

Private military
contractors
government
transparency media
essay



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The 1990s set a new stage for military action. A global market for military services rapidly developed. As Singer mentioned, the age-old practices of mercenaries developed in a corporate evolution of private military contractors, in this article now referred to as PMC's. PMC's provide services to an array of international actors, including international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, global or multinational corporations, but also the governments. These legalized and market based private armies have, until today, created great material for scholars to discuss and analyze both the ethical and legal side of their actions and involvements. Many positive results have shown from the work of private military contractors, e. g. delivering protection to humanitarian aid workers requiring protection within conflict zones, a peacekeeping force in need for support (Singer, 2012). However, this article will focus on the downside of private military contractors' involvements with governments and their negative impact on the public, e. g. the Blackwater Baghdad shooting scandal, Abu Ghraib prison scandal. These examples will be further illustrated in the following chapters.

Deborah Avant and Lee Sigelman, two political scientists, have attempted to examine the effects of PMC's influences on the state's level of democracy, mainly focusing on the United States. They discuss the three fundamental elements of democracies, that of constitutionalism, transparency, and public consent and argue that the influence of PMC's will lead to a decrease in the level of democracy. Their evidence indicates that military raised via market-based contracts are harder to learn about and thus less transparent than the government's own military forces. Consequentially a lack of transparency will ensure that the public is less aware of the deaths of contractors and the

negative impacts PMC's can have, thus creating an increase in public consent towards the government.

In first instance one could agree that as a result of the decline of transparency people will not be aware of certain negative impacts created by PMC's and will thus show more content. However, the author of this article hypothesizes that, if the public eventually does discover these negative impacts, which are indirectly that of the responsibility of the government, an even greater public discontent will arise that will finally lead to a decline in political trust. This paper will therefore focus on the negative impacts that collaborations between PMCs and the government have on citizens, by building on Avant and Sigelman's thesis on transparency and public consent.

Given that Avant and Sigelman have focused on the United States and because the US government is the biggest contractor of private military companies, the United States will be primarily used as example to illustrate certain examples of PMC activities.

In the first part of this paper the emerge of private military contractors and their relation with the US government will be discussed. Examples of negative loaded PMC practices will be given to substantiate the conclusions that will be made about transparency and political trust. Following, democratic transparency will be defined and Avant and Sigelman's viewpoints on the relation between transparency and public consent will be elucidated. This will be followed by the relation to and definition of public trust. Finally, conclusions will be made whether the collaboration between government and PMC's could finally lead to a decrease in political trust.

The emerge of private military contractors

As mentioned above, the 1990s set a new stage for military action. After the end of the Cold War, a private military industry emerged that evolved in a market-based military support. Singer (2004) wrote that the underlying cause of this emerge was the confluence of three momentous dynamics: the end of the Cold War produced a vacuum in the market of security, there were transformations in the nature of warfare, and as a result of growing liberal capitalism there was a normative rise of privatization. These profit driven organizations, that trade in professionals services linked to warfare, were named private military contractors (PMC's).

Since the war in Iraq, spring 2003, the use of PMC's has boomed. Franke and Boemcken mention that, according to the department of Defence (US), the number of PMC's has increased with 140% from 2007 to 2009 and between 2008 and 2009 with 236% (Franke & Boemcken, 2011). Outsourcing of military operations has become very popular amongst international organizations. The government of the United States has made many agreements with these PMC's. There are various reasons why companies outsource their military operations, an example is that private actors motivated by profit are believed to be more efficient and effective (Franke & Boemcken, 2011). This paper will to a great extent focus on the following motive. According to Singer (2004), governments mainly outsource military operations because carrying these operations out through the national army would not gain the government legislative or public approval.

The United States is, until today, one of the biggest contractors of private military companies. During their operation in Iraq in 2003, the US deployed <https://assignbuster.com/private-military-contractors-government-transparency-media-essay/>

between one in ten to one in six personnel from private military contractors, carrying out the work that previously would have been done by soldiers of the national army (Avant, 2007). The first numbers released on the amount of military contractors in Iraq, released in 2006, counted 100, 000 contractors that were employed only by the US government, not to mention all other US international organizations.

