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# War on Iraq



Operation: Enduring Presence

By [Sam Graham-Felsen](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [July 28, 2005](#).

The issue of permanent bases cuts to the heart of not only how long we intend to stay in Iraq, but why we got there in the first place.

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When I called former Democratic Sen. Gary Hart at his office in Colorado, I explained that I was working on a story about permanent bases in Iraq. "Right," Hart replied, "unlike the *New York Times* and the *Washington*

*Post*."

"The fact that no one's discussing this is a great mystery to me," Hart told me.

If the topic of permanent bases in Iraq seems unfamiliar, it's because, as Hart noted, there's been barely a whisper about them in the mainstream media. While the deteriorating situation in Iraq is making headlines daily, it's been two months since any reports on the presence or construction of bases have emerged from major press outlets. Yet, the issue of permanent bases is one that cuts to the heart of not only how long we intend to stay in Iraq, but why we got there in the first place.

"If the goal of ... the Bush administration, was to overthrow Saddam Hussein, install a friendly government in Baghdad, set up a permanent political and military presence in Iraq, and dominate the behavior of the region (including securing oil supplies)," Hart wrote in May, "then you build

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permanent bases for some kind of permanent American military presence. If the goal was to spread democracy and freedom, then you don't."

Bush has publicly denied that the United States has permanent designs on Iraq, and on February 17, 2005, Donald Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "I can assure you that we have no intention at the present time of putting permanent bases in Iraq." For all the Bush administration has done to verbally dispel notions that it seeks permanent bases, it continues to plan and construct bases that are built to last, well, permanently.

Here's what we do know. In April of 2003, senior Bush administration officials told the New York Times that we were planning "a long-term military relationship with the emerging government of Iraq, one that would grant the Pentagon access to military bases and project American influence into the heart of the region." Nearly a year later, in March of 2004, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the U.S. was constructing 14 "enduring bases." These long-term encampments were technically designated to house troops through 2006, but military officials were candid about their potential to serve as permanent bases. "Is this a swap for the Saudi bases? I don't know. ... When we talk about enduring bases here, we're talking about the present operation, not in terms of America's strategic global base," Army Brig. Gen. Robert Pollman told the *Tribune*. "But this makes sense. It makes a lot of logical sense."

Two years after the Times story emerged, the Washington Post's Bradley Graham detailed a U.S. plan to eventually consolidate troops into four or five "contingency operating bases" -- even newer newspeak for enduring bases. These large, heavily fortified air bases would be able to withstand direct mortar attacks. The consolidation plan is technically part of a future withdrawal strategy, but the bases themselves are clearly built to last for years to come.

There is a spectrum of opinion on the exact nature of these bases. "Permanent," of course, is a dirty word in Washington, and even the most anti-war politicians are tentative to designate them as such. Defense expert John Pike of GlobalSecurity.org believes the bases lack components of official "permanency" -- such as reinforced steel and ground-level concrete slabs--but admits that military has been deliberately vague and hesitant about releasing detailed information. "Look, if they say they're building these bases as part of a withdrawal plan, that's because the withdrawal plan is victory. And we're not even close to victory, which is exactly why they're building these bases," Pike told me. "We're going to be there by the end of Jeb's second term."

Eric Leaver of the Institute for Policy Studies put it this way: "These bases are made out of concrete. My house is made of concrete, and I consider my house to be pretty permanent." And Larry Diamond, Hoover fellow and former advisor to Paul Bremer, has bluntly declared that the bases are permanent. This past February, he told a UCLA audience: "[W]e could declare ... that we have no permanent military designs on Iraq and we will not seek permanent military bases in Iraq. This one statement would do an enormous amount to undermine the suspicion that we have permanent imperial intentions in Iraq. We aren't going to do that. And the reason we're not going to do that is because we are

building permanent military bases in Iraq."

Moreover, the fine print of an [\\$82 billion appropriations bill](#) passed by Congress in May reads: "This proposal will allow the Army to provide temporary facilities, and in some very limited cases, *permanent facilities*... These facilities include barracks, administrative space, vehicle maintenance facilities, aviation facilities, mobilization-demobilization barracks, and community support facilities." [emphasis mine]

Of course, the more one probes on these bases, the more definitions become tenuous. It's only in the fog of war that that the words "permanent," "enduring," and "contingent," begin to mean the same thing. These new terms are intentionally vague, blurring the reality of what's really happening: the execution of a long-term plan to have a permanent military presence in Iraq.

Several Democrats have been vigilant in calling for Bush to verbally denounce permanent bases, but they've been awfully quiet on the presence and construction of enduring bases. When I contacted the office of Sen. Carl Levin, Mich., ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, I was told that enduring bases was not an issue being discussed in the Senate. I got virtually the same response when I contacted the office of Rep. Ike Skelton, Mo., the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, whose spokesman told me that "the issue of permanent versus enduring bases and whatnot is not something at this point that has specifically come up around here. It didn't come up when we were going through legislation earlier this year, which is when smaller things like that come up." In the repeated calls I made to other prominent Democrats, I got either more of the same or no response at all.

