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An Airbase in Vicenza

How Italy Became a Launching Pad for the US Military

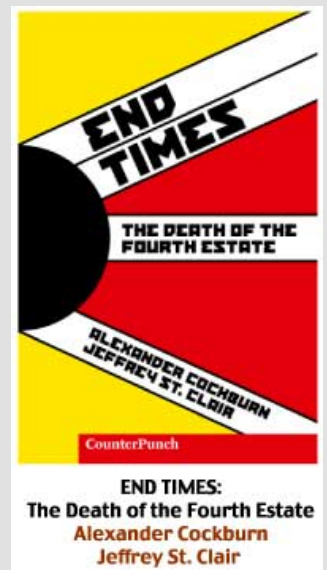
By VALERIO VOLPI

The presence of friendly governments in Eastern Europe and in central Asian former Soviet Republics, allured by the prospect of U.S. investments and protection against their Russian neighbor, is helping U.S. militarism in its imperialist expansion eastwards, as pointed out by Elise Hugus's article "U.S. Military Expansion in Eastern Europe", *Z Magazine*, September 2007.

However, as U.S. tentacles are expanding eastwards, they are, at the same time, tightening their grip on southern Europe: infamous yet probably unknown to the majority of people worldwide, are the latest events concerning Vicenza, 110,000 residents, a small, pleasant town located in the Padanian lowlands, close to world-renowned Venice and the Adriatic sea, in the northeastern part of Italy. Vicenza's Dal Molin airport has been chosen by the U.S. as the site for a new base, in an area already heavily militarized (including the Ederle base with 6,000 U.S. troops; site Pluto in Longare, where nuclear warheads were stored for twenty years; the Tormeno base; the Torri di Q.lo depots; the housing area in East Vicenza), but nonetheless the perfect location for new missions in the Middle East, thanks to its geographical position and 150 m long runway.

The network consisting of Dal Molin, which will be reinforced by an additional 2000 new soldiers, currently stationed in Bamberg and Schweinfurt in Germany, who will be part of the new Brigade Combat Team, the largest assault force in Europe with six battalions in Vicenza (four at Dal Molin and two at Ederle) and an overall 4,600 troops; Aviano air base, near Pordenone, not far from the Slovenian border, massively used for the bombing of Serbia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, as well as Iraq in 1991 and 2003; and the Ederle base, also in Vicenza, which was used to transport the 173rd U.S. brigade

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into Iraq, will turn northeastern Italy into a formidable bridgehead for assaults to the Middle East, with hundreds of planes and thousands of men ready to take off and be deployed in a few hours' time. How could anyone believe, then, what U.S. authorities state, that is, that the runway at Del Molin will not be used?

Italy, unlike other countries closer to the Middle East, but not necessarily subservient to U.S. orders, such as Turkey, is the perfect place for U.S. imperialism: no matter who is in charge, center-left or center-right, Prodi or Berlusconi, orders from the U.S. master must be obeyed; besides, thanks to bilateral agreements, U.S. bases are sovereign territories. This is why building a new base in Italy is an extremely advantageous deal.

It is worth remembering that the only exception to this rule has been Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, who, in spite of his many flaws as a human being, nevertheless dared to oppose the U.S. government.

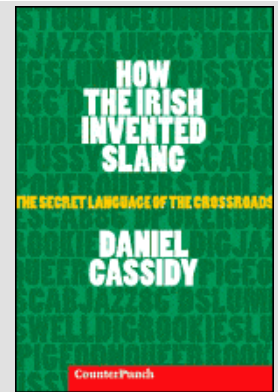
On 12 October 1985 some members of the Palestinian Liberation Front hijacked an Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, near the Egyptian coast, in order to obtain the liberation of some imprisoned Palestinians. During the hijacking, an American citizen was killed. The commando eventually surrendered, and was put on an Egyptian plane, supposedly to be flown into Tunisia. During the flight, however, four American fighter jets forced the Egyptian plane to change route and land in the U.S. base of Sigonella, Sicily, in order to arrest the commando. Prime Minister Craxi, however, after stating that the killing of the American tourist had taken place on Italian soil (the Achille Lauro ship), and that the Palestinian commando should therefore stand trial before an Italian court, had a number of Italian carabinieri surround U.S. troops ready to storm the Egyptian plane. The Palestinian hijackers were eventually arrested by the Italian police and detained in Italy.

