

Nothing to Fear

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I first encountered outsourcing, that wonderful euphemism for private military contractors or mercenaries, one bright San Diego morning in July 1966, when I reported for duty aboard USS Henrico as the most junior Supply Corps Officer in the Navy. A fast attack transport, the Henrico carried 1,000 troops, the boats to put them ashore, a commodore and his staff, and a crew of about 430 officers and men. To clean the officers' staterooms, if you could call them that, the officers' heads, prepare their food, carry their gear to the laundry and demonstrate by a one to one relationship the seniority of the Captain and the Commodore, the Navy provided Filipino stewards.

Why Filipinos instead of, say, Germans, or some other nationality with a more martial character? Perhaps the decision makers preferred chicken adobo to sauerkraut, but the reason was cultural and political. For generations, stewards had been African Americans, forbidden to perform any military service other than servile. Lest anyone attribute this to some inherent racism or elitism in the Navy,

consider that confining African Americans to menial labor reflected the racism of the country as a whole.

In 1948, however, President Truman signed an Executive Order desegregating the armed forces, opening both officer and enlisted ranks to all Americans. Ultimately Truman's Order produced General Colin Powell, first African American to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of State, and General Lloyd J. Austin, first African American to head Central Command, which includes the Middle East. Were it not for recruiting stewards from our former colony, our officers would have had to wash their own clothes and fry their own eggs. The only serious criticism was that the cultural gap between Filipinos and Americans frustrated both employers and employees.

In this one anecdote, gentlemen, we have an unanswerable argument in favor of outsourcing our military: like so many other tiring, dangerous, and tedious occupations, Americans just won't do it anymore. Can we seriously expect anyone with a chance at Wall Street riches or an idea for an app that might make billions to risk his or her life against some black flag-waving maniac in a God forsaken desert?

We have exactly the same problem finding anyone to cut our grass, clean our offices, and work in slaughter houses or drywall our homes. In one instance, the need is filled by private military contractors, in the other by illegal immigrants.

Rant if you will against them, they are both essential for what we have become. And let's be serious about this supposed problem. In a nation where the men let their women do their fighting for them, private military contractors are not the problem.

Several factors made outsourcing inevitable. Both the draft and our participation in the Vietnamese War sputtered to an end in 1972, showing the effectiveness of conscription in curtailing our involvement in an unpopular undeclared conflict. And good riddance. What are draftees but conscripts, and what are conscripts but hirelings of the state, mercenaries by another name? How can the President or the neo-cons or K Street or whoever is running our foreign policy act forcefully in international affairs, if they must listen to the cries of distraught mothers and endure the rage of angry students? Isn't it better to allow young people to self-select for military service rather than run up so many draft deferments that the system tumbles of its own weight? Now you see that from whichever direction we approach it, outsourcing the military is essential, either through professional soldiers or civilians hired to do the same work.

Anyone who objects to privatizing core governmental functions must explain where the people to perform these duties would come from if not from a labor market hard-hit by the dot.com bust of 2000 and the Great Recession of 2007-2014. Many of these private military contractors are too old, too sick and too

compromised for the traditional armed forces or government employment. If I were arguing by survey, I would ask how many men here told their sons or grandsons that they expected them to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan. No takers, are there? Has anyone even met a private contractor? I did, once; he was off for another year in Afghanistan as an advisor to the mayor of Kabul. I haven't seen him since.

Consider if you will the great advances in economics that have made privatization the watchword for our times. Like the Roman grandees who bought up the Campania and later all of Italy, displacing the small farmers who had manned the legions, agribusiness has made the family farm obsolete, and with it the source of the riflemen who once made our infantry so formidable. Next time you turn off the Interstate for a hamburger on your drive to Hilton Head or Florida, look at the teenagers behind the counter. You wouldn't want to see one of them waving an M-16 around, would you? Besides, the armed forces wouldn't take them. Did you know that 70% of today's high school graduates can't qualify mentally or physically, or can't pass a drug test, or don't have a clean enough record to enlist in the Navy? The only solution is to recruit through organizations not hampered by job-killing regulations.

What about our vital national secrets? Dare we entrust them to employees of a private contractor? Everyone talks about Edward Snowden, but he is as far as we

know the only weak link in more than 9,000 private military contractors with top secret clearances. For every Snowden, there is a Bradley or Chelsea Manning, someone in uniform eager to spray our darkest secrets throughout cyberspace. Comparing the two, no one would argue that Snowden does not make a more professional appearance. Since disclosing our secrets appears to be inevitable, they may as well be disclosed by someone capable of providing a rationale for their actions rather than some poor enlisted person broken by hundreds of days of confinement in a military prison with all the charms of Abu Ghraib.

If we can privatize our armed forces, then we can securitize them. And if we can securitize them, we can all profit from them. Isn't that what the country is all about? Everything has its price, and anyone with a little capital can share in the bounty. Is it any more objectionable to have a private military contractor in your portfolio than a tobacco company or a marijuana grower or a pornographer? We can make our armed forces matter again to the people in this country who really count: investment bankers, financial advisors, hedge fund operators and commodities traders.

