, because of its proportions and overt ostentatiousness, actually be considered an embassy, and, if so, an embassy representing whom? The answer to this question has been shown in this blog posting. We have seen that America's military might, for decades now, have strategically been placed all over the world, and that power is currently being stealthily consolidated in the office of the president. These things are being done in preparation for the epiphany of a American Century sponsored American emperor. Whether this is the current president or some anti-dignitary yet to come will remain to be seen. But one thing is most certain, his seat of power will be Embassy Baghdad, which is a monument to the Bush administration's convictions that America is destined to be the greatest dominator this world, and history, has ever seen. The imperial mindset goes deep. It thinks unbearably well of itself, and so, naturally, it wants to memorialize itself, to give itself the surroundings that only the great, the super, the megalomaniac deserves. So, then, it seems the only proper tribute we can offer to this example of human arrogance and folly is to declare the Behemoth American Embassy in Baghdad the 8th wonder of the modern world.

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