This is, to my knowledge, the only case when an Italian government has taken a strong stand before U.S. authorities.

This is why, though the Vicenza case has been and still is a major source of contention both among Italian citizens and within Romano Prodi's coalition government, the Bush Administration has never been too worried about the outcome of the diatribe: the moderate wing of the coalition, that is, the newly-born Democratic Party, is keen on proving its pro-U.S., pro-western world stance; the left wing (Greens, Communists, left-wing Democrats of the Left) is paralyzed by the fact that the alternative to this government would be Bush-lover Berlusconi's return.

The international agreement regulating the status of NATO and U.S. bases in Italy is the (secret) 20 October 1954 Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement, signed by Interior Minister Scelba and U.S. Ambassador Luce, but never ratified by the Italian Parliament, despite the fact that article 80 of the Italian Constitution specifically states that: "The houses authorize through laws the ratification of international treaties which are of a political nature, or which call for arbitration or legal settlements, or which entail changes to national territory or financial burdens or changes in the laws". It is very difficult to conceive how a treaty allowing the opening of foreign bases in the country would not fall within one of the cases mentioned above (actually, *all* cases mentioned above are inherent in such a treaty).

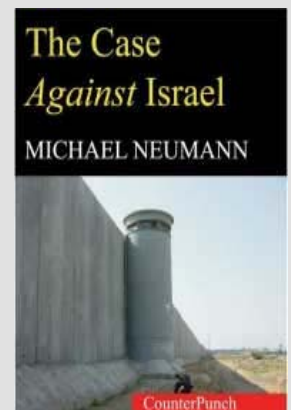
The agreement's content was disclosed only on 10 March 1999, when then-Prime Minister D'Alema removed this secrecy after the acquittal of the U.S. pilot responsible for the death of 20 people (eight Germans, five Belgians, three Italians, two Poles, one Austrian and one Dutch) on the Cermis cableway, on the Italian Alps. That was done to allow the Italian Bench and the provincial Government of Trento



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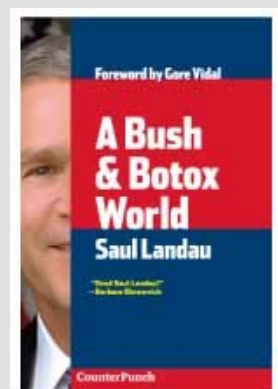
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(where the cableway was located) to access the provisions of the treaty.

What happened then was simply blood-curdling. A U.S. plane was flying by Mount Cermis, in the Italian Alps, at a height of 360 ft (110 m), when military regulations imposed a minimum height of 2,000 ft (600 m), and that very plane was not allowed to fly at less than 3,600 ft (1100 m). Its speed was also considerably faster than permitted, as recorded by a U.S. "Awacs" radar plane, according to which the plane was traveling at 500 mp/h (100 mp/h was the maximum speed allowed).

The pilot, Captain Richard J. Ashby, had made a bet with other fellow soldiers: had his plane managed to fly between the two cableway cables, between 30 and 40 meters apart, his crew would win. The stake: beer for the night. A videotape proving the bet had been recorded. However, the plane accidentally hit and cut the cable supporting the car, which plunged for 80 meters. All of the occupants died. The videotape was destroyed immediately after.