But to Gary Hart, it's simple: those who are against permanent bases should be against the continued construction of such bases. "Either you are leaving or you are not. If you are leaving you don't need fixed facilities. If you are not planning to leave, you convert trench latrines and tents into fabricated steel and pour concrete runways. One is removable and the other one is not. And it's pretty simple -- if you are pouring concrete runways and welding steel, you plan to be there for a while."

Democratic Reps. Tom Allen of Maine and Barbara Lee of California have introduced resolutions on permanent bases in recent weeks. While both resolutions call for the administration to eliminate the possibility of establishing permanent bases, again, neither of them addresses enduring bases. "The focus here is on policy and not construction," Lee's spokesman, Nathan Britton, told me. "I'm not a commander on the ground and for that reason I'm not going to speculate about the reasons for consolidating troops into [enduring] bases... This is a really important debate that needs to happen and it's not going to get caught up in the policy of supporting the troops or not supporting the troops."

This emphasis on policy and not construction was echoed by foreign policy researchers and analysts I spoke with in Washington. Larry Korb of the Center for American Progress told me that the U.S. should make clear that they will definitely turn the bases over to the Iraqis, but stressed that the construction of contingency operating bases was necessary for the safety of the troops. Michael

O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution said he favored "to the extent possible avoiding the construction of permanent or even quasi-permanent bases now." But, he added, "I want our troops to be safe and comfortable. So I care more about articulating publicly a strategy and rough timetable for major cutbacks in our troop presence than in the base issue." Brookings' P.W. Singer took a slightly different tack and told me that the U.S. should at least wait until the Iraqis have a constitution before continuing construction of contingency operating bases.

All three of their responses reflect the current political optics on Iraq: none of them are enthusiastic about the bases and what they might portend, but none are willing to condemn them, lest they be accused of failing to "support the troops." This, it is worth pointing out, is exactly the kind of stance the Bush administration hopes for -- a stance that allows for the indefinite continuation of business as usual in Iraq.

Before the appropriations bill was passed in May, Erik Leaver of the Institute for Policy Studies condemned funding for the construction of contingency operating bases (which he plainly labeled "permanent") in a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* op-ed. I asked Leaver why there seemed to be so much hesitancy on the part of Democrats who oppose the idea of permanent bases to condemn the actual construction of permanent bases. Leaver told me the cautiousness, again, was related to concerns about the safety of troops: "If bases are being attacked with mortars and building concrete housing would make troops safer, who is going to be against that, even if it makes the base more 'permanent?'"

Leaver thinks that a bill (such as Allen's or Lee's) articulating our intent over permanent bases will get the ball rolling, however. "It's so hard to get to this first step because everybody in the leadership knows that the very next question is how long are we going to remain in the bases?" Leaver told me. "But I think it's very important just to make this first step because it totally changes the dynamic of what's happening on the ground. You'd be giving a whole different message to the Iraqi people."

Calling for Rumsfeld to amend the "at the present time" from his February statement on permanent base intentions is an important step. And while it may (at least temporarily) assuage the doubts of the occupied Iraqis, it does nothing to prevent the U.S. from staying in Iraq for as long as it sees fit. And so, settling for a verbal guarantee from the Bush administration -- with permanent facilities already set up -- is a losing bet. After all, today, years after invading Korea and setting up bases that were not designated as "permanent," bases and troops remain.

Washington's political climate remains fixed on the need to be seen as "supporting the troops," which is of course leveraged at every turn to stifle legitimate criticism of Bush's long-term plans. Even the most outspoken anti-war Democrats have consented to this skewed discourse, leaving them cornered into qualified support for long-term bases. Everyone knows that the safest place for the troops is not some heavily-fortified, concrete base in Iraq, but the security of their own homes. Under the current political rules of play on Iraq, that's just something that isn't said. And while Democrats remain silent, the Bush administration will continue, unchecked, in its quest to do what it had always planned: stay in Iraq for the long haul.

*[Sam Graham-Felsen](#) is co-author with [The Nation's Katrina vanden Heuvel](#) of the weekly online feature, [Sweet Victories](#).*

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### **The Bases Are Not Permanant!!**

Posted by: expat in tokyo on Jul 28, 2005 12:50 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

The bases will be there as long as there is oil pumping out of that country which the US wants to control. As soon as that oil is gone those bases will be as well.

If spreading democracy and freedom were really on the agenda(and I say this with my tounge in my cheek) then why doesnt the Comander in Chief ever use the "d" word when it comes to China!! It is all spin and rhetoric.. something the Bush administration does so well Goebels would blush!!

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