Besides many positive results that have been achieved by PMC's, some negative events have occurred that have been in disadvantage of and suffered by these PMC's. As Franke & von Boemcken mentioned, accounts of human rights abuses and shooting incidents involving contractors have increased over the years. The suitability of some of the contractors has been questioned and the ethical debate on their abilities, motives, and interferences to fulfill certain functions is rising (Franke & von Boemcken, 2011). Examples of events that disadvantage PMCs are, for example, the shooting incident of Blackwater contractors. In 2007, 5 contractors of the private military company Blackwater caused the death of at least eight Iraqi civilians. Reported by the Times: " Guards employed by Blackwater, the US security company, shot Iraqis and killed victims in allegedly unprovoked and random attacks, it was claimed yesterday." (The Times, 7 August, 2009) . Another incident, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, led to the circulation of reports on human rights abuses by employees of a PMC's. American employees of the PMCs, Titan and CACI19, allegedly abused Iraqi detainees during prison interrogations (Avant, 2004). It caused a lot of controversy as the media raised global public awareness on the ethical side to PMCs. In 1990, during their operation in Bosnia, the UN recruited the private military

company DynCorp. This company later became widely known for its involvement in sex trafficking. Employees of the company were charged with the assault of engaging in sex with minors and selling them as slaves to each other. This story made its way back to the media through the movie 'The Whistleblower' (Jurriaans, 2012). These abovementioned reports have slowly brought the activities and ethical side of PMCs under public attention, though public awareness is still very limited. The reasons for that will be further outlined in the next chapter.

Other negative results have been the suffering of employees contracted by private military companies. Like national armies, men and women fight and risk losing their lives. The deaths of soldiers, whether from private companies or national armies, will have an impact on the public and may communicate a message about the importance and legitimacy of a mission (Avant & Sigelman, 2010). CNN occasionally reports on PMC casualties. One of the reports on October 3rd 2007 announced the death of two employees of Blackwater: "The burned and mutilated remains of two of the employees were strung up from a bridge over the Euphrates River, an image that fueled American outrage (...)" (Drash, CNN, 3 October 2007). Another incident that made the headlines: "Attack on U. S. contractors revealed / Four killed when convoy was assaulted by mob in town near Baghdad last month" (Anderson & Fainaru, Washington Post, 23 October 2005). All these contractors, who lost their lives during their mission, have relatives they leave behind. The grievance and loss of these people has caused emotions about the significance of the work of private military contractors. The Iraq Coalition

Casualty Count has reported 191 contractors deaths during the period of the Iraqi war, from 2003 to 2010.

PMC's and government transparency

As Avant and Sigelman stressed, governmental transparency is essential for a healthy democracy and can lead to public consent if people are aware and in agreement of the activities of the government.

Government transparency can both be approached domestically and internationally. In general, it is defined as “ the legal, political and institutional structures that make information about the internal characteristics of a government and society available to actors both inside and outside of the domestic political system” by Finel and Lord (1999) (Avant & Sigelman, 2010, p. 243). But for this context Park & Blenkinsopp' (2011) definition of transparency will be used: ‘ the availability of information to the general public and clarity about government rules, decisions, and activities’ (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011, p. 256). They continue to mention that the demand for transparency is growing rapidly and governments are required to engage in more active disclosure (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

The information coverage on PMC's has been limited. Governments have been very discreet in disclosing information on contracts with PMC's. As Avant mentions, coverage of national military deployments are given virtually automatically, but there is no such coordinated or automatic flow of information about contracts between government and PMC's (Avant & Sigelman, 2010). Information blockages make it very difficult to request access to data on numbers of casualties or contractors, etc. And though

media has frequently reported on PMC activities, the coverage has nowhere near been as extensive as reports on national army activities. Avant and Sigelman examined media coverage of PMC activities and their results showed an overwhelming lack of coverage of PMC performances. Figure 1 and 2 illustrate the differences in media attention of two newspapers on national army reports and reports on PMC activities. Both figures show a great difference between the reports on the army and PMC's.

Figure 1 New York Times News Coverage of National Military Army versus PMCs (referred to as PMSC).

Source: (Avant & Sigelman, 2010, p. 246)

Figure 2 St. Louis Post-Dispatch Coverage of National Military Army versus PMCs (referred to as PMSC).

Source: (Avant & Sigelman, 2010, p. 246)

As a result, Avant and Sigelman stress that less extensive media coverage and the diffuse and limited availability of information on PMC activities reduces transparency on the use of PMC's by governments (Avant & Sigelman, 2010). They conclude that this reduced transparency can lead to benefits for the government. The opportunity to outsource military goals provides new possibility of seeking public policy ends through contracting private military companies (Singer, 2004). Thus, it allows governments to achieve certain goals that would not have gained legislative or public approval if it would have been carried out by the national army. Moreover, Isenberg argues, the use of PMC's has the potential to facilitate the conduct

of conflict without having public consensus or a political debate (Isenberg, 2012).

In the sex trafficking case in Bosnia in 1990 it took until 2000 before an investigation of the crimes started and media reports began to spread. And it was only when the movie was launched in 2002, that global controversy aroused around the ethicality of the PMCs. The public discontent on the matter did not have any influence on the holding office of the US, as they were not thought responsible for the actions in Bosnia (Isenberg, 2012).

