

IRAQ: Green Zone Construction Boom

In Baghdad, the United States is now building a monument to rank with Grand Coulee Dam, the Pentagon, Disney World and the Mall of America. It has elements of all four, plus a 15-foot stone wall and surface-to-air missiles.

by David Sarasohn, **Oregonian**
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Despite what everyone says, it's just not true that this generation of Americans is not building massive monuments to leave as our timeless legacy to our posterity.

We're just not building them here.

But in Baghdad, the United States is now building a monument to rank with Grand Coulee Dam, the Pentagon, Disney World and the Mall of America. It has elements of all four, plus a 15-foot stone wall and surface-to-air missiles.

It's the new American embassy in Iraq, the biggest U.S. embassy anywhere, maybe the biggest embassy anywhere ever. According to the Associated Press and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the embassy area will cover 104 acres -- 10 times the size of a typical U.S. embassy space, six times the size of the United Nations compound in New York, and about the area of Vatican City, which is its own country.

The embassy takes in 21 buildings, including six apartment buildings; power generator, water source and purification plant; a recreation building with swimming pool, gym and food court; five high-security entrances plus an emergency entrance/exit.

It is, to use a phrase popular with the Bush backers a while ago and less widely used now, the embassy of an empire. Expressing the deepest aspirations of the United States at this moment in history, it's kind of a cross between Caesar Augustus and Donald Trump.

It's also a clear statement -- a literally concrete statement -- that the United States plans to be a dominant presence in Iraq for a long time.

At its beginning, the giant embassy was expected to reflect a broader determination to persevere in Baghdad. In 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell told The Washington Post, "As I build up that large embassy, I've got to also generate more international support, U.N. presence -- get the U.N. back in there in force. . . . I think NATO is more and more willing to play a role in Iraq."

That hope has largely vanished, along with the idea that the United States has a clear strategy in mind to reorder Iraq.

When you don't have a policy, you can at least have a palace. Especially when the biggest embassy in the world will be escorted by some of the biggest military bases in the world.

Four U.S. "superbases" are planned for Iraq, and Newsweek recently described the furthest along: Balad Air Force base, 15 square miles with separate neighborhoods for different services and private contractors, an indoor golf course and a full range of fast-food options. According to The Nation, another superbase, al-Asad, has two bus routes.

It is the official U.S. position that all this is temporary, and Newsweek quotes spokesman Lt. Col. Barry Johnson explaining, "What we have in Iraq are 'contingency bases,' intended to support our operations in Iraq on a temporary basis until (Operation Iraqi Freedom) is complete."

But the magazine also quotes Air Force Brig. Gen. Frank Gorenc, commander of Balad, that "It's safe to say Balad will be here for a long time."

Something the Iraqis, for good or ill, probably figured out a while ago. Many of them have concluded, again for good or ill, that the United States plans to keep a major military presence in Iraq about as long as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

To try to reassure them, Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., has introduced, and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., has co-sponsored, a military appropriations amendment saying the money couldn't be used "to establish permanent military bases in Iraq or to exercise control over the oil infrastructure or oil resources of Iraq."

Eventually, all public policy issues, internationally or at home, become issues of real estate. And when one country is building such massive presences in another country, it becomes harder to imagine that, in the president's words, "As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down."

Maybe, as the Iraqis stand up, we will trade up.

But maybe someday, in an Iraqi future that seems further and further away, we won't think of our new construction projects as massive embattled outposts in a bitterly hostile country.

Maybe someday we can just think of them as gated communities -- with missiles.

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