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The Stimulus Package in Kabul

Posted By Tom Engelhardt

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You must have had a moment when you thought to yourself: It really isn't going to end, is it? Not ever. Rationally, you know perfectly well that whatever your "it" might be will indeed end, because everything does, but your gut tells you something different.

I had that moment recently when it came to the [American way of war](#). In the past couple of weeks, it could have been triggered by an endless string of ill-attended news reports like the *Christian Science Monitor* piece [headlined](#) "U.S. involvement in Yemen edging toward 'clandestine war.'" Or by the millions of dollars in U.S. payments [reportedly missing](#) in Afghanistan, thanks to under-the-table or unrecorded handouts in unknown amounts to Afghan civilian government employees (as well as Afghan security forces, private-security contractors, and even the Taliban). Or how about [the news](#) that the F-35 "Joint Strike Fighter," the [cost-overflow](#) poster weapon of the century, already long overdue, will cost yet more money and be produced even less quickly?

Or what about word that our Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has [officially declared](#) the Obama administration "open" to keeping U.S. troops in Iraq after the announced 2011 deadline for their withdrawal? Or how about the [news](#) from McClatchy's reliable reporter Nancy Youssef that Washington is planning to start "publicly walking away from what it once touted as key deadlines in the war in Afghanistan in an effort to de-emphasize President Barack Obama's pledge that he'd begin withdrawing U.S. forces in July 2011"?

Or that bottomless feeling could have been triggered by the recent [request](#) from the military man in charge of training Afghan security forces, Lt. Gen. William Caldwell, for another 900 U.S. and NATO trainers in the coming months, lest the improbable “transition” date of 2014 for Afghan forces to “take the lead” in protecting their own country be pushed back yet again. (“No trainers, no transition,” wrote the general in a “report card” on his mission.)

Or it could have been the accounts of how a trained Afghan soldier [turned his gun](#) on U.S. troops in southern Afghanistan, killing two of them, and then fled to the Taliban for protection (one of a string of similar incidents over the last year). Or, speaking of things that could have set me off, consider this passage from the final paragraphs of an Elisabeth Bumiller article [tucked away](#) inside the *New York Times* on whether Afghan War commander Gen. David Petraeus was (or was not) on the road to success: “It is certainly true that Petraeus is attempting to shape public opinion ahead of the December [Obama administration] review [of Afghan war policy],” said an administration official who is supportive of the general. ‘He is the most skilled public relations official in the business, and he’s trying to narrow the president’s options.’”

Or, in the same piece, what about this all-American analogy from Bruce Riedel, the former CIA official who [chaired](#) President Obama’s initial review of Afghan war policy in 2009, speaking of the hundreds of mid-level Taliban the U.S. military has reportedly wiped out in recent months: “The fundamental question is how deep is their bench.” (Well, yes, Bruce, if you imagine the Afghan War as the basketball nightmare on Elm Street in which the hometown team’s front five periodically get slaughtered.)

Or maybe it should have been the fact that [only 7 percent](#) of Americans had reports and incidents like these, or evidently anything else having to do with our wars, on their minds as they voted in the recent midterm elections.

The Largest “Embassy” on Planet Earth

Strange are the ways, though. You just can’t predict what’s going to set you off. For me, it was none of the above, nor even the flood of Republican war hawks heading for Washington eager to “cut” government spending by [“boosting”](#) the Pentagon budget. Instead, it was a story that slipped out as the midterm election results were coming in and was treated as an event of no importance in the U.S.

The Associated Press [covered](#) U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry’s announcement that a \$511 million contract had been [awarded](#) to [Caddell Construction](#), one of America’s “largest construction and engineering groups,” for a massive expansion of the U.S. embassy in Kabul. [According to](#) the ambassador, that embassy is already “the largest ... in the world with more than 1,100 brave and dedicated civilians ... from 16 agencies and working next to their military counterparts in 30 provinces,” and yet it seems it’s still not large enough.

A few other things in his announcement caught my eye. Construction of the new “permanent offices and housing” for embassy personnel is not to be completed until sometime in 2014, approximately three years after President Obama’s July 2011 Afghan drawdown is set to begin, and that \$511 million is part of a \$790 million bill to U.S. taxpayers that will include expansion work on consular facilities in the Afghan cities of Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat. And then, if the ambassador’s announcement was meant to fly below the media radar screen in the U.S., it was clearly meant to be noticed in Afghanistan. After all, Eikenberry publicly insisted that the awarding of the contract should be considered “an indication ... an action, a deed that you can take as a long-term commitment of the United States government to the government of Afghanistan.”

