

Civilian Contractors Providing Logistics and Support on the
Battlefield

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The Department of Defense uses contractor services for a number of reasons. In some instances, contractors are able to fill in where scarce skill exists, due to reduction in strength or the concerted efforts to privatize certain military functions to then sustain specialized skills for future military deployments or contingencies. Elsewhere the military does not have the technical or specialized skills needed in place to repair equipment or weapons. Finally, limitations placed on the number of U.S. military that can deploy to a region are compensated by contractors who are able to fill in and complete the tasks required for the mission.

-Colonel Ronda G. Urey US Army

The reliance of civilian contractors on today's battlefield stems from four significant events in recent military history. The four events include the reduction in military manpower, the government push to privatize existing military functions, growing reliance on contractors to maintain sophisticated weapon systems and military vehicles, and mandated troop ceilings.¹ By having civilian contractors focus on what are sometimes considered mundane tasks, troops can focus on being "trigger pullers." However, civilian contract companies, on the battlefield, tend to focus on monetary gain vice mission accomplishment, make better wages than Armed Forces personnel, display questionable proficiency, and have no military command and control, which all threaten mission accomplishment and the Armed Forces ability to perform their primary duties as warfighters.

History of Civilian Contractors on the Battlefield

Utilizing civilian contractors on the battlefield to support U. S. Military Forces, dates as far back as the Revolutionary War. General George Washington used civilians to haul food and supplies and provide shelter for his Army. Civilian contractors have continued to support

¹ Colonel Ronda G. Urey, USAWC Strategy Research Project, *Civilian Contractors on the Battlefield*, 18 Mar 2005, 3

the military in various conflicts including World War II where they supported the U.S. in all theaters of the war. During the Korean War railroad and road maintenance, along with transportation, were provided by civilian contractors. By the Vietnam War, construction, base operations, water and ground transportation, petroleum supply, and maintenance and technical support for high tech systems were supplied by civilian contractors.

Focus on Monetary Gain vice Mission Accomplishment

Civilian contractors may be patriotic Americans, however, their primary goal is not winning the war they are supporting. The primary goal is to make as much revenue as possible.² Roser and Bauman state, "...one of the fundamental problems of privatizing combat support functions had been the mismatch of goals..."³ Monetary gain is the major motivational factor for those who choose to become civilian contractors. Their responsibility, as explained to them by their superiors, is to make as much money for their companies as they possibly can.⁴ Contractors do not display the same sense of urgency as their military counterpart. Contracted civilians have an

² Dina Roser and Robert Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 2007, Foreward

³ Ibid, 19

⁴ Ibid, Foreward

economic incentive to extend the work as long as possible with as many employees as possible to increase profits.⁵

Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) employees, once hired, attend training seminars to learn about their responsibilities with their military counterparts. The civilians are often given pep talks during these seminars in which their mission is explained to them. Contractors, are told that they are not to be heros. They are not going overseas to help the troops, the Iraqi people, or America. They are told that they "are going for the money."⁶ Throughout all of the pre-deployment seminars, the focus is on how much money the employees are going to make.

Because civilian contractors are in the war to make a dollar, they are capable of threatening work stoppages if they feel they are not getting paid enough, leaving the troops without food, water, or essential supplies and parts for the mission. In Kuwait in 2003, a KBR manager threatened a work stoppage because one of his contractors "...was refusing to perform work because of a contention that no funding remained available."⁷ The contracting officer, who is the link between the military and the

⁵ Roser and Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 19

⁶ Ibid, 60

⁷ Ibid, 42

contractors, tried to explain that the military was good for the money and that no stance was necessary. However, with the goal being monetary gain, the KBR manager still insisted that his employees be prepared to cease operations until the situation was resolved.⁸ This shows how the contractors were focused on the money and not the mission they were supporting. The work stoppage and the failure of delivering supplies and services could have put the troops at great risk and reduced their ability to complete their mission.

Making Better Wages than Armed Forces Personnel

Many military personnel have a bitter taste in their mouths for civilian contractors. This dates as far back as the Revolutionary War, when soldiers would compare their salaries to those of civilians who were providing logistical support.⁹ Civilian contractors, make higher wages, get better benefits and can quit on the battlefield whenever they want to. "You cannot order civilians into a war zone," said Linda K. Theis, an official at the Army's Field Support Command, which oversees some civilian logistics contracts. "People can sign up to that -- but

⁸ Roser and Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 43

⁹ Castillo, Lourdes A., "Waging War with Civilians: Asking the Unanswered Questions." *Aerospace Power Journal*, Fall 2000.

they can also back out."¹⁰ Military personnel, on the other hand, must do as they are ordered, or they are subject to punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

Because civilian contractors have greater benefits, better vacation time and often times shorter tours, military troops become bitter. Contractors are well paid for the risks they take, making almost six times more than a new private. The difference in pay can create tension between the contractors and U.S. troops.¹¹ "When they are side by side doing the same job, there is some resentment," said Rick Saccone, who worked as an intelligence contractor in Baghdad for a year.¹² Seeing these contractors doing as they please, deciding when they will deliver supplies or when they will go into danger zones, compounded with making better wages demoralizes the troops. Pay disparities and working conditions made it difficult to reenlist soldiers during the Revolutionary War,¹³ much like the disparity issue between contractors

¹⁰ Wood, David, "Some of Army's Civilian Contractors Are No-Shows in Iraq.", *Newshouse News Services*, 31 July 2003.

