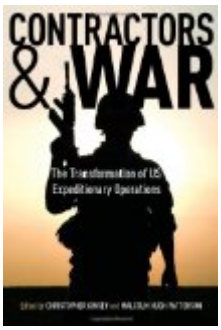
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Christopher Kinsey, Malcolm Hugh Patterson, eds.. *Contractors and War: The Transformation of US Expeditionary Operations.* Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2012. 352 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-6991-4.

Reviewed by T. X. Hammes

Published on H-Diplo (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Contractors and War: The Transformation of US Expeditionary Operations is an important book because in Iraq and Afghan contractors became an essential element of American warfare. They made up more than 50 percent of the deployed forces in those conflicts,[1] and secretary of defense Robert Gates directed the Department of Defense staff to assume contractors will constitute that portion of future forces.[2] In relying so heavily on contractors, the United States normalized their use, and we are seeing them show up across the planet.

As noted in their title, editors Christopher Kinsey and Malcolm Hugh Patterson believe the explosive growth of contractors has transformed how the United States conducted operations in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and against terrorists globally. To support their thesis, they assembled twelve thought-provoking essays organized around four major themes: the nature of contractor support; reconstruction and stabilization operations; the legal aspects of future U.S. operations; and the U.S. administrative structure needed to use contractors.

Robert Mandel's opening essay advances the thesis that contractors are in fact transforming modern conflict. He notes the motivations that drove the United States to rely heavily on contractors--and why it continued to use them rather than mobilizing larger numbers of reserves. He highlights one driver that should be of particular concern to a democracy: the fact the American people don't seem to notice or care about contractor casualties. This is a radical change for America. If an American solider is killed guarding a convoy, he is remembered, his family taken care of, and his death puts pressure on politicians to find a solution. However, if he gets out of the service, signs on with a contractor, and dies one month later guarding a similar convoy, Americans don't seem to notice. You won't see a picture of him in the *Washington Post's* Faces of the Fallen feature nor is he added to the number of U.S. combat deaths. In addition to the ethical aspects of using contractors, Mandel notes that questions about

cost, effectiveness, political impact, and "inherently governmental functions" remain unanswered (p. 29). He concludes the United States has no choice but to continue to use contractors but determining how the United States can successfully do so will require a great deal more research and "creative security thinking" (p. 31). The well-documented failure of contractor's efforts to train the Iraqi army and the Afghan police as well as numerous substandard construction projects and mentoring teams show that the U.S. use of contractors has had mixed success at best.

The second essay, by Ryan Kelty and Darcy Schnack, examines how soldiers feel about the presence of contractors, concluding that while it has a negative impact on retention attitudes it does not seem to actually impact retention (pp. 42-43). The authors caution the reader that they interviewed fewer than six hundred soldiers but found the soldiers were ambivalent about the presence of contractors. Unfortunately, the surveys were done in 2005 and 2006 and thus are dated. One has to wonder if the additional four to five years of exposure to contractors in conflict zones has changed the opinions of the soldiers.

The final essay on the nature of contractor support, Renee de Nevers's, opens the aperture to explore the United States' global use of contractors. She notes that most of problems associated with contractors in Iraq are also manifested in Afghanistan. As expected, the lack of oversight and correlated failure of contractors to achieve contract goals are present since U.S. government oversight processes were the same for both theaters. She also highlights the negative impact on governance that contractors have in nations as poor as Afghanistan, because contractors hire away the best and brightest local talent at salaries the government cannot offer.

The second section focuses on the use of contractors in stability operations. William J. Flavin leads off with a proposed operational concept for contracting. While one can disagree with his recommendations, he outlines the problems of using contractors and provides a well-reasoned series of questions to guide a reader through the concept. Next, Samuel A. Worthington delves into the natural and continuing tension between the U.S. government, military, and the contractors they employ versus nongovernmental/intergovernmental organizations (NGOs and IGOs) operating in the same space. While he does an excellent job of describing how government actions cause problems for NGOs, Flavin does not examine how NGO actions can hurt the government. He repeats the mantra that aid organizations are neutral without acknowledging that aid delivered to areas not under control of the government has the practical impact of assisting the insurgent. Nor does he discuss the impact that NGO use of armed contractors for security can have on the situation. In the final essay of this section, Kateri Carmola examines how government agencies and contractors differ in their understanding of and willingness to accept risk. He concludes that the complexity of population-centric counterinsurgency may simply preclude contracts from working (p. 150). However, he does not examine how contractors might be used if the United States were to adopt a different approach to counterinsurgency. Would they be effective in a campaign focused on capturing or killing insurgent leaders? How about in a campaign that does not seek an unachievable political settlement but simply seeks to "mow the grass"? These last two essays provide excellent but narrow discussions of their subjects. Both needed to be expanded to deal with the broader issues identified.