(Note to [Tea Party types](#) heading for Washington: this contract is part of a new stimulus package in one of the few places where President Obama can, by executive fiat, increase stimulus spending. It has already resulted in the hiring of 500 Afghan workers and when construction ramps up, another 1,000 more will be added to the crew.)

[Jo Comerford](#) and the number-crunchers at the [National Priorities Project](#) have offered TomDispatch a hand in putting that \$790 million outlay into an American context: “\$790 million is more than ten times the money the federal government allotted for the State Energy Program in FY2011. It’s nearly five times the total amount allocated for the National Endowment for the Arts (threatened to be completely eliminated by the incoming Congress). If that sum were applied instead to job creation in the United States, in new hires it would yield more than 22,000 teachers, 15,000 health care workers, and employ more than 13,000 in the burgeoning clean energy industry.”

Still, to understand just why, among a flood of similar war reports, this one got under my skin, you need a bit of backstory.

Singular Spawn or Forerunner Deluxe?

One night in May 2007, I was nattering on at the dinner table about reports of a monstrous new U.S. embassy being constructed in Baghdad, so big that it put former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s grandiose Disneyesque palaces to shame. On 104 acres of land in the heart of the Iraqi capital (always referred to in news reports as almost the size of Vatican City), it was slated to cost \$590 million. (Predictable [cost overruns](#) and delays – see F-35 above – would, in the end, bring that figure to at least [\\$740 million](#), while the cost of running the place yearly is now estimated at [\\$1.5 billion](#).)

Back then, more than half a billion dollars was impressive enough, even for a compound that was to have its own self-contained electricity-generation, water-purification, and sewage systems in a city lacking most of the above, not to speak of its own anti-missile defense systems, and 20 all-new blast-resistant buildings, including restaurants, a recreation center, and other amenities. It was to be by far the largest, most heavily fortified embassy on the planet with a “diplomatic” staff of 1,000 (a number that [has only grown](#) since).

My wife listened to my description of this future colossus, which bore no relation to anything ever previously called an “embassy,” and then, out of the blue, said, “I wonder who the architect is?” Strangely, I hadn’t even considered that such a mega-citadel might actually have an architect.

That tells you what I know about building anything. So imagine my surprise to discover that there was indeed a Kansas architect, BDY (Berger Devine Yaeger), previously responsible for the Sprint Corporation’s world headquarters in Overland Park, Kansas; the Visitation Church in Kansas City, Missouri; and Harrah’s Hotel and Casino in North Kansas City, Missouri. Better yet, BDY was so proud to have been taken on as architect to the wildest imperial dreamers and schemers of our era that it posted sketches at its Web site of what the future embassy, its “pool house,” its tennis court, PX, retail and shopping areas, and other highlights were going to look like.

Somewhere between horrified and grimly amused, I wrote a piece at TomDispatch titled [“The Mother Ship Lands in Baghdad”](#) and, via a link to the BDY drawings, offered readers a little “blast-resistant spin” through Bush’s colossus. From the beginning, I grasped that this wasn’t an embassy in any normal sense and I understood as well something of what it was. Here’s the way I put it at the time:

“As an outpost, this vast compound reeks of one thing: imperial impunity. It was never meant to be an embassy from a democracy that had liberated an oppressed land. From the first thought, the first sketch, it was to be the sort of imperial control center suitable for the planet’s sole ‘hyperpower,’ dropped into the middle of the oil heartlands of the globe. It was to be Washington’s dream and Kansas City’s idea of a palace fit for an embattled American proconsul – or a khan.”

In other words, a U.S. “control center” at the heart of what Bush administration officials then liked to call “the Greater Middle East” or the “arc of instability.” To my surprise, the piece began racing around the Internet, and other sites – TomDispatch did not then have the capacity to post images – started putting up BDY’s crude drawings. The next thing I knew, the State Department had panicked, [declared](#) this a [“security breach,”](#) and forced BDY to take down its site and remove the drawings.