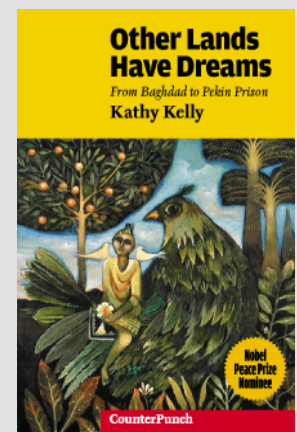
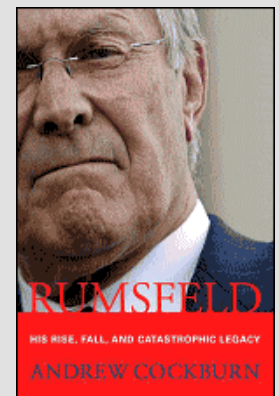
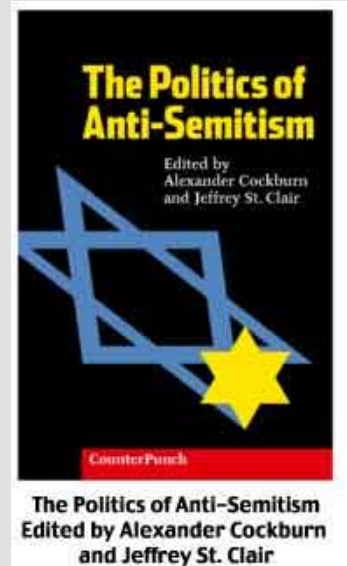
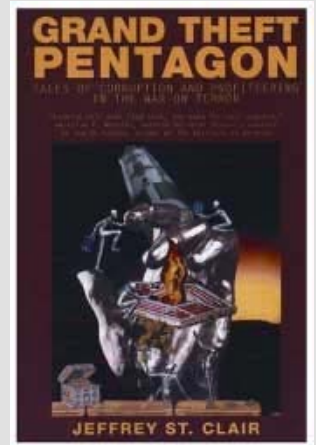
Of the four Marines on the plane, only Ashby and his navigator, Captain Joseph Schweitzer, stood trial. The trial took place in North Carolina, after an Italian court had stated that NATO treaties gave jurisdiction to U.S. military courts. Charged with twenty counts of involuntary manslaughter and negligent homicide, and risking a 206-year imprisonment sentence, they were nevertheless acquitted. The court stated that authorized height for the flight was 500 ft (though the plane was flying much lower, otherwise it never would have cut the cables); that board maps did not show the cableway (event denied by the Marine Command, as the cableway was well visible on charts); and that the radar was not working properly (which has never been proven).

Such acquittals caused an uproar among European public opinion. After the verdict, Ashby declared his prayers would be for the victims. The next day, he went to Las Vegas to celebrate. Navigator Schweitzer, evidently tortured by remorse, confessed everything. Schweitzer and Ashby stood trial again in May 1999, charged with obstruction of justice for destroying the videotape. Ashby was sentenced to six-month detention, and then released after 4.5 months for good behavior. Not bad for somebody responsible for the death of twenty innocent people.

As mentioned above, the provisions of the 1954 Agreement are now public. However, the publicity concerns only the political framework of the treaty. Technical attachments (that is, what is done within bases, how bases will be used and what kind of weapons are kept inside) remain top secret. And, though the 1995 Memorandum between the Italian and U.S. governments states that facilities are officially under Italian control, and that the U.S. Commander must preemptively inform Italian authorities about any moving of supplies, weapons, personnel, and any problem or inconvenience occurred or likely to occur, full control on staff, equipment and operations falls within U.S. jurisdiction, and no sanctions are provided for in case of breach of these regulations. That is, Italian authorities officially keep an eye on bases; what happens in there, however, is decided by U.S. authorities.

Therefore, the status of U.S. bases in Italy has not changed: they remain sovereign enclaves within the Italian territory, no different than States such as the Vatican or San Marino Republic (which, however, do not appear to own nuclear weapons, planes, ships or tanks). This means that no Italian, whether MP, judge, journalist or member of police forces can freely access the bases, and U.S. authorities are free to do whatever they like within their sovereign territory.

Take Camp Darby, near Pisa, for example. This base, wherein an immense amount of weapons is amassed (60% of the



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weapons used in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 came from there), is directly connected to Livorno harbor by means of ship-canal.

On the evening of 10 April 1991, because of some mysterious U.S. naval manoeuvres in front of Livorno harbor, ferry boat Moby Prince crashed into an oil tanker: 140 people died. The U.S. has always refused to cooperate in the investigations.

In summer 2000, the ceilings of eight ammunition depots collapsed: in the next twelve days, due to the dangerousness of the situation, radio-controlled robots were used to remove more than 100,000 ammunitions, weighing more than 24 tons. Of course, neither the public nor Italian civil authorities were informed. No evacuation was therefore arranged.

