

# Touring the American empire of bases with the Marines

Richard Tanter and US Marine Corps

## Introduction by Richard Tanter<sup>1</sup>

In the decade after the end of the Cold War, triumphalist U.S. public intellectuals, liberal and conservative alike, were trying on the mantle of 'empire' for size. For many at the time, while 'US imperialism' denoted kneejerk leftism, 'the American empire' might just be an appropriate acknowledgement of achievement on a global scale, an accolade about reality rather than a matter of opprobrium.

As the world knows, that hubris led to three catastrophic wars of choice and the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq and the deaths of hundreds of thousands or more. It also led to the American historian and political scientist, [Chalmers Johnson](#), long-time Cold Warrior and doyen of US East Asian specialists, to astonish his more complaisant professional colleagues by publishing four extraordinary books between 2001 and his death in 2010 probing the reality of American empire, together called the [Blowback](#) series:

*Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (2001)

*The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004)

*Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (2007)

*Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope* (2010)

Johnson's political *volte face* and pathbreaking analysis of a new form of global empire came out of his close involvement with Okinawan resistance to one of the most enduring and oppressive 'peacetime' expressions of the American empire of bases. Seven decades after the US military colonization of Okinawa began, US bases still amount to more than one-fourth of the prefecture's land area with the struggle continuing over construction of a new Marine base at Henoko. Such is the grotesque weight of American military occupation on Okinawan society and the consequent [deeply-rooted resistance](#) that it is still not possible for even a lavishly funded Tokyo-backed conservative to be elected governor of Okinawa without railing against the American bases.

In *Nemesis*, Johnson summed up the argument of the second book:

*'The Sorrows of Empire* was written during the American preparations for and launching of the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. I began to study our continuous military buildup since World War II and the 737 military bases we currently maintain in other people's countries. This empire of bases is the concrete manifestation of our global hegemony, and many of the blowback-inducing wars we have conducted had as their true purpose the sustaining and expanding of this network. We do not think of these overseas

deployments as a form of empire; in fact, most Americans do not give them any thought at all until something truly shocking, such as the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, brings them to our attention. But the people living next door to these bases and dealing with the swaggering soldiers who brawl and sometimes rape their women certainly think of them as imperial enclaves, just as the people of ancient Iberia or nineteenth-century India knew that they were victims of foreign colonization.'

Excellent researchers following on from Johnson have raised the count of US overseas military bases to [well beyond 1,000](#) and deepened our understanding of technology-dense strategic islands ([Ruth Oldenziel](#)) such as Diego Garcia (Vine's *Island of Shame*) and the rapidly proliferating 'lily pads' of notionally light-footprint 'temporary' or 'rotational force' bases in Africa and Asia of special forces or drone deployments ([Nick Turse](#)).

Counting bases is tricky. The Pentagon's annual [Base Structure Report](#) is essentially a real estate listing of property acreage and dollar value of 'sites', and omits small or 'low cost' sites. Its listings of non-US sites include a great many in Japan, South Korea, and in Europe, but there are no listings at all for Afghanistan and Iraq.

So, how many US bases are there outside the United States itself? In 2011, [Turse took a stab](#):

'There are more than 1,000 U.S. military bases dotting the globe. To be specific, the most accurate count is 1,077. Unless it's 1,088. Or, if you count differently, 1,169. Or even 1,180. Actually, the

number might even be higher. Nobody knows for sure.'

In 2018? We just do not know. On the one hand, budget sequestration, technological change, and base rationalisation programs may have cut the number somewhat. On the other hand, new wars in East, Central and West Africa, Yemen and elsewhere and a proliferation of [special operations](#) and [drone bases](#) have considerably increased the numbers. 'Rotational forces' - regular scheduled deployments of US forces in 'host' countries for part of the year on what the Pentagon calls 'permanent rotation' - also fudges the issue.

Just this month [US Vice-President Mike Pence](#) announced that the Lombrum Naval Base on Papua-New Guinea's Manus Island is to be expanded to become a 'joint' PNG-Australian-United States base to counter an increased Chinese regional presence. The Vice-President followed this up with a [joint announcement](#) that the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand would fund the electrification of seventy percent of Papua's area in a move to counter Chinese aid programs.



**Source: Ben Packham, 'Move to head off China with Australian base in PNG',**

**The Australian, 20 September 2018**

Yet, excellent and assiduous as these researchers are, sometimes the best representation of Johnson's argument about the American empire of bases comes from the words and images published by the United States military itself.

