

Hired guns: Can you outsource a war?

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Can you outsource a war? The U.S. seems to be trying to do it in Iraq. As part of its overall streamlining of the armed forces, the Bush administration has relied to an unprecedented extent on private companies such as Halliburton, Blackwater and Custer Battles to support and prosecute the war. Before the recent surge in troop numbers, there were about as many private contractors—125,000—in the war zone as regular troops.

When most of us hear about private contractors we envision people delivering food, driving trucks or repairing oil wells. But between 25,000 and 50,000 of these private contractors are engaged in “security.” They constitute a distinct kind of armed force that protects military bases and the Green Zone, guards key personnel, provides escorts for convoys, trains Iraqi soldiers and gathers intelligence. This information comes from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, which also reported earlier this year that some 12 percent of Iraq reconstruction expenses—close to \$4 billion—has gone to “security services” from over 100 different private firms.

If one uses the 50,000 figure for the number of security contractors in Iraq, then one-quarter of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq are private soldiers. Not to put too fine a point on it: one-quarter of the soldiers working for the U.S. are mercenaries. These soldiers—not all of them are American citizens—have gone to war because they like the adventure and the pay (which can be as much as \$33,000 a month).

What’s the problem with this? As with all government contractors, there is a problem of financial accountability. The House oversight committee has been struggling to get information out of the Pentagon on how the security services are being used and how much the firms are being paid. It discovered that some firms were billing the government twice the amount they were paying out in salaries. For these companies, war has been good business indeed.

Another problem is moral and legal accountability. Do these private soldiers ultimately serve the U.S. military command or only their civilian CEOs? Early in the Iraq occupation the government declared that contractors were immune from civil prosecution, just like members of the military. But does that mean the security contractors are accountable to military standards of conduct? That has not yet been established. Jeremy Scahill, author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, says the security firms want to have it both ways: they want their employees to be immune from civil prosecution, like regular soldiers, but also excluded from military justice.

The government's use of paramilitary forces undermines the American tradition of citizen-soldiers. It represents a new element of the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned about in 1961. Eisenhower worried that a vast standing army and a permanent armaments industry would have unwarranted influence on American policy. The new reality is that U.S. military policies are not only being influenced but are increasingly being carried out by paramilitary groups working for profit-making companies.