Conventional weapons are just a small part of the issue. U.S. bases' extra-territoriality has allowed them to be home to a massive amount of nuclear weapons as well. One notorious example is La Maddalena naval base, located on the island of Santo Stefano, in the northern part of the island of Sardinia, one of the most beautiful natural areas in the world. This base is home, thanks to a 1972 (secret) agreement between the U.S. and Italy, to nuclear submarines.

Though Prime Minister Spadolini stated in 1984 that no Cruise nuclear missiles were in that base, an analysis carried out by U.S. analysts William Arkin and Joshua Handler four years later (Briefing Paper on La Maddalena: a key site for sixth fleet Tomahawk Cruise missiles, Greenpeace News, 22 June 1988), based on official declassified papers, stated the opposite. According to this report, though no nuclear warheads could be found on dry land, nuclear weapons were stored inside ship Orion, moored at the base. Besides, nuclear submarines would frequently voyage to and from the base. La Maddalena was, according to the report, a fundamental location for the Cold War's arm race.

The strategic importance of this base grew after the end of the Cold War, with threats no longer coming from the USSR, but, rather, from Islamic fundamentalist groups, possibly hiding in North Africa. Nuclear propulsion, necessary for long voyages, nuclear weapons, or enormous and extremely expensive nuclear submarines would therefore no longer be necessary for terrorist-hunting missions.

Nonetheless, despite Edward Luttwak's advice to shut down bases no longer important strategically, the Pentagon lobby (backed by Rumsfeld) managed to get huge amounts of funds to make the base safer against terrorist attacks, and to even triple its extension.

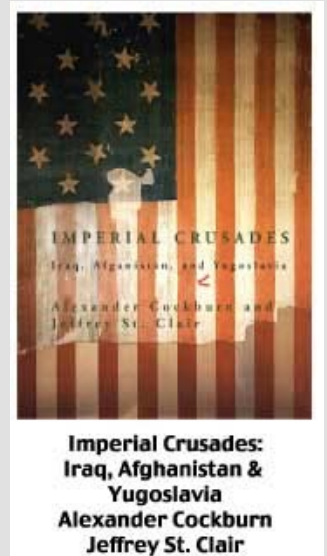
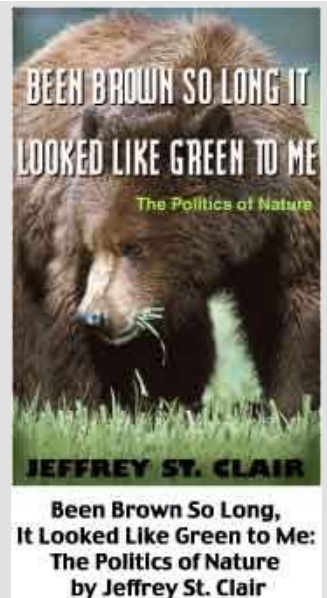
However, the base is due to be shut down in February 2008. What happened?

Even though construction works had begun, on 23 November 2005, then-Minister of Defense Antonio Martino received the order to report to Washington. Rumsfeld informed him that the base would be closed permanently. Apparently, the Iraqi war costs no longer allowed for frills. Investments had to be diverted to something more suitable to U.S. current and future imperial plans, say Vicenza, for example.

Therefore, it is not thanks to people's mobilization, or to the sincere commitment of Sardinia Governor Renato Soru that the base will be closed. The Americans are leaving because it is more convenient for them. Otherwise, they would stay.

Now, U.S. troops will be leaving Sardinia soon, leaving behind, however, a mountain of health problems and environmental pollution.

Accidents have been numerous, though few have escaped military secrecy and become known, for a reason or another, to the public: on 22 September 1972, damaged nuclear



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submarine Ray entered the base for repair, though security protocols provided for offshore repairing; on 19 June 1982, ship Orion left her moorings to repair a damaged nuclear submarine; on 13 November 2002, damaged nuclear submarine Oklahoma City was taken to La Maddalena; on 25 October 2003 submarine Hartford ran aground. A trivial accident, in the words of Rear Admiral Stanley. However, he removed the base top officials, which was a very strange act for something so unimportant.

