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The Mega-Bunker of Baghdad

The new American Embassy in Baghdad will be the largest, least welcoming, and most lavish embassy in the world: a \$600 million massively fortified compound with 619 blast-resistant apartments and a food court fit for a shopping mall. Unfortunately, like other similarly constructed U.S. Embassies, it may already be obsolete

By William Langewiesche



WHITE ELEPHANT IN THE GREEN ZONE The new United States Embassy rises above Baghdad—one of the only projects in Iraq being completed within budget and on time.

When the new American Embassy in Baghdad entered the planning stage, more than three years ago, U.S. officials inside the Green Zone were still insisting that great progress was being made in the construction of a new Iraq. I remember a surreal press conference in which a U.S. spokesman named Dan Senor, full of governmental conceits, described the marvelous developments he personally had observed during a recent sortie (under heavy escort) into the city. His idea now was to set the press straight on realities outside the Green Zone gates. Senor was well groomed and precocious, fresh into the world, and he had acquired a taste for appearing on TV. The assembled reporters were by contrast a disheveled and unwashed lot, but they included serious people of deep experience, many of whom lived fully exposed to Iraq, and knew that society there was unraveling fast. Some realized already that the war had been lost, though such were the attitudes of the citizenry back home that they could not yet even imply this in print.

Now they listened to Senor as they increasingly did, setting aside their professional skepticism for attitudes closer to fascination and wonder. Senor's view of Baghdad was so disconnected from the

streets that, at least in front of this audience, it would have made for impossibly poor propaganda. Rather, he seemed truly convinced of what he said, which in turn could be explained only as the product of extreme isolation. Progress in the construction of a new Iraq? Industry had stalled, electricity and water were failing, sewage was flooding the streets, the universities were shuttered, the insurgency was expanding, sectarianism was on the rise, and gunfire and explosions now marked the days as well as the nights. Month by month, Baghdad was crumbling back into the earth. Senor apparently had taken heart that shops remained open, selling vegetables, fruits, and household goods. Had he ventured out at night he would have seen that some sidewalk cafés remained crowded as well. But almost the only construction evident in the city was of the Green Zone defenses themselves—erected in a quest for safety at the cost of official interactions with Iraq. Senor went home, married a Washington insider, and became a commentator on Fox News. Eventually he set himself up in the business of “crisis communications,” as if even he finally realized that Iraq had gone horribly wrong.

Inside the Green Zone the talk of progress slowed and then died. The first of the nominal Iraqi governments arrived and joined the Americans in their oasis. The rest of Baghdad became the fearsome “Red Zone,” and completely off limits to American officials,

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