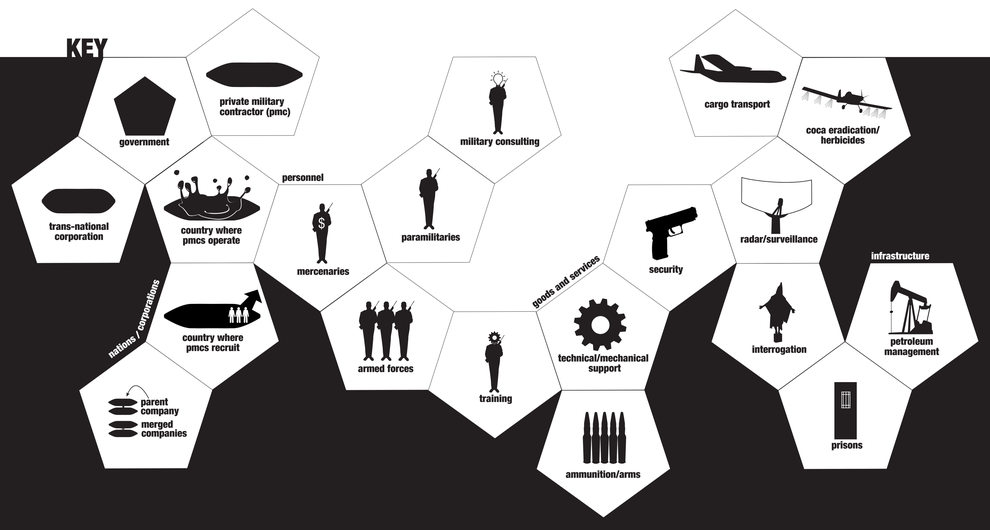
$200,000,000,000 spent by world governments for Private Military Contractors each year

KEY



The Privatization of War

Colombia as Laboratory and Iraq as Large-Scale Application

[The King of England] is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

United States Declaration of Independence, 1776

Today, the privatization of military services is a worldwide business worth $200 billion (US) a year. The mercenary armies so reviled by the authors of the Declaration of Independence have become today's Private Military Contractors (PMCs), an acceptable part of many global economies. PMCs prefer to distance themselves from the term "mercenary," to the point of forming a powerful lobby called the International Peace Operations Association (IPOA).

The first PMCs were formed some decades ago to assist with military logistics. The PMC market boomed during the 1990s, when hundreds of companies were founded mainly by former military officers from dozens of countries. Most PMCs are American-based or controlled, but significant numbers are based in South Africa, Great Britain, Israel and Russia, as well as France, Germany, Italy and other countries. In addition to PMCs, civilian companies take on missions that are entirely part of the contemporary war machine. For example DHL, a German company which normally operates an international parcel service, provides cargo transport for the US Army and other contractors in Iraq.

The "products" PMCs offer nowadays range from logistics (such as building and managing military camps, training facilities, and prisons) to strategic support (such as managing radar and surveillence equipment or designing combat strategies) to open combat and special sabotage missions. Huge PMC conglomerates have been formed and even traded on the stock market, such as CSC (which owns DynCorp) or KBR (a subsidiary of Halliburton).

Hiring PMCs has various advantages for a government. PMCs are less accountable to the public because they are private corporations. In the United States, PMC contracts under $50 million do not need approval by Congress, although costs for military interventions do. American enlisted troops are accountable to military law; PMC operatives are not, as they are considered civilians. In addition, many contracts excuse them from civil prosecution.

It's very handy to have an outfit not part of the U.S. armed forces. Obviously, if somebody gets killed or whatever, you can say it's not a member of the armed forces. Nobody wants to see American military men killed.
- Myles Frechette, former US ambassador to Colombia

It is bad "public relations" to see US soldiers dying. However, the death of PMC employees does not have as great an impact on public opinion. In Iraq, there have been anywhere from 1,000 to 2000 PMC employees killed to date. The death toll for these operatives does not appear in military body count statistics.

The relationship between enlisted soldiers and private contractors during conflicts has changed dramatically over the last decade. During the first US war against Iraq in 1991, one out of every 100 military actors was a PMC employee. During the war against Afghanistan in 2001, it was one out of 50. Currently, in Iraq, it is likely that one out of every six military personnel is a PMC employee- between 20,000 and 30,000 individuals are "on duty" in Iraq. The "coalition of the willing" has become the "coalition of the billing".

If Iraq is a large-scale application of the privatization of war, then Colombia might be a functional laboratory for the concept. Colombia is rich in natural resources: oil, petrol, gold, emeralds, water, and bio-diversity. It is the fifth-largest oil producer for the US and is the fifth-largest market for US goods in Latin America. 400 of the largest US corporations have investments in Colombia.

The conditions for "good business" are ensured by PMCs- in cooperation with the Colombian army, police, cattle producers, narcotraffickers, paramilitaries, the US Army, the CIA, and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). The US and Colombian governments, transnational corporations, and PMCs act in ever-shifting coalitions to undermine campesino organizations, unions and unionizing efforts, social movements, and the armed insurgency.

This type of "public/private partnership" is common in Colombia, where, for example, the Coca-Cola corporation, Drummond Coal, and other enterprises work with paramilitary groups to menace union workers in order to crush organizing efforts. In the last 20 years, more than 3,000 union workers have been killed in Colombia by paramilitary groups.

Approximately 20 PMCs are working in Colombia, funded by US Army contracts and the Pentagon. Some of these activities include the work of DynCorp, which has several hundred employees working to eradicate coca and poppy plantations using crop dusters and herbicides. These aerial teams are accompanied by heavily armed "Search and Rescue" planes. There is documentation that eradication efforts are also being directed towards food crop agriculture of small farmers that lie within areas with guerrilla presence. The CIA is operating under the cover of PMC California Microwave in order to detect guerilla units and pass on information to the Colombian army. The collective work of the PMCs, paramilitaries, and Colombian army has displaced more than 2.5 million people.

Colombia and Iraq are two key sites that exemplify PMC operations in the militarized world order.