Independent researchers who have analyzed the water near the U.S. base have found consistent amounts of radioactive thorium 234, cobalt and plutonium. An analysis carried out by consortium Epidemiologia Impresa Sviluppo on behalf of the Sardinia government has found that in La Maddalena area the rate of deadly diseases is far higher than in the rest of the country. For example, Non-Hodgin lymphoma is 177.8% higher for men; 335% more people have been hospitalized for melanomas; lung cancer is 43.6% higher. Just a coincidence?

Another infamous effect of the 1954 Agreement has been the secret stationing and training, in the past, of illegal paramilitary commandos, often with the participation of Italian secret service agents, working to influence Italian political life, and take action (read *coup d'état*) in case of unwelcome outcome at the polls (that is, leftist victory) or threat of Soviet invasion (certainly more imaginary than real).

Among these gangs, GLADIO, recently declared by an Italian court as "conspiracy subversive of the constitutional order", was very active in promoting the so-called "tension strategy", consisting in the organization and the execution of terrorist acts, such as the detonation of bombs in crowded places, with the help and connivance of Italian neo-fascists groups, to then cast the blame on the Communist party or leftist organizations in order to damage the Left at the polls.

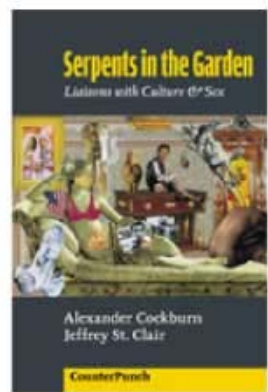
Infamous examples are the bombings of: the Agriculture National Bank in Piazza Fontana in Milan, on 12 December 1969 (16 people dead and 88 injured); train Italicus near Bologna on 4 August 1974 (12 dead and 105 injured); Bologna train station on 2 August 1989 (85 dead, 200 wounded); and Rapid train 904 on 24 December 1984 (15 dead, 2 more died afterwards, 267 wounded). Probably, only the fact that Italy was located in the middle of Europe, its size and its economic weight saved it from suffering the same fate of countries such as Nicaragua or Guatemala.

All this in a country where U.S. military facilities (ranging from simple radar posts to extended bases with barracks and weapons) exceed one hundred. According to the Pentagon "Base Structure Report 2005", U.S. armed forces own 1,614 buildings, covering 892,000 sq/m; and rent 1,190 buildings, covering 886,000 sq/m. 14,000 troops and 5,140 civilians work for the U.S. army in Italy. A real disaster, political, urban, environmental, social, which the new Dal Molin base will make even worse.

Now, it is first of all important to see how the decision was made, as this is another example of full and utter contempt for popular sovereignty.

The decision was made secretly a couple of years ago by Vicenza's mayor Hullweck and then-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. News began to leak only in May 2006, when citizens organized into six different protest committees.

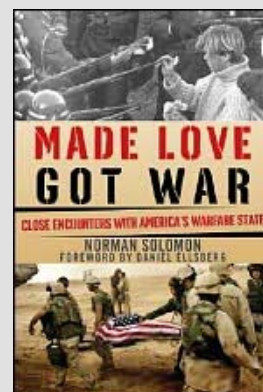
On 26 October 2006, the conservative majority in Vicenza town council, after repeatedly rejecting a citizens' advisory referendum on the issue, voted in favor of the base (21 to 17). However, a few days later, on 15 November, in Caldogno, a little town located next to Dal Molin, the town council voted unanimously against.



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After these votes, it was up to the Prodi government to make a final decision. In this case, despite the proclaimed commitment to local communities' will and decisions, enshrined in the center-left coalition's electoral manifesto; and despite the fact that the entire left side of the coalition was strongly opposed, Prodi argued that Berlusconi's promise to Bush was an unmodifiable obligation for his government. Vice-Prime Minister Francesco Rutelli, who visited Vicenza last 14 September amidst thousands of protesting people, adamantly confirmed this position.

This stance is just absurd. After all, Italian troops had been sent to Iraq by the Berlusconi government, who had promised eternal support. But troops were withdrawn. And a basic tenet of democracy is that governments change, so that policies may change. And Prodi's coalition's electoral manifesto promised to resolutely cut the extension of militarized zones. But, evidently, obeying Washington is more important than respecting the manifesto and the will of local communities, whose majority is opposed to the base.

