

“Outsourcing” The War

By William R. Polk

American casualties in Iraq have topped 600 dead and about (since complete figures have not been released) 3,000 wounded. There are signs that the American public has become seriously disturbed, as the Spanish public had already become. The American press, long quiescent about the costs of the war, is now printing an increased number of pictures of scenes of carnage and dispatches suggesting that the war is going badly.

Short of withdrawing, as Spain has now decided to do, minimizing casualties or at least lessening their effects on the public is a task governments have faced since the beginnings of history.

The answer has usually been the same: find others, either foreigners or people the public doesn't know about or care about, to do the fighting – and take the casualties.

This is a very old tactic and one particularly notable in Iraq where the first major empire, the Assyrians, employed ancestors of today's Kurds as warriors. Their policy has been copied by Romans, British, French and other governments. The British conquered Iraq during the First World War with Indian troops and to control their far-flung empires, hired Gurkhas from Nepal. When any of these soldiers got wounded or killed, the public was little concerned: they were replaceable, alien and relatively cheap.

Without being aware of the historical precedents, America is now reliving them. But, in a typically American fashion, it has adapted them to its commitment to free enterprise. Its military force is increasingly both “privatized” and “outsourced.”

Among what are known as “private military firms” which have flocked into Iraq since the invasion a year ago are perhaps 400 companies offering the services of mercenaries. Many are small but a few have already fattened into giants. The largest in the new paramilitary field, as in everything in Iraq, is Halliburton, the company formerly headed by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and from which he still draws a substantial yearly payment.

Mr. Cheney's tie with Halliburton goes back to the time, while Secretary of Defense under the first President Bush, he allocated \$9 million to Halliburton to study how it could support American troops. After leaving government service, Mr. Cheney became the chief executive officer and a major stockholder of Halliburton. Now that he is back in government, Halliburton has been awarded about \$2.5 billion in government contracts of which many are in the “security” field.

Among the newer and rapidly growing “private military firms,” is Blackwater USA which was founded only in 1998 but already has yearly revenues of over \$1 billion. Most of the other companies operating in Iraq employ only a few bodyguards or

technicians, but others already major enterprises. Among them are Military Professional Resources Inc., Vinnell Corporation (now a part of Northrop-Grumman), Aviation Development Corporation and DynCorp.

These “solution providers,” as they like to call themselves, are anxious not to be thought of as suppliers of mercenaries because, according to the Geneva conventions, mercenaries are illegal. We learned about the African exploits of “white mercenaries” in the popular film, “The Dogs of War.” Avoiding this bad image, today’s private warrior firms advertise themselves as patriots who, having been trained by their government, wish to continue to help that government in its struggles. And, of course, for a hefty fee.

The fees are huge. One firm, DynCorp, is reputed to take in nearly \$2 billion yearly. It is not unique. The paramilitary field as a whole is one of the fastest growing sectors of the world economy and expects revenues to reach at least \$150 billion a year within a few years.

The numbers of paramilitary men and women employed are impressive. One firm, Military Professional Resources Inc., maintains that it has over 10,000 highly-trained former soldiers on its rosters. Another, Global Risks, has been spectacular in “outsourcing” the force it has fielded in Iraq: it is said to maintain there about 500 Gurkhas and the same number of Fijians.

As private companies, the profit-driven criteria are training, availability and cost. So, at least one firm, Erinys, has employed former members of the notorious South African security forces. While Gurkhas and Fijians may be cheap, firms offer up to \$1,500 a day about three times the monthly salary of regular soldiers. And, at those rates, they get what they need. The perhaps (since no one has exact figures) 20,000 paramilitaries now employed in Iraq are more than double the size of the British military expedition and, coming from about 30 countries, they constitute a broader coalition than the one touted by the American government.

To get contracts and build up their fees, the new companies build on the contacts of their key employees. Many are headed by retired American generals and staffed by officers who until a few years or even months ago were “brothers-in-arms” of those now hiring them. The best known example is Military Professional Resources Inc., whose chief executive, a retired chief of staff of the U.S. Army, was once the superior officer of Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Even more notable is their foray into the political arena. The ten largest firms spent over \$30 million lobbying during last few years and donated over \$10 million to political campaigns. Some were even less subtle: Blackwater USA is reported to have hired the lobbying firm headed by the former chief of staff of the leader of the House of Representatives, Republican Representative Tom DeLay. The firm also employs Mr. DeLay’s wife. With a fine sense of bipartisanship, the company that owns Military Professional Resources Inc. hired as one of its lobbyists the wife of Tom Daschle, the Democratic minority leader of the Senate.

Filling a perceived need, able to mobilize large sums of money and drawing on political support, these “private military firms” have taken on military and combat-related tasks all over the world. In Iraq, they guard the senior American government representatives, patrol pipe lines, cater meals and occasionally fight; in Afghanistan, they guard the new president; in Colombia, they spray coca crops and fight insurgents; in the Philippines, they are engaged against the Moro insurgents; in Guantánamo, they not only built the prison but even interrogate the “enemy combatants.” In Kuwait, Jordan, Nigeria, Bosnia and elsewhere they have trained national armies. And, increasingly, they maintain sophisticated weapons systems for the American military.

The American government is not the only patron of the new firms. In the dangerous environment of Iraq, every contractor feels driven to hire a private security force to protect its employees. It has been estimated that this soaks up perhaps a quarter of all allocated rebuilding funds.

If the tradition of using paramilitary forces is such an old and widely adopted one, what is different about them now. Most significant is that private security forces are not under military or official civilian control and operate essentially outside any legal jurisdiction. But, vis-à-vis natives, they employ overwhelming force. In instances, which are perhaps inevitable, when they abuse their power, they are accountable only to their employers.

Not surprisingly, Iraqis have begun to focus their hostility onto the paramilitaries. Anger against them was graphically demonstrated when mobs killed and mutilated four employees of Blackwater USA in Falluja. They were the most widely reported such casualties, but they were not the first. *The New York Times* reported on April 19 that insurance payments for 94 dead and 1,164 injured have been claimed for 2003 alone; claims will certainly be higher this year.

As a result of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s decision to privatize many tasks of the American armed forces, so dependent have they become on these paramilitary firms that some observers believe the trend cannot be reversed. As Peter Singer, author of *Corporate Warriors*, has summarized, “This new military industry encompasses hundreds of companies, thousands of employees, and billions of revenue dollars.” It has made itself indispensable. The question that remains is whether its agents can be made to operate in accordance with public policy and in ways that do not promote further hostility. That is the question brutally posed by the Falluja killings.