

## Privatizing the War on Terror: America's Military Contractors

Written by John W. Whitehead

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America's troops may be returning home from Iraq, but we're far from done paying the costs of war. In fact, at the same time that President Obama is reducing the number of troops in Iraq, he's replacing them with military contractors at far greater expense to the taxpayer. In this way, the war on terror is privatized, the American economy is bled dry, and the military-security-industrial complex makes a killing – literally and figuratively speaking.

The war efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have already cost taxpayers more than \$2 trillion and could go as high as \$4.4 trillion before it's all over. At least \$31 billion (and perhaps \$60 billion or more) of that \$2 trillion was lost to waste and fraud by military contractors, who do everything from janitorial and food-service work to construction, security, and intelligence – jobs that used to be handled by the military.

Over the past two decades, America has become increasingly dependent on military contractors to carry out military operations abroad. According to the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq & Afghanistan, the United States can no longer conduct large or sustained military operations or respond to major disasters without heavy support from contractors. As a result, the U.S. employs at a minimum one contractor to support every soldier deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. For those signing on for contractor work, many of whom are hired by private contracting firms after serving stints in the military, it is a lucrative, albeit dangerous, career path. Incredibly, while base pay for an American soldier hovers somewhere around \$19,000 per year, contractors are reportedly pulling in between \$150,000 and \$250,000 per year.

The exact number of military contractors on the U.S. payroll is hard to pin down, thanks to sleight-of-hand accounting by the Department of Defense and its contractors. However, according to a Wartime Contracting Commission report released in August 2011, there are more than 260,000 private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than the number of ground troops in both countries.

Unfortunately, fraud, mismanagement, and corruption have become synonymous with the U.S. government's use of military contractors. McClatchy News "found that U.S. government funding for at least 15 large-scale programs and projects [in Afghanistan] grew from just over \$1 billion to nearly \$3 billion despite the government's questions about their effectiveness or cost." One program started off as a modest wheat program and "ballooned into one of America's biggest counterinsurgency projects in southern Afghanistan despite misgivings about its impact." Then there was the \$300-million diesel power plant that was built despite the fact that it wouldn't be used regularly "because its fuel cost more than the Afghan government could afford to run it

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regularly.” RWA, a group of three Afghan contractors, was selected to build a 17.5-mile paved road in Ghazni province. They were paid \$4 million between 2008 and 2010 before the contract was terminated with only two-thirds of a *mile* of road paved.

Mind you, with the U.S. spending more than \$2 billion a week in Afghanistan, these examples of ineptitude and waste represent only a fraction of what is being funded by American taxpayer dollars. Yet what most Americans fail to realize is that we're funding the very individuals we claim to be fighting. The war effort has become so corrupt that U.S. taxpayers are not only being bilked by military contractors but are also being forced to indirectly fund insurgents and warlords in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Taliban – which receives money from military contractors in exchange for protection. This is rationalized away as a “cost of doing business” in those countries. Furthermore, the boom in contracting work in the war zones isn't necessarily aiding U.S. employment, given that large numbers of contractors are actually foreign nationals.

Despite the high levels of corruption, waste, mismanagement, and fraud by military contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. government continues to shield them, resisting any attempts at greater oversight or accountability. War, after all, has become a huge money-making venture, and America, with its vast military empire, is one of its best customers. Indeed, the American military-industrial complex has erected an empire unsurpassed in history in its breadth and scope and dedicated to conducting perpetual warfare throughout the world.

What most Americans fail to recognize is that these ongoing wars have little to do with keeping the country safe and everything to do with enriching the military-industrial complex at taxpayer expense. It's the military-industrial complex (the illicit merger of the armaments industry and the government) that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned us against more than 50 years ago and has come to represent perhaps the greatest threat to the nation's fragile infrastructure today.

Unfortunately, Americans have been inculcated with a false, misplaced sense of patriotism about the military that equates devotion to one's country with supporting the war machine so that any mention of cutting back on the massive defense budget is immediately met with outrage. Yet the military-industrial complex is engaged in a deadly game, one that all presidents, including Obama, foster. And the consequences, as Eisenhower recognized, are grave: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. ... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

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