A survey carried out by Demos & Pi (headed by Ilvo Diamanti, one of Italy's most famous political scientists) in October 2006 found that: 71.8 % of Vicenza residents and 67.5% of Caldogno's knew about the project; 84.8% of Vicenza residents and 85.5% of Caldogno's wanted a referendum; 61% of Vicenza residents and 64.8% of Caldogno's were against the new base; 86.6% of these people in Vicenza and 82.6% in Caldogno would still be opposed to the base, even if a different area, having a lower impact on the environment, traffic, and territory, were chosen.

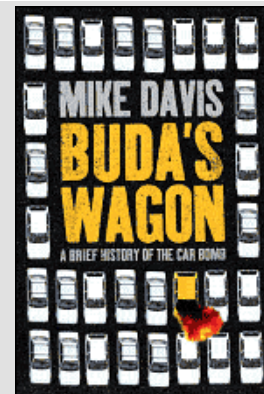
Opposition to the base is widespread in Italy: 17 February 2007 saw a massive demonstration in Vicenza, with the participation of between 150,000 and 200,000 people coming from all over Italy (including U.S. citizens, organized in the U.S. Citizens for Peace and Justice), which, however, has not changed the government's mind on this insane project, which will be disastrous.

First of all, according to 19 renowned Italian town planners, led by Eddy Salzano, 600,000 new c/m of concrete would find their way into the center of Vicenza, stifling any chance of future civil economic development. The findings of the 23 September 2006 meeting on the future of Vicenza expect 707,000 c/m over a surface of 37,000 sq/m. In addition to this, a new residential village will be built, for a total 400 new houses, necessary to host the soldiers now stationed in Germany, and their families.

Data presented to the Vicenza town council meeting of 10 August 2006 show that repairing the 50-year-old Ederle base would cost the U.S. 800,000 dollars; the new Dal Molin base, together with the new residential village, new hospital and schools, only 412,000 dollars. However, new buildings will cover an additional 30% of territory (167,000 sq/m on an overall surface of 550,000) of the Dal Molin area, which, added to 910,000 of the old Ederle and the housing area, will result in a stunning 1,460,000 sq/m, more than the industrial area of Vicenza, but in the very heart of the city, a few hundred meters from major historical landmarks.

Furthermore, the plan envisages that the majority of buildings at Dal Molin will be used for the storage of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, as reminded by Guglielmo Verneau, an engineer. 16% of buildings will be used as dorms; 21 depots will store weapons. Four buildings on the southeastern side of the base, each 112.83 m long, 43.8 m wide, and 11.4 m tall, will include five depots for biochemical materials.

This plan will also be disastrous for the local and Italian economy: a higher number of U.S. troops will be in the city (but no apartments or hotel rooms will be rented), resulting in more pollution, a depreciation in real estate value in the



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area (usually houses around bases lose 30% of their value), a shrinkage in tourism, much fewer acres of land for the development of new civil activities, a higher likelihood of terrorist attacks.

Furthermore, because of bilateral agreements between Italy and the U.S., the Italian government (that is, Italian tax-payers) must share the costs (so-called burden-sharing) of bases with the U.S., in the amount of 37% of total expenses. Therefore, if Italy paid the US 326 million euros in 2002 for 16,000 soldiers stationed in Italy, 2,000 of whom were in Vicenza, we might assume that in that year the amount spent for the Ederle base was 40,75 million euros. The presence of an additional 2,000 soldiers would entail a yearly cost of at least 81 million euros.

What's more, the 1954 London Agreement provides that all utilities within U.S. bases are excise and VAT-free. All items and products bought by U.S. troops or bases are VAT-free. Therefore U.S. troops pay 25% less than Italians do for electricity, 40% less for natural gas, and 65% less for fuel. That, of course, is a very powerful stimulus to the unprincipled squandering of natural resources.