Transparency, public consent & political trust

Increasing people's knowledge about government's performance and agenda is seen as an important tool to increase the trust of citizens in their government. As Hood mentions: " Transparency stimulates a culture of openness, which is thought to have a positive effect on trust."

(Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012, p. 51). Applying the role of transparency to this paper, its relation to public consent should be seen vice versa. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the use of PMCs by governments decreases their transparency. Citizens are not fully aware of their collaboration with PMCs and can therefore not develop an opinion on their military agenda, which, in this case, leads to an increase in public consent. To their knowledge, the government is minimizing the threat of losing human lives by cutting down on military activities. The people are kept in ignorance about military contracts and, as a result, the government will receive more public consent.

In short, governments have been outsourcing military activities to PMCs for which they would not have received public consent if they would have conducted it through the national army (Singer, 2001). Avant and Sigelman
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accentuate this point by arguing that if governments would contract PMC's for military services, transparency would decrease which could then lead to an increase in public consent, " since a lowered transparency could diminish the perceived human costs of war" (Avant & Sigelman, 2010, p. 256). On first thought, this could be perceived as a logical effect, but in the long run, it could lead to a decrease in public consent if public awareness of PMCs and governmental collaboration increases. This can, for example, be a result of increased media attention.

Owing to the information blockage of, especially, the US government, facts and figures of PMC activities have to a great extent not been made public. Media coverage has been limited as reporters are having a hard time accessing data on PMC contracts with governments. Therefore people have not been made aware of the roles of PMC throughout the world, including the negative side it has developed due to unfavorable events that occurred. Avant reports that small amounts of information, particularly involving PMCs in Iraq, have been passed through to the public and has interrupted some public consent processes in the US (Avant, 2006), though this is still very limited. Singer reports that an increase in media attention and government's release of information is taking place. Media is increasingly reporting on alleged human rights violations and it has lead to a deteriorating image of security contractors (Franke & von Boemcken, 2011). The stories and reports are also increasingly making their way through by movies. An examples is Shadow Company, a documentary that extensively investigates the motives and activities of private military contractors. Another movie, mentioned before is the Whistleblower, that captures the atrocities of the sex trafficking

scandal of two PMC companies in Bosnia. Another important source that is contributing to spread of information is Wikileaks, that publishes secret documents of governments and organizations all over the world. They published the horrible scenes of the Baghdad attack and were responsible for the spread of awareness around the attack (McGreal, 2010, The Guardian) . Blanche (2012) mentions that the Arab media is gradually framing PMC activities in instances of civilian violence and their reports are slowly reaching Western media.

Concluding from the above, the increase in media attention will give rise to a greater public awareness of the negative activities of PMCs that are contracted by the government. As a result, a decrease in political consent could arise when people discover that their government has been outsourcing activities that they, in the first place, would not have given any consent to. This decrease in public consent could have disastrous consequences on the trust between the people and their government, as they may become suspicious of the activities of the government.

Transparency is linked to a certain trust in government. Transparency provides people the possibility to perceive a level of trustworthiness in the government. Trustworthiness refers to whether people perceive a government organization to be capable, effective, skilful or professional in making decisions (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). If people discover that, on the account of their government, hostilities have been taking place by PMCs, the public will lose their trust and will become suspicious about the governments' behaviour and agenda. As stated above, knowledge on

government activities through transparency is essential for obtaining public
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consent. When people discover that their government has executed certain activities without their knowledge and consent, this could lead to a decline in political trust. As Worthy and Grimmelikhuijsen mention, rising secrecy, the abuse of the freedom of information, and a decrease in understanding will lead to a decrease in political trust (Worthy & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012).

Conclusion

An increase in media attention of private military contracting, and a growing awareness that governments are outsourcing duties that they would otherwise not receive public consent for, are believed to have great effects on the trustworthiness of the government.

Although Avant and Sigelman argue that the use of PMCs is a helpful tool for governments to evade public consent. Contracting PMCs leads to a decrease in government transparency and a lowered transparency could abbreviate the perceived human costs of war, thus increasing public consent (Avant & Sigelman, 2010). However, the increasing attention of the media on PMC activities suggests that people will develop an awareness of the governments' collaboration with PMCs and that they, consequently, will also discover the negative events of these PMCs. People could become suspicious and they could, as a result, lose their trust in the government.

Suggestions

It could be interesting to conduct an experiment around this thesis that will devote to the public awareness on PMC's collaboration with the government and the public trust. A small example of this experiment could go as followed: a group of people will be asked to answer a questionnaire entailing

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specific question about trust in government and the perceived transparency. People will be asked about their level of trust in government and their awareness of government's activities. They will then be asked to read several articles on activities of PMC's contracted by the government that show both positive and negative results. They will then again be asked to fill in the same questionnaire. Both questionnaires will be compared to discover if the trust people had in their government was influenced by the articles and the discovery of certain government' activities.