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Living Along the Fenceline and Standing Army: The American Empire of Bases

By Vanessa Warheit

Vanessa Warheit reviews two new documentaries on American Military Bases Overseas

Two recent documentaries make excellent viewing for anyone interested in the history of American military bases overseas – and their ongoing ramifications. With an estimated 1,000 US military bases outside of the 50 states,[1] the United States currently has the largest number of overseas military bases of any country in history. Why does the US need military bases in over 130 countries? Why do countries like Germany, Italy, Japan and South Korea still host hundreds of American military bases and thousands or tens of thousands of US soldiers, more than six decades after World War II? Why is the US still aggressively expanding into many new countries? *Standing Army* (72 min., 2010) is a far-reaching exploration of the ideological and geo-political answers to these questions. *Living Along the Fenceline* (67 min., 2011), though also international in scope, is a more narrowly focused film, answering a critical question: How do these bases affect local populations? Offering both global and personal perspectives, these two films are complementary and would work well together as tools to initiate dialogue and discussion on base issues and the role of American global military power.

The empire of bases. A graphic from* Living Along the Fenceline *(courtesy of the filmmakers).

Standing Army's co-directors Thomas Fazi and Enrico Parenti began filming the Dal Molin US base expansion protests in their native Italy in 2009. Their film project grew (not unlike the base network itself), and eventually included Italy, Japan, Kosovo, Diego Garcia, and Iraq. This kind of film is incredibly difficult to make, and the filmmakers have grappled with their subject admirably. No other film has directly taken on the issue of America's vast and pernicious base network the way *Standing Army* does, and for that reason alone it is a landmark film, and worth seeing. The graphics in the film are also excellent: beautifully illustrated, they render very complex geographical and historical information easy to follow. Likewise, the narration and the cinematography are top-notch.

But what this complex film really has going for it is its breadth, and scope: from the very beginning, it points to the need to understand the underlying reasons for the proliferation of American bases. "Markets have always relied on state power, and military might," says the narrator in a neat, British accent. Noting that America's military budget has continued to grow under the Obama administration despite the 2008 recession, the narrator asks the film's central question: Why?

Unfortunately – for the world and for the film – there is no simple answer to this question. While *Standing Army* uses a series of graphic equations as a simple structuring device (New Enemies=New Wars, New Wars=Military Buildup, etc.), the simplicity of the equations belies the complexity of the situation. The film only hints at the market forces that drive these equations – and offers as a single example the proposed AMBO oil pipeline that would pass through eastern Europe.

Perhaps because of the AMBO pipeline connection, the filmmakers chose to use a PR tour of the US Army's Camp Bondsteel base in Kosovo as connective tissue throughout the film. One of the largest US bases in Europe, and a recent addition to America's growing global roster, Camp Bondsteel is conveniently located close to the proposed pipeline's location. This makes it an ideal example of one of the film's key assertions: wars are waged to create bases, which enforce US economic interests. Unfortunately, the banality of the base tour works against the filmmakers' intentions – at least to an American audience. The grim, dramatic musical score seems at odds with the tour guide's insipid, cheerful delivery, and the disconnect between the two unfortunately divests the massive Bondsteel of any sinister feel. Only once does the base seem to match the creepiness of the music, when the tour guide allows the camera into a video game room. There, on a video screen, we see a virtual raid on a ruined village, down the barrel of a virtual gun, and the effect is chilling.

The banality of life in the camp is perhaps the heart of the problem the filmmakers faced: militarization is a slippery enemy, and the everyday routine of American military culture inside the base seems to defy the violence it continues to perpetrate outside. Yes, it's chilling to see soldiers carrying large automatic weapons; but when the gun-toting soldiers are depicted ordering cheeseburgers in the commissary they tend to look (to this American reviewer) like some very ordinary-looking Americans who probably signed up as weekend reservists, and don't really want to be there. And of course, the point of the film – I think it's safe to say – is that these soldiers aren't really the enemy. The enemy is the system that proliferates the bases. *Standing Army* starts with shots of money being printed; and it's this money, the grease and metaphor for a corrupt system that continues to propagate military bases in times of peace, that probably should have been the through-line for the film.

Standing Army also includes many beautifully shot interviews with extremely eloquent subjects, and they do an excellent job of placing the bases in their geo-political context. However the list of the film's interview subjects reads like a who's who of American intellectuals opposed to American imperialism, including Noam Chomsky, Catherine Lutz, and the late Chalmers Johnson – and these voices have no counterpoint. This one-sided approach deprives the film of a tension that might have been provided by juxtaposing these interviews with the claims of American political or military leaders. It would have been nice to hear from, say, an American ambassador to one of these countries, or even from an elected official from a host city struggling with the pros and cons of dealing with its US base. The only interview that approaches this perspective is with the delightfully outrageous military strategist Edward Luttwak, who actually says on camera that "anyone who complains about [base expansion in] Vicenza,[2] in my point of view, is a dirty commie."

Despite these limitations, *Standing Army* contains some priceless moments. Toward the end of the film, there is a magical sequence in which the filmmakers deftly cut between DoD footage, showing Okinawan-based US Marines violently beating on each other during a training exercise, and an interview with Vietnam veteran Allen Nelson, describing the perspective of a Marine stationed in Okinawa:

"You get out of there and you feel really pumped. Someone looks at you funny, and you kick his butt. And they like that stuff – the military likes that stuff. They may say, well we don't want our guys breaking local laws, and causing problems for the local people... but that's garbage. I mean if that's the case, then you don't let us off the base."

