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Just What Is America Doing all Over the World?

By Doug Bandow

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In one of the most celebrated debate exchanges of the 2008 presidential campaign, GOP contender Rep. Ron Paul pointed out that Americans were hated because they were "over there" in Islamic lands. In fact, there is virtually no country on earth where American forces are not located.

Luckily, most people in most of those nations are not trying to kill Americans. In fact, many foreigners enjoy being protected at U. S. expense. Alas, Washington's desire to garrison most of the earth's surface helps explain why Uncle Sam is effectively bankrupt.

In fact, it's hard to keep track of America's many overseas military installations. By one Pentagon count there are 865 foreign facilities. But that doesn't count bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, which probably pushes the total past 1000.

There are 268 in Germany, 124 in Japan, and 87 in South Korea. Many of these are small, but the numbers are still incredible. Moreover, writes David Vine of American University: "Others are scattered around the globe in places like Aruba and Australia, Bulgaria and Bahrain, Colombia and Greece, Djibouti, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Romania, Singapore, and, of course, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba -- just to name a few. "

The expense of these facilities is just not the buildings, gates, fences, and other physical plant. There are the many people services -- hospitals, commissaries, chow halls, and more. Finally, costs include paying and training personnel, more than 1.4 million active duty worldwide. Plus caring for millions of family members.

There are nonfinancial costs too. Argues Vine: "Military families suffer painful dislocations as troops stationed overseas separate from loved ones or uproot their families through frequent moves around the world. While some foreign governments like U. S. bases for their perceived economic benefits, many locals living near the bases suffer environmental and health damage from military toxins and pollution, disrupted economic, social, and cultural systems, military accidents, and increased prostitution and crime. "

Bases also often are seen as an endorsement of ugly authoritarian regimes, such as those in Central Asia. In fact, the price of maintaining such installations frequently is formal political and economic support for the host governments.

Advocates of an imperial presence abroad like to argue that it is cheaper to station forces overseas than at home since some countries pay "host nation support." But that ignores the fact that it is America's foreign commitments, backed by bases all over the world, which generate the need for such a large military.

Many policymakers act as if the number of U. S. soldiers, marines, airmen, and sailors is set by the stars, the position of the sun, or the phase of the moon. With no discretion in the number of military personnel, the only question for Washington is where to put them. So dump them in countries which help pay to maintain them.

But U. S. troop levels are not a matter of geography, fixed for all time. They are a matter of choice. The choice to act like the world's policeman.

The Bible tells us that God worries about even a sparrow falling to earth. So does Uncle Sam, who insists on being consulted about virtually every other nation's economic policies, political systems, human rights records, military forces, international objectives, and more.

According to the Defense Department, there are 140,000 U. S. personnel in Iraq. There we are trying to create a Western-style democracy along the Euphrates. The objective has gone from turning the entire Middle East into an idyllic replica of Switzerland to just avoiding a collapse like in Lebanon three decades ago.

Another 90,000 Americans are in Afghanistan. With al-Qaeda virtually absent from that nation (and Osama bin-Laden long gone to Pakistan), the U. S. now is pursuing a different mission. Alas, it's not exactly clear what. Apparently the administration hopes to turn the corrupt, illegitimate Karzai regime into a respected, competent, and effective central government. A wonderful ideal, but neither realistic nor a strategic interest worth war for the U. S.

About 52,000 American troops are in Germany. Obviously the most populous and prosperous country at the center of Europe doesn't need defending. The likelihood of Russian troops marching on Berlin and clambering up the Bundestag building is somewhat akin to that of the Martians landing and conducting a modern War of the Worlds.

The only other reason to have forces in Germany is because that country is closer to other places where Washington wants to send U. S. personnel -- but shouldn't. German bases once devoted to preventing a Red Army conquest are now handling casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan. However, if the U. S. wasn't promiscuously warring on other nations, it wouldn't need a German way-station in Europe.

There are 36,000 troops in Japan. World War II ended 65 years ago, but Washington apparently hasn't noticed. With the second largest economy on earth, Japan could do whatever is necessary to defend itself. Instead, Tokyo expects America to sacrifice Los Angeles if necessary to protect Tokyo.

Roughly 29,000 American military personnel are in South Korea. U. S. forces have been stationed there for 60 years, the first three in a very hot war. The South has the world's 13th largest economy, with about 40 times the GDP of North Korea. The Republic of Korea's population is twice that of the North. Surely Seoul could defend itself without American assistance.

Smaller numbers of Americans are spread throughout the world. About 11,000 afloat in the Pacific. Roughly 10,000 in Italy. Some 9,000 in the United Kingdom. More than a thousand each in Belgium, Spain, Turkey, Bahrain, and Djibouti. Hundreds of people in Greece, Greenland, Netherlands, Portugal, Australia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Canada, Diego Garcia, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Cuba (Guantanamo Bay), Honduras. Smaller numbers are sprinkled elsewhere.

Advocates of this imperial military presence -- how better to characterize a thousand military installations around the world? -- denounce anyone suggesting retrenchment as an "isolationist." "But why is bombing, invading, and occupying other nations considered to be a positive form of "engagement"?"

It certainly isn't in America's interest. With a \$13 trillion national debt and a \$1.6 trillion deficit the U. S. can't afford to police the world. Moreover, forever meddling everywhere guarantees endless conflict and war, with tens of thousands of Americans dead, maimed, and wounded.

Finally, promiscuous intervention inevitably makes the U. S. a target of terrorism. As Rep. Paul pointed out, being "over there" -- bombing, invading, and occupying Muslim lands -- creates enemies. And some of those enemies have proved they are both willing and able, to strike the American homeland. That doesn't make it right. But it does provide another reason to bring U. S. troops home.

To coin a phrase, it is time for a change. Washington policymakers traded in the American republic for a global empire decades ago. It's time for the American people to trade back.

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