

# Tax dollars at work: U.S. military bases overseas

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In a small-group setting at the World Council of Churches Assembly in 2006, a Paraguayan couple timidly mentioned their concerns about the United States building a military base in their country. The Americans in the group were shocked: they didn't know about such a base. But then much of what's done by the Department of Defense is shielded from U.S. citizens—and sometimes even from Congress.

According to Chalmers Johnson in his book *Nemesis*, officially the U.S. has 737 military bases located in 132 of the 190 countries belonging to the United Nations. But the official count fails to mention bases in Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq and several other Middle Eastern countries. The DOD also doesn't count the extensive military facilities maintained by the U.S. in Britain that nominally belong to the Royal Air Force. And then there are host countries, like Jordan, that—for the sake of relations with their own people—want to be able to deny that they have an American military presence. Johnson concludes that the total number of overseas bases is over 1,000 and that even the Pentagon doesn't know how many there are for certain.

Overseas bases range from large, permanent facilities such as the ones in Germany, complete with officers' clubs, bowling alleys and activity centers, to the "lily pad" bases constructed in areas of instability, which contain prepositioned weapons and munitions and have little or no American presence. In the past two decades a string of these lily pad bases have been built in countries around the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, in Iraq at least four permanent, heavily fortified military bases have been created, which presumably the U.S. would continue to occupy even if it otherwise pulls out of the country.

The presence of U.S. military bases breeds resentment in many of the host countries. Sometimes host countries themselves are expected to pay part of the cost of the bases. The conditions negotiated for the establishment of the bases are often

not in the best interests of the host countries. The long-term presence of war matériel can have a devastating impact on the local environment. And American personnel are often insensitive toward local culture and customs, providing yet another offense to host countries.

Although Americans enjoy the idea of having global economic and technological supremacy, most of them don't like the image of America as an imperial military power. Niall Ferguson of New York University says that the U.S. is "an empire . . . that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial." We won't be able to overcome this state of denial until we realize what is happening in our name and with our tax dollars.