I was amazed. But (and here we come to the failure of my own imagination) I never doubted that BDY’s bizarre imperial “mother ship” being prepared for landing in Baghdad was the singular spawn of the Bush administration. I saw it as essentially a vanity production sired by a particular set of fantasies about imposing a *Pax Americana* abroad and a *Pax Republican* at home. It never crossed my mind that there would be two such “embassies.”

So, on this, call me delusional. By May 2009, with Barack Obama in the White House, I knew as much. That was when two McClatchy reporters [broke a story](#) about a [similar project](#) for a new “embassy” in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, at the projected cost of \$736 million (with a couple of hundred million more slated for upgrades of diplomatic facilities in Afghanistan).

Simulating Ghosts

Now, with the news in from Kabul, we know that there are going to be three mother ships. All gigantic beyond belief. All (after the usual cost overruns) undoubtedly in the three-quarters of a billion dollar range, or beyond. All meant not to house modest numbers of diplomats acting as the face of the United States in a foreign land, but thousands of diplomats, spies, civilian personnel, military officials, agents, and operatives hunkering down long-term for war and skulduggery.

Connect two points and you have a straight line. Connect three points and you have a pattern – in this case, simple and striking. The visionaries and [fundamentalists](#) of the Bush years may be gone and visionless managers of the tattered American imperium are now directing the show. Nonetheless, they and the U.S. military in the region remain remarkably devoted to the control of the Greater Middle East. Even without a vision, there is still the war momentum and the money to support it.

While Americans fight bitterly over whether the stimulus package for the domestic economy was too large or too small, few in the U.S. even notice that the American stimulus package in Kabul, Islamabad, Baghdad, and elsewhere in our embattled Raj is going great guns. Embassies the size of pyramids are still being built; military bases to stagger the imagination continue to be constructed; and nowhere, not even in Iraq, is it clear that Washington is committed to packing up its tents, abandoning its billion-dollar monuments, and coming home.

In the U.S., it's clearly going to be paralysis and stagnation all the way, but in Peshawar and Mazar-i-Sharif, not to speak of the [greater Persian Gulf region](#), we remain the spendthrifts of war, perfectly willing, for instance, to ship fuel across staggering distances and unimaginably long supply lines at [\\$400 a gallon](#) to Afghanistan to further [crank up](#) an energy-heavy conflict. Here in the United States, police are [being laid off](#). In Afghanistan, we are paying to enroll thousands and thousands of them and [train them](#) in ever greater numbers. In the U.S., roads [crumble](#); in Afghanistan, [support for road-building](#) is still on the agenda.

At home, it's peace all the way to the unemployment line, because peace, in our American world, increasingly seems to mean economic disaster. In the Greater Middle East, it's war to the horizon, all war all the time, and creeping escalation all the way around. (And keep in mind that the escalatory stories cited above all occurred before the next round of Republican war hawks even hit Washington with the wind at their backs, ready to push for far [more of the same](#).)

The folks who started us down this precipitous path and over an economic cliff are now in retirement and heading onto the memoir circuit: our former president is [chatting it up](#) with Matt Lauer and Oprah; his vice president is nursing his heart while assumedly [writing about](#) "his service in four presidential administrations"; his first secretary of defense is readying himself for the [publication](#) of his memoir in January; and his national security adviser, then secretary of state (for whom Chevron once [named](#) a double-hulled

oil tanker), is already [heading into](#) her [second and third](#) memoir. But while they scribble and yak, their policy ghosts haunt us, as does their greatest edifice, that embassy in Baghdad, now being cloned elsewhere. Even without them or the neocons who pounded the drums for them, the U.S. military still pushes doggedly toward 2014 and beyond in Afghanistan, while officials [“tweak”](#) their drawdown non-schedules, narrow the president’s non-options, and step in to fund and build yet more command-and-control centers in the Greater Middle East.

It looks and feels like the never-ending story, and yet, of course, the imperium is [visibly fraying](#), while the burden of distant wars grows ever heavier. Those “embassies” are being built for the long haul, but a decade or two down the line, I wouldn’t want to put my money on what exactly they will represent, or what they could possibly hope to control.

Tom Engelhardt, co-founder of the [American Empire Project](#), runs the Nation Institute’s [TomDispatch.com](#). His latest book is [The American Way of War: How Bush’s Wars Became Obama’s](#) (Haymarket Books). You can catch a Timothy MacBain TomDispatch video interview with me on our “stimulus” spending abroad by clicking [here](#) or download it to your iPod, [here](#).