Nelson then goes on to describe his personal horror, as an older veteran-turned-peace-activist, on returning to Okinawa thirty years after he was stationed there during the Vietnam War, and finding the bases still there. The Okinawa sequence also includes some appropriately creepy nighttime shots of American soldiers on the prowl, and ends with a moving scene in a preschool, where 2- and 3-year old children stop playing in order to cover their ears as US fighter jets scream by overhead. If this scene doesn't convince you that the bases pose critical problems for local citizens, nothing will.

A girl covers her ears from the noise at a preschool near Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa, in a scene from* Standing Army *(courtesy of the filmmakers).

Okinawa is one of the more accessible venues for exploring the base issue; it's easy to get behind a people's struggle for justice against an unresponsive Japanese government and overwhelming military might. Unlike many other base locations, the Okinawans are clearly united in wanting the bases out; and while their community is fraught with the complex issues of psychological colonization, insecurity, and economic dependency that plague most base-hosting communities, these issues haven't prevented them from creating a united opposition movement. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Okinawa is the location for one of the most moving segments of another recent film to address the base issue: *Living Along the Fenceline*.

In this case, the story of Okinawan suffering is even more grim. An Okinawan woman describes being raped by US servicemen, adding that she was too ashamed by the experience to report it. Years later, after other similar rapes are reported, she comes out of the shadows to tell her story. The filmmakers convey her narrative – as well as the other stories in this film – with real compassion and a total lack of sensationalism. They manage to convey the horror of the Okinawan rape from the victim's perspective, deftly overcoming her clear wish not to have her face revealed on camera, and portraying her ultimately as a survivor – and a champion for the rights of women in her community.

Womens' rights and empowerment are clearly a fundamental message of this film. Exploring the lives of seven women resisting the negative impacts of US bases on base-hosting communities, *Living Along the Fenceline* ranges beyond Okinawa, including stories from Texas, the Philippines, Guam, Hawaii, South Korea, and Puerto Rico. What links them are not only the US military bases that occupy their communities, and the high rates of prostitution, environmental cancer, and violent crime the film attributes to the hosted bases; these stories also show what each woman is doing to help her community to overcome the challenges posed by the bases. The film's subjects span a wide range, including a former prostitute who now helps prostitutes with livelihood training, and a university professor who teaches her students about the links between US military activity and high rates of cancer in their community. Another story features a young woman from a military family who chooses to protest the local base when she learns of toxic contamination from the base that is killing her neighbors. In Vieques, we meet a seamstress who lost her daughter to cancer, who now works for a service agency supporting cancer patients; in South Korea, we encounter a former theology student who runs a health clinic in a base community that has no schools and no hospital. And in Honolulu, we meet a Hawaiian activist who dreams of restoring Pearl Harbor, from its current use a military base and monument to war, back to its original use as the foodbasket of Hawaii and a monument to peace.

The women featured in* Living Along the Fenceline *(courtesy of the filmmakers).

What all of these women have in common is their active involvement in resisting the bases, and, in some cases, their efforts to help others to resist the bases' influence as well. And while the film is more a collection of stories than a story itself, a faint thread of hope emerges: as the stories progress, it is slowly and subtly revealed that these women's lives, stretching across the globe, have in fact begun to overlap and intersect, through their involvement with the organization Women for Genuine Security.

Living Along the Fenceline is beautifully shot, and professionally edited, and the film's far-ranging geography is easy to follow thanks to a map of the world on which American flags indicate US bases. (The DVD is also conveniently chapterized for each location.)

The film is narrated – and not so subtly bookended – by one of the filmmakers, Debbie Lee, herself an activist involved with Women for Genuine Security (the film's sponsoring group). While Lee's role is primarily as narrator – she appears only fleetingly on camera during the story segments – she introduces the film on camera, explaining her own family's history of immigration to the US and subsequent military service. In the introduction, she cleverly aligns herself with most Americans, who tend to think of the military as a job, as a way to pay for college, or as something their family members have done. "I never realized," she tells us, "that we had so many military bases around the world until I met the women in this film." The implication, of course, is that we may not have realized it either.

At the end of the last story, Lee reappears – this time standing in front of a razor-wire topped fence. "The women in this film are not working alone," she reminds us. "They're supported by their communities and by people all across the world." Cue footage of the women, now working together in a meeting room. While this kind of ending risks relegating the film to a for-activists-only audience, it is genuinely uplifting to see these women – each of whom we have witnessed struggling on her own to make a difference – supporting each other and working together toward a common goal.

Standing Army and *Living Along the Fenceline* come at an auspicious time. As Americans gradually begin to face the moral and economic limits of constant military growth, and as the once unquestionable US defense budget comes under closer scrutiny, the base issues these films address are increasingly relevant. Thomas Fazi, in an interview with Kelley Vlahos for antiwar.com,[3] described his hopes for *Standing Army* thus: "I hope we've managed to show people that war isn't just the bombs you see going off on TV. War is a system of permanent violence and destruction, of which the bases are the clearest example; a system that at any given time, in hundreds of locations around the world, is polluting societies, cultures, people, and life in all its forms. I guess you could say that now more than ever, war is everywhere. And resistance should be too." His film, particularly seen in tandem with *Living Along the Fenceline*, serves as a wake-up call to Americans, and as a poignant and riveting call-to-arms for resisters everywhere.

For an excellent map showing US bases worldwide, as a function of time, see this link.

More information on *Standing Army* is available here.

Trailer available here; The film opened theatrically in Japan in April 2012.

Living Along the Fenceline is available on DVD (with subtitles in Korean, Japanese, Pilipino, and Spanish) here.

Vanessa Warheit works as a filmmaker and educator in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her documentary *The Insular Empire: America in the Mariana Islands* aired nationally on PBS and is distributed by New Day Films.
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[1] See here.

[2] For an insight into US attitudes toward the Vicenza base, see the Wikileaks cable from Nov 2009.

[3] See here.

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