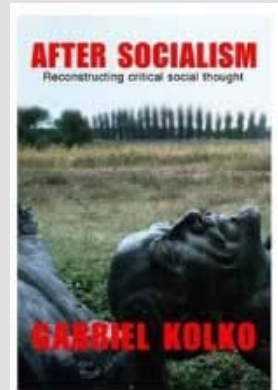
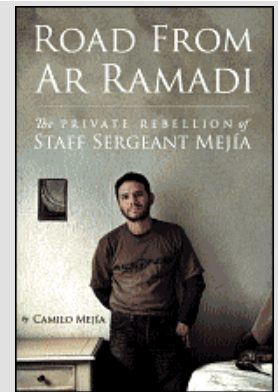
At the moment, according to data from AIM, the municipal enterprise supplying water to Vicenza and other 25 towns in the province, reported by Eugenio Vivian, an engineer, water consumption is 20.7 million c/m per year, that is 280 liters per person per day (including industrial use). In a situation where water is becoming more and more scarce, due to an increase in industrial use, building development in piedmont areas, and a 10-15% decrease in rainfalls in the last 30 years, U.S. officials have requested a capacity of between 60 and 260 liters per second. AIM stated that at present only 7 liters per second can be supplied, which might become 30 by connecting the system to a water plant. Should the Americans manage somehow to get an average consumption of 100 liters per second, considered that 260 liters is impossible, as it would require the digging of new wells which would dry up the nearby cities of Padua and Rovigo, Vicenza would consume an additional 3.15 million cubic meters of water (that is, what 30,000 new residents would consume).

As far as natural gas is concerned, newspaper Corriere del Veneto of 5 October 2006 estimates an average consumption of 900 c/m p/h excluding summer and winter peaks.

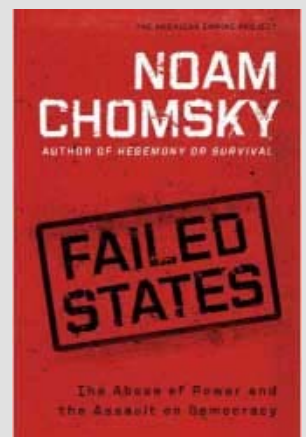
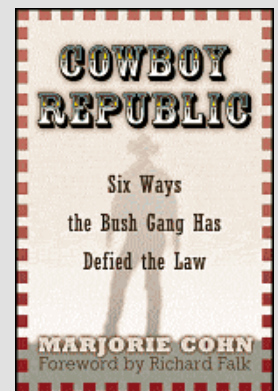
Vivian reckons that with a conservative estimate of 10 hours a day for 180 days, plus hot water for 185 days, overall consumption would be 1.620 million + 494,000 c/m = 2.114 million c/m which, divided by the 119,000 heated sq/m of the new base, would result in a yearly consumption of 17.76 c/m per sq/m in the base alone, when the most modern housing environmental standards require an amount equal to or lower than 3 c/m per sq/m. An additional 1.2 million c/m should be calculated for the new housing area, that is, 400 houses for an average consumption of 300 c/m, for an overall 3.314 million c/m (that is, what an additional 5,500 residents would consume).

As for electricity, not one single sq/m of the approximately 80,000 of new roofs has been destined to solar panels. Instead, U.S. authorities have asked for the installation of an additional 9 MW. Vivian has estimated, by analyzing the consumption level of tertiary industries, which are the most similar to U.S. standards, an additional consumption of about 30-31 million KWh per year, which would become 32 million with the new housing area (that is, the amount that 26,000 new residents would consume).

We need to put an end to this madness. As Sardinia governor Renato Soru has stated, Americans are our friends, but we want them here as tourists, not as soldiers. To this, I would add that it is time to claim back our sovereignty and put an end to our semi-colonial status, and take back our land,



After Socialism
By Gabriel Kolko



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including those immense areas occupied by Italian military bases. Prodi should not turn a deaf ear to his voters' will.

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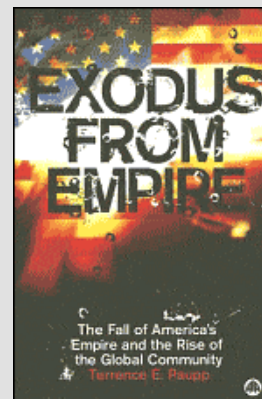
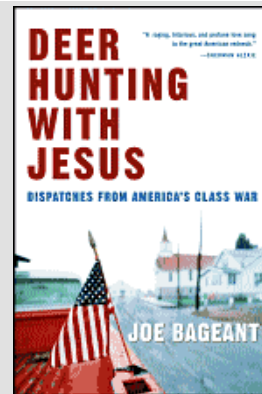
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