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Kent E. Calder: Embattled Garrisons

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INTRODUCTION

THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGN troops on the soil of independent nations has traditionally been at once an unusual and an uncomfortable reality. Historically overseas military bases have almost invariably been the product of empires, and have disappeared with the liberation of their peoples. For the citizens of the United States, they were for the first century of the Republic and beyond a particularly noxious form of foreign entanglement. Only from the late 1930s, as the storm clouds of World War II began to deepen, did overseas military bases in other sovereign nations gradually become a more acceptable reality, for both Americans and others.¹

Since World War II, foreign bases have come to seem commonplace, and even natural—especially to Americans—despite their earlier historic uniqueness. As we will see, bases have come to perform important roles in international affairs: deterring aggression, reinforcing alliance relations, inhibiting balance-of-power conflict, providing formidably efficient global logistics networks, assuring smooth resource flows, and helping most recently to combat terrorism. Overseas bases have become the very sinews of an American globalism that in any other age would be known as empire.²

Yet these global guardians are also themselves both vulnerable and often controversial. However omnipotent the power of American arms may be in technical and geopolitical terms, it must also, like the military of other great powers past and present, contend with the domestic political context of host nations and indeed, often with dissent at home. Other great powers, such as Russia, Britain, and France, have already, by and large, lost their global basing networks, under a range of economic and political pressures. And since 9/11, the United States has also come to face an increasingly complex political basing problem. As the struggle against terrorism has broadened into a global “arc of instability” within the developing world, and as even America’s industrialized allies have grown skeptical and weary, the pressures on America to retrench have deepened once again, from Saudi Arabia to Turkey, South Korea, and beyond. Something much larger than an “Iraq War syndrome” is at work, although Iraq has proven to be an important catalyst.

In some countries, to be sure, the broad skepticism and antagonism about foreign bases have been arrested, at least for a while. In some few

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instances, both past and present, foreign troops are greeted as liberators rather than agents of empire. Yet those instances are rare, and the felicitous conditions they create fleeting and difficult to sustain.

Foreign bases, in short are thus *embattled garrisons*, and are likely to be increasingly so as America's turbulent involvement in the Middle East is steadily redefined. Overseas bases often fill important military roles, not only in the Middle East, but around the world, yet they are increasingly difficult to sustain politically. How and where to best keep them are issues of crucial importance for policy. Similarly understanding the comparative politics behind host-nation response ranks as an important question for middle-range social science theory, as well.

This volume, in the social science tradition, approaches the world around us from the perspective of causal explanation; it struggles to answer the persistent question, *Why?* Like all social scientists engaged in that process, we confront the continuing dilemma of how to strive simultaneously for universalism and realism. As policy-oriented students of social science, we face an additional challenge—how to produce generalizations that have both predictive and prescriptive relevance for the future.

The response that we propose to the multiple analytical challenges confronted here is threefold: (1) to develop and test falsifiable generalizations about why military bases come and go; (2) to employ the more viable ones in probabilistic fashion to provide a prognosis for existing and anticipated basing configurations; and (3) to suggest prescriptions for future policy on the basis of past historical experience. Broadly speaking, this approach leads us to see clearly that overseas bases have over the past half century developed important stabilizing functions in the global system, but that they are historically and institutionally contingent; that their prospective political viability in host nations varies considerably, if in predictable fashion; and that public policy can critically affect that viability. In sum, it argues that there can be a policy science of basing, and presumes to diffidently suggest how that science might evolve.

In an attempt to initiate a more systematic study of base politics, I begin this volume in chapter 1 with a historical survey of foreign basing—since the concept of “bases outside of empire” emerged in the late 1930s—that illustrates the important strategic functions that forward deployment has come to perform.³ In chapter 2 I summarize the current state of American overseas basing in comparative historical and cross-national perspective, emphasizing the political and technological forces affecting its long-term viability, and the policy challenges that those long-term forces create. Chapter 3 conceptualizes base politics in more theoretical fashion.

Chapters 4 through 8 outline in greater detail, through subnational analysis, the varied yet generalizable patterns that host-nation base politics typically assume. They show the primary importance of understanding the

analytical structure of base-related conflicts, before getting trapped by their details. They clearly illustrate that there are definite patterns of success and failure in stabilizing the presence of overseas bases, and making them consistent with the aspirations of local inhabitants. Yet amidst the nuance, the difficulties of sustaining bases in the absence of large-scale financial support, and those of transforming base presence even in the presence of such support, come through clearly.

Chapters 9 and 10, in conclusion, consider what the United States should do about the detailed, real-world circumstances previously presented. Chapter 9 outlines emerging options for policy, beyond the details of current conflicts, while chapter 10 is more normative, presenting concrete policy recommendations and implications for further research. Given the strategic importance that these embattled garrisons have assumed over their short lifetime of but three score years and ten, it concludes that policy should attempt to sustain some core functions and locations on a global basis. Yet substantial retrenchment, relocation, and sensitivity to local politics are emphatically in order, as recent developments in the Islamic world make clear. Also important is more systematic analytical attention to the forces that support and erode foreign basing, toward which end this volume hopefully provides a useful start.