¹¹ Roberts, Michelle, "AP Impact: Nearly 800 Civilian Contractors Killed in Iraq." *Associated Press*, 23 Feb 2007

¹² Ibid

¹³ Castillo, Lourdes A., "Waging War with Civilians: Asking the Unanswered Questions."

and soldiers in today's war. In both cases, "the issue is distracting and affects the morale of the troops."¹⁴

The book "Betraying our Troops" puts into perspective the differences between contractors and troops and the wages they earn for performing the same duties:

Certainly no one intended this to be a consequence of privatizing combat logistics, but soldiers have been demoralized by their feelings of resentment toward the contractors. They are seeing contractors performing tasks that soldiers used to do, but for considerable more pay and benefits.¹⁵

Troops see these contractors living in luxury while they are suffering in small remote bases, left to wonder when the next convoy is going to come with food and supplies. Their bitterness towards the contractors leads them to forego reenlistment, encouraging them to leave the military and join the ranks of civilian contractors. The rationale for these troops leaving the Armed Forces is that they would be going back to Iraq with the military anyway, so "why not go back making more money?"¹⁶

Questionable Proficiency

KBR, as well as, other civilian contract companies have an over abundance of applicants volunteering to go to the combat zone on a daily basis. Many of these personnel

¹⁴ Roser and Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 78

¹⁵ Ibid, 80

¹⁶ Ibid, 80

who apply are enticed by the amount of money that they will be making. However, many of these applicants are not always the best qualified for the job at hand.

In Kuwait in 2003, a KBR manager went into a truck driver holding area to find 40 men to drive fuel tankers into a combat zone. Driving tankers into a combat zone is an extremely difficult task requiring good truck driving proficiency. The manager needed 40 qualified tanker drivers, but instead picked the first 40 people on the list.¹⁷ Many truck drivers hired had never driven a truck before or were only recent graduates of truck driving schools who had never driven a rig on the road. Hiring inexperienced personnel results in great risk. Foreign nationals and Iraqis, who required less pay than Americans, were being hired as truck drivers although they were not well trained in avoiding ambushes, fire support, IEDs or what to do when attacked.¹⁸

Many civilians hired to do carpentry and electrical work, had difficulty performing their duties, as well. Major Rick Lamberth, US Army, witnessed this lack of trade work proficiency at Camp Speicher in Iraq. "Soldiers, usually Reservist, with a background in the trades, such

¹⁷ Roser and Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 61

¹⁸ Ibid, 158.

as carpentry, often had to take over the work from the contractors, pushing them aside...saying I'll do the job."¹⁹ Soldiers and Marines would get frustrated because contractors were being paid larger sums of money and were not able to complete their responsibilities. It became a joke that to be hired by KBR to work on generators, one only had to know how to spell "generator".²⁰ A common observation at Camp Speicher were the disagreements between the military contracting officer and the KBR managers. They usually entailed discussions about the contractor's inability to perform required tasks.²¹

No Military Command and Control

In general, military commanders are more comfortable with having command and control over the personnel that are assigned to them, including civilian contractors. This is one of the biggest challenges that commanders face. Contracted employees are not considered subordinates to the commander and therefore are not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice unless a war has been declared.

Contracted employees cause major concern on the

¹⁹Roser and Bauman, *Betraying our Troops; The Destructive Results of Privatizing War*, 134

²⁰Ibid, 134

²¹Ibid, 134

battlefield because they may refuse to provide services if they feel they are in too much danger or are not getting paid enough to perform their duties in the hazardous environment. A commander cannot force the contractor to perform. He can only request that the contractor be removed from the unit by the contracting officer. "When you turn these services over to the private market, you lose a measure of control over them," said Singer, a foreign policy researcher at the Brookings Institution. Replacing 1,100 Marine cooks with civilians, might make short-term economic sense. But civilians "can walk off the job any time they want, and the only thing the military can do is sue them later on," Singer said.²² Missions can be jeopardized if contractors, functioning outside the military's command and control, refuse to provide support under fire.²³

Counterargument

The main advantages to using civilian contractors on the battlefield are saving money and time. Congress ordered Department of Defense (DoD) to develop ways of

²² Wood, David, "Some of Army's Civilian Contractors Are No-Shows in Iraq.", *Newshouse News Services*, 31 July 2003

²³ T. Christian Miller, "Private Contractors Outnumber US Troops in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July 2007, 1

cutting costs without cutting services. To do this, the military has turned to reengineering, competitive sourcing, and privatization of more military functions. According to General Bill Tuttle, USA Retired, the Army can cut logistics cost by 20 percent through the use of civilian contractors.²⁴ The DoD can also hire contractors at whatever level of experience is necessary to complete the mission. In the military it can take eight years to gain eight years of experience. In the civilian realm, if a technician with 10 years of experience is needed, the DoD can hire a civilian now with 10 years of experience.²⁵

Conclusion

It is understood that civilian contractors on the battlefield are here to stay. Due to the military manpower reductions, the government's reliance on high tech systems, and mandated troop ceilings, the need is evident. However, stipulations should be placed on these civilian contractors so that members of the Armed Forces can accomplish their mission.

Commanders must be able to exercise command and control of the civilian contractors assigned to them. They

²⁴ Castillo, Lourdes A., "Waging War with Civilians: Asking the Unanswered Questions.

²⁵ Ibid

must be able to order contractors to perform the duties that they signed up for. Contractors must be held liable for their actions and punishable under the UCMJ like their military counterparts.

Untrained contracted personnel must be given proper training for their job and for the combat zone. Contractors going to a combat zone need continuous training much like the Armed Forces receive so they have a fighting chance to defend themselves should the need arise. Contracted personnel should also train with the units they are deploying with. This could help create a brotherhood between the contractors and the unit, creating an understanding of how important their mission is to the troops they are supporting.

The civilian contractors job of providing logistics and support is an important one. Hiring contractors frees military personnel to be "trigger pullers" and allows the military to be a lighter, more agile force. However, to build a better relationship between contractors and military personnel and to make the battlefield more efficient, command and control issues and training of civilian contractors needs to be addressed.

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