The three papers in the legal aspects section all agree that current U.S. law and policy are inadequate for dealing with contractor misconduct in conflict zones. In their essays, Geoffrey Coin and David Price both note the requirement for the U.S. legal system to adapt but neither is optimistic about that possibility. The third essay by Allison Stanger provides the broader observation that people who are in position to change the system

benefit most from its current configuration. Businesses like it because they are making a lot of money. Businesses also fund serious lobbying efforts against major change. Political leaders like it because contractors make it much easier to commit and sustain U.S. forces to a conflict when half of the force is comprised of contractors. And of course, lobbyists ease politicians' perennial problem of raising money for election campaigns.

Frank Camm starts the section on U.S. administrative structures with a practical guide for evaluating whether a contractor is a better choice than a government source. His well-thought-out discussion results in the unsurprising conclusion that it "depends" (p. 250). He consolidates the discussion into a very useful table that suggests contractors are best used in support services, not in a combat theater, and are most problematic when providing security in combat (p. 246). But he also notes that the choice may well be made ahead of time. If government budget cuts have removed the capability, the contractors become the default source. In fact, this has often been the driving factor in the use of contractors in the past.

Stuart Bowen's essay on reforming the U.S. approach to contracting provides a succinct summary of what went wrong with contracting in Iraq, then a list of specific recommendations, and finally the rather bold recommendation that all contracting be consolidated under a single agency. While there are numerous theoretical advantages to a single contracting agency, this reviewer's repeated, painful encounters with the General Services Administration makes him very skeptical that it can work in reality. High prices, late deliveries, and poor product selection were the result of putting one agency in charge of buying all supplies for the U.S. government. One fears the same result, magnified by the problems of intercontinental distances, will be a bad thing for the U.S. effort in a conflict.

The final essay succinctly identifies the key problems that resulted from the extensive use of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. It then highlights three critical unresolved issues: contractor reliability, laws governing contractors, and the role of armed contractors. It notes that none of the three have been resolved but mentions the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, which directed the adoption of the recommendations the authors made in the article. Unfortunately, the authors did not update the article so the reader has no idea if the recommendations proved successful in the intervening five years.

Unfortunately, this is where the essays end. The book would have been much more useful to policymakers if the editors had included a section to address the potential strategic impacts contractors have had and will have. Thus, this reviewer also recommends Molly Dunigan's ***Victory for Hire: Private Security Companies' Impact on Military Effectiveness*** (2011) to round out the analysis.

While a couple of the essays are clearly dated, this volume is a well worth the reader's time. In the conclusion, the editors' note that the United States will continue to use contractors in the future. Thus the problems identified in this volume will persist unless both the legislative and executive branches take action to provide the legal and organizational structures to deal with them. Once those steps are taken, leadership will also be required to achieve cultural acceptance of contractors by both the military and civilian bureaucracies. While the title suggests the editors think contractors have transformed U.S. expeditionary operations, the sum of the articles suggests that the use of contractors is evolving rather than transforming. The editors also note that the purpose of the volume is to analyze the problems and suggest solutions in the hope it will stimulate discussion. In this, they succeeded.

Notes

[1]. Moshe Schwartz, ***Department of Defense Contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan: Background and Analysis*** (Washington, DC: Congressional Re-

search Service, 2010), 5, available at http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40764.pdf.

[2]. Secretary of Defense Memorandum, "Strategic and Operational Planning for Operational Contract Support (OCS) and Workforce Mix," January 24, 2011, 1.