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## Bush's Baghdad Palace

NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN

Among the many secrets the American government cannot keep, one of its biggest (104 acres) and most expensive (\$592 million) is the American Embassy being built in Baghdad. Surrounded by fifteen-foot-thick walls, almost as large as the Vatican on a scale comparable to the Mall of America, to which it seems to have a certain spiritual affinity, this is no simple object to hide.

So you think the Bush Administration is planning on leaving Iraq? Read on.

The *Chicago Tribune* reports, "Trucks shuttle building materials to and fro. Cranes, at least a dozen of them, punch toward the sky. Concrete structures are beginning to take form. At a time when most Iraqis are enduring blackouts of up to 22 hours a day, the site is floodlighted by night so work can continue around the clock."

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Nicholas von Hoffman is the author of *A Devil's Dictionary of Business*, recently published by Nation Books. He is a Pulitzer Prize losing author of thirteen books, including *Citizen Cohn*, and a columnist for the *New York Observer*.

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It will come as less than a surprise to learn that this project is another Halliburton deal subbed out to an outfit in Kuwait. The *Tribune* says that "for security reasons, the new embassy is being built entirely by imported labor. The contractor, First Kuwaiti General Trading and Contracting Co., which was linked to human-trafficking allegations by a *Chicago Tribune* investigation last year, has hired a workforce of 900 mostly Asian workers who live on the site." In a land where half the population is out of work the United States ought to win countless native hearts and minds with this labor policy.

On the other hand, the latest is that the facilities for the 8,000 people scheduled to work in the vice-regal compound will be completed on time next year. Doubtless the cooks, janitors and serving staff attending to the Americans' needs and comforts in this establishment, which is said to exceed in luxury and appointments anything Saddam Hussein built for himself, will not be Iraqis either.

According to Knight Ridder, "US officials here [in Baghdad] greet questions about the site with a curtness that borders on hostility. Reporters are referred to the State Department in Washington, which declined to answer questions for security reasons." Photographers attempting to get pictures of what the locals call "George W's Palace" are confined to using telephoto lenses on this, the largest construction project undertaken by Iraq's American visitors.

Nonetheless, we know much of what is going on in the place, where there will soon be twenty-one buildings, 619 apartments with very fancy digs for the big shots, restaurants, shops, gym facilities, a swimming pool, a food court, a beauty salon, a movie theater (we can't say if it's a multiplex) and, as the *Times of London* reports, "a swish club for evening functions." This should be ideal for announcing the various new milestones marking the trudge of the Iraqi people toward democracy and freedom.

*USA Today* has learned that the "massive new embassy, being built on the banks of the Tigris River, is designed to be entirely self-sufficient and won't be dependent on Iraq's unreliable public utilities." Thus, there will be no reason or excuse for any of the thousands of Americans working in this space, which is about the size of eighty football fields, to share the daily life experience of an Iraqi or even come in accidental contact with one.

"It's no secret why a luxurious embassy might be needed in Baghdad. The State Department is finding it more difficult to persuade people to staff the embassy here," writes Knight Ridder's Leila Fadel. "The post needs people with language skills and experience that are already hard to find. Americans can't bring their families here, and the kidnappings and violence relegate Americans to the embassy complex." Thus it appears that our diplomatic personnel are more like mercenaries than Doctors Without Borders.

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The "above and beyond the call of duty" stuff is strictly for our beleaguered soldiers.

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 8,000 people labor, along with the however many thousand military personnel necessary to defend them, is not a diplomatic outpost. It is a base. A permanent base.

So it turns out that the plan, if that is the right word for the haphazard, faith-based, fact-free and data-scarce decision-making that has been the one constant in this adventure, is to stay in Baghdad and run the country. This is beyond lunacy.

There are these 8,000 Americans holed up in a private city, who do not dare to leave their fortified luxury bunker for fear of being killed or kidnapped and tortured if caught outside their fortified walls, and who are trying to run the country by giving orders to the Iraqi government, which is also operating out of the Green Zone, that vast fortified place isolated from the people of the country.

Democrats demanding an exit strategy from Iraq are routinely derided by the Bush Administration as cowards who "cut and run." But if this Embassy plan is not a form of cut and run, what is it? Instead of cutting and making a run for Kuwait, they intend to cut and run into what amounts to the world's largest bunker, a capacious rat hole where they can wait in safety until all the Iraqis have killed one another or all factions unite, march on this air-conditioned citadel and slit the throats of its irrelevant inhabitants.

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