Just think what Bill Ackman could do with an armored division. And what about selling naming rights for our aircraft carriers and submarines? After all, names like the USS Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter are as clichéd as "Veterans' Stadium." We should be able to get the sponsors to buy the uniforms, too, just as

they do for NASCAR pit crews. It's only a matter of time until we see F-35s adorned with the STP logo. Believe me, gentlemen, corporate taxes can be all but eliminated with the right marketing and negotiating team.

We have already outsourced other so called core governmental functions. Few realize and fewer care that Paul Bremer, our first proconsul in Iraq, was himself a civilian contractor, not an employee of the United States. During his tenure, the State Department spent \$20 million for his personal protection. Since Verres looted Sicily during the Roman Republic, no putative democracy has undertaken administration of a conquered province like this. No Cicero arose to denounce Bremer, however; a government paid public relations team helped insulate him from criticism for his disastrous administration, including demobilizing the Iraqi Army and, at a stroke, manning the resistance that would terrorize our traditional armed forces unfortunate enough to be deployed to his fiefdom.

Consider the flexibility outsourcing provides. Shortly before the invasion of Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld defeated Condoleezza Rice in a bureaucratic squabble over whose department would administer the soon to be conquered nation: Defense or State? As might be expected Defense, with the least qualifications, won. But in a stunning reversal, State became the contracting department for security. Again, the least qualified department won the internal battle. The unstated rationale, of

course, was that no one in congress would bother adding the State Department appropriation for contractors to the Defense Department budget to get the real cost of the war. And if they did, who would care?

Look at the spoils of this internal war. No, I'm not talking about the ill-conceived scheme to pay for the Iraq war through siphoning off its oil. I'm talking real money. During President Obama's first term, private military contractors exceeded the number of traditional troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. A congressional report found that between June 2009 and March 2011 in Iraq and Afghanistan, civilian contractors outnumbered traditional troops 10- to-1, State Department personnel 18- to-1, and USAID workers 100-to-1.

Now consider the costs saved by privatizing our armed forces. Between October 2001 and July 2011, there were about 2,500 contractor deaths in Iraq compared to 6100 American military deaths. Estimates vary, but the consensus is that it will cost more than \$1trillion for the death benefits and injuries our traditional armed forces have suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have saved ourselves at least \$500 billion by outsourcing all this pain and death to the private sector. The contractors' employees do not have recourse to the Veterans Administration; when their benefits are exhausted, they are exhausted. Remember that it is far preferable to bankrupt a private military contractor unable to pay promised benefits than a government.

What great victories have our contractors brought us, cynics may ask?

Indeed, as our traditional forces recede in Iraq, a new enemy a few thousand strong captured Mosul and Fallujah and a host of other half -forgotten places from their Iraqi counterparts. Those with long memories will recall the dazzling photos of the Fall of Saigon. Please do not succumb to defeatist thinking. Let me state absolutely that effectiveness, and, in particular, military effectiveness has never been a criteria or even a concern when the United States hires mercenaries. Remember the wardroom stewards, condemned by their culture to always be a step behind their employers? Political expediency, deniability, budget manipulation, yes; but victory in the field, never.

Who talks of victory for our traditional forces, after W. landed on that aircraft carrier and proclaimed, “Mission Accomplished?” From the hapless General Sanchez, who first presided over “the deteriorating security situation in Iraq” to the present, can you name me one general officer relieved of command for incompetence? General McCrystal was sacked for insubordination and *lèse majesté*, not incompetence. Gentlemen, I pose the question: when was the last time we shot an admiral?

Indeed, losing the war in Iraq insured W’s re-election from an electorate afraid to “change horses in the middle of the stream.” If the popular press is to be believed, we have more major generals in our army than privates, all with lifetime

job security and pension benefits beyond the imagination of the most rapacious municipal union.

Our last clear-cut victory was the First Gulf War, and what did we gain from that but W. and Rummy, anxious for a reprise that would assure their places among the great captains of history? If you want the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, get into videogames and play Call of Duty 2 or Grand Theft Auto, Third Edition. We would all have been so much better off if W. and Rummy had been computer literate. This country cannot afford another copycat victory.

Earlier I mentioned Central Command. Did you know there was an AfriCom, complete with its own website, tasked with projecting and protecting American interests in Africa? For all I know, there is probably a MidWestCom, or a CaliforniaCom. Where will the soldiers come from to stoke these fancies? How can we hope to garrison the world without private military contractors?

Finally, consider the question of political oversight and civilian control. In last elections, the new Senate Majority Leader campaigned on the slogan: "Guns, Coal, Freedom: Team Mitch;" the Speaker of the House didn't campaign at all. Tell me what oversight these luminaries and their cohorts in congress will provide. And who would you rather have whispering in their ears: a highly trained lobbyist or lawyer from the private contractor community, someone capable of marshalling

the facts and making a rational argument, or a member of Team Mitch? The question answers itself.

When someone asked Livy, who wrote his *History of the Roman Republic* during the reign of its first emperor, what application his masterwork had to current events, he replied: “We must honor the past, but we must live in the present.” Amen. Private military contractors are the present.