

War on Terror Inc.
Corporate Profiteering from the Politics of Fear

Solomon Hughes
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When the historians of the future come to write the story of the last years of the 20th century in the UK and the USA, one of the bits they will have the most trouble getting their heads round will be the decision by the American state – with its British chum tagging along behind, as per usual – to privatise much of its military and intelligence services; essentially to surrender its monopoly on the use of violence for political ends. Why did the US and UK military and intelligence agencies, qua agencies, go along with it? Why was there so little resistance, so few resignations and so little political heat, generated by proposals which would have seemed preposterous – treasonous – a generation or two earlier? (That whirring noise is Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ernest Bevin rotating in their graves.)

Hughes has done us a big favour in pulling together the entire shabby story: this is one of those subjects which we all ought to understand but which has been scattered so far. This account does include the American experience but it is the British events which interest me and have been less well reported so far.

This takes us to the core of the NuLab story, for it shows that the Blair-Brown administrations really did believe that private is always better than public. (How they must have hated the Labour Party!) Yet it still astounds me to read an account of a Labour government casually handing over chunks of the British defence structure to American and British business; just giving away part of the power of the state which NuLab were supposed to be trying to articulate in the interests of the British people (never mind the less well off/disadvantage/deprived/poor/working class – pick a term). Such privatisation speaks of extremely low self-esteem: for we – the state and politicians – are useless, is what it says; we need some 'experts' from the private sector run to things.

Hughes tells the British end of this grubby story as a straightforward chronology, from the early days of Group 4 getting their mitts on some bits of the prison service, through the fire sale of British Army accommodation (which set the benchmark for the state getting screwed by private capital) and thence on through Aldermaston and the naval dockyards.

But these were the foothills. The big steps were taken after a meeting at

Ditchley Park in 2000 at which American and British civil servants, politicians and corporate leaders (and people like Dick Cheney, who was both; Hughes names the names) met and worked out how to begin divvy-up their states' military assets. The rationale for this? Nothing more sophisticated than the usual belief that the private is better than the public; in this case, that the private sector could implement change faster than the state, could shake-up the rigid bureaucracies of the Pentagon and MOD to create the new, dynamic forces for the rapidly changing strategic environments (etc etc, boilerplate, boilerplate). And hey, if we make a shit-load of money in the process, so much the better.

So began a series of deals in which the taxpayer got screwed, some companies made hundreds of millions, some Labour MPs got nice payoffs, and NuLab stayed onside with their American buddies. And yes, Cheney's Haliburton got its hands on some British assets.

We get a separate chapter on British mercenaries and the rationale for their use. Jack Straw, who as Home Secretary had signed off on private prison guards, now signed off on private soldiers. Hughes quotes from a Green Paper produced while Straw was at the head of this particular dung heap. The new private military companies (n.b. not mercenaries) would need little regulation:

'private military companies are different from freelance mercenaries since they have a continuing corporate existence and will wish to maintain a reputation as respectable organisations.' (p. 108)

Yes, it's the 'light touch' again.

And then a long came 9/11 and the whole ramshackle wagon-train of crooks, conmen, dumb or careerist politicians, broke into a gallop as a new 'enemy' announced himself and the 'war on terror' replaced the cold war as the rationale for military spending. It makes billions for the corporations who pay for the politicians' election campaigns, and the new mercenaries enable the politicians to fight unpopular wars without having to worry so much about the negative PR associated with body-bags: mercenaries don't arrive back in flag-draped coffins.

This disgusting story climaxes with the arrival in Iraq of maybe 100,000 mercenaries, all getting paid many times more than their state equivalents (as usual privatisation means paying a great deal more for a worse service), with hardly any controls over their behaviour; 100,000 mercenaries, an army of (mostly) American gunslingers, 'to build a nation'. Altogether now: you couldn't make this shit up.