Such a case is a series of media releases from the U.S. Marines a week or so ago, published in dozens of newspapers, websites, and television programs around the world to celebrate the 243<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the Marines.

One version appeared on *Business Insider India*: 'The US Marine Corps turns 243 today — check out these awesome photos of the Devil Dogs in action', with all words and images supplied by the U.S. Marines. This version of the article showed marines in action around the world today: in Syria, Afghanistan, Jordan, Bulgaria, Finland, Sweden, Thailand, Romania – and of course, in Australia.

In reality, these amount to just a smidgeon of the 150-plus countries in which, as Nick Turse reported, US special forces – Marines, SEALs, rangers, and so on – operated just between 2011 and 2014. The publicity text shows that the Darwin-based Marine Rotational Force – itself a part of the Okinawan-based 31<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit amphibious assault group – has its European counterpart, seen below on exercise in Sweden, Bulgaria and Romania. These countries, with Australia and many others, are the compliant hosts to the American empire of bases.

'The US Marine Corps turns 243 today — check out these awesome photos of the Devil Dogs in action',

[All photos supplied by *US Marine Corps*.]



**Marines with 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division fire an M777 Howitzer at known targets during training on August 9, 2018 at Mount Bunday Training Area in Australia.**



**Marines fire an 81mm mortar during training in support of Operation Inherent Resolve in Hajin, Syria on August 4, 2018.**





**A US Marine with Marine Rotational Force-Europe 18.1 shoots the Swedish Carl Gustaf M4 anti-tank recoilless rifle during Exercise Archipelago Endeavour with Swedish Marines of 1st Marine Regiment on the island of Uto, Harsfjarden, Sweden on Sept. 5, 2018.**



**Hospital Corpsman Jacob Adam drinks cobra blood at jungle survival training during Exercise Cobra Gold 2018 at Camp Ban Chan Khrem in the Kingdom of Thailand on Feb. 17, 2018.**



**Marines with Black Sea Rotational Force 18.1 fire an 81mm mortar system during Exercise Platinum Eagle 18 at Babadag Training Area in Romania on Sept. 5, 2018.**



**US Marine firefighters and Royal Thai firefighters work together to put out a simulated aircraft fire during Exercise**

## Cobra Gold 2018.



Staff Sgt. Nathaniel McDonald, the motor transport operations chief with Combat Logistics Battalion 3, prepares to spar during the Marine Corps Martial Arts Instructors Course's culmination at Marine Corps Base Hawaii on September 27, 2018.



Cpl. Daniel Hopping, Assaultman, Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, and a native of Rogers, Arkansas, shields himself from dust being kicked up from a CH-53E Super Sea

Stallion lifting off during a mission in Helmand province, Afghanistan on April 28, 2014.



Marines with Black Sea Rotational Force 18.1 advance to their objective during a patrol exercise at U.S. Army Base Nova Selo Forward Operating Site, Bulgaria.



Marines with Maritime Raid Force, 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit swim under water during dive training in Aqaba, Jordan on July 8, 2018.





**Pfc. Vincent Fiore with Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment fires a Light Anti-Armour Weapon (LAW) during Exercise Bougainville II at the Pohakuloa Training Area on the Island of Hawaii on Oct. 20, 2018.**



**Combat Engineers with the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit practice breaching techniques during a live fire demolition range at Theatre Amphibious Combat Rehearsal (TACR) 18.**



**US Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Rey White, an aviation boatswain's mate handler with the Essex Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), launches an F-35B Lightning II with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 211, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), from the amphibious assault ship USS Essex (LHD 2), before the F-35B's first combat strike on Sept. 27, 2018.**



**A US Marine with 3d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, attached to Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force, Crisis Response-Central Command, fires a shoulder-fired anti-tank missile at his target during a live-fire demonstration near At Tanf Garrison, Syria on Sept. 7, 2018.**



**Marines with Marine Rotational Force-Europe move toward their objective during Exercise Winter Sun 18 in Boden, Sweden on March 14, 2018.**



**Marines with Bravo Company, 4th Tanks Battalion fire a M1A1 Abrams tank during a low-light live-fire exercise as part of Exercise Arrow 18 in Pohjankangas Training Area near Kankaanpää, Finland on May 16, 2018.**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article appeared as 'Darwin, the Marines, and touring the American Empire of Bases' on *Pearls & Irritations*, 17 November 2018.