Case Archive

# Chapter 12: Implementation and Performance

## Custer Rides Again: Why the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Relied So Heavily on Private Contractors

James Glanz and Andrew W. Lehren of the *New York Times* did some gritty reporting on the war in Iraq. In late December 2004, they found, a fierce firefight erupted at a security checkpoint. Men inside a convoy opened fire on Iraqi police officers and sped off. More shots took out the tire of a civilian car and others poured into a minibus. A team of Iraqi police officers, port security officials, and British military troops finally caught up with the convoy.

Who was responsible for starting this battle? From documents that came from WikiLeaks, the private organization that systematically leaked hundreds of thousands of classified documents it obtained surreptitiously from American soldiers, the reporters learned the answer. The shots came from individuals working for Custer Battles, a private security company owned by Americans and working for the American government. They managed to escape disciplinary action by following a deep-seated Iraqi tradition. They bribed Iraqi civilians and quickly departed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To a degree not widely appreciated, the United States fought the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan by relying heavily on private contractors. The country didn’t have enough soldiers for the task. Some contractors provided invaluable support functions, like transporting fuel and ammunition and operating kitchens. Most Americans know about front-line battle conditions from movies and old television shows like *MASH.* But Iraq and Afghanistan were nothing like these previous wars. With troops stretched thin, private contractors shouldered a large part of the effort, often fighting and dying as the war dragged on. The issue attracted high-level attention with the creation of the Commission on Wartime Contracting (<http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/index.php/about> ).

As the Iraqi war began to wind down, at least for American troops, the commission worried about who would provide security for the large number of Americans who provided ongoing advice and support. With much of the military leaving the country, the State Department had little choice but to double the number of contractors. However, its ambassador concluded, the department “does not have within its Foreign Service cadre sufficient experience and expertise to perform necessary contract oversight.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In Afghanistan, squabbles between the government and non-governmental development firms funded by the U.S. government threatened to shut down the big projects on which the nation’s rebuilding depended. The firms were responsible for much of the major reconstruction underway in the nation. Their top officials did not trust the Afghani government to protect their workers from attacks by the Taliban, so they hired private security guards. But Afghan President Hamid Karzai prohibited the use of these private guards, as part of a broader strategy of eliminating private security companies throughout the country.

“If we don’t have private security, we cannot operate in Afghanistan,” explained a development executive. “It’s not open to negotiation.” A U.S. official added that banning the private security companies “will be catastrophic.” The official said, “If these projects grind to a halt, we might as well go home. They are essential to the counterinsurgency strategy.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Without the guards, one American said, the power plant supplying Kabul might go dark. That, the American said, would be when the importance of the counter-insurgency strategy—and the private contractors who supported it—would be clear.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did the government’s reliance on private contractors shape the American strategy to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?
2. One analyst joked that the quickest way to have ended the much-criticized war in Iraq would have been to fight it with the same role for contractors as in previous wars. That would have required far more American troops and, with the troops stretched so thin, it might have posed a difficult choice for war strategists: end the war sooner or rely on a draft. How has the growing role of contractors affected war strategy? (We often think of public administration as the product of public policy. In this case, there is a different question: How has the public administration of war-fighting affected public policy?)
3. Should the government rely so heavily on contractors for future conflicts? If so, what steps should it take to ensure better management and supervision? If not, how should the government provide the help and support that winning such conflicts would require?

1. James Glanz and Andrew W. Lehren, “Growing Use of Contractors Added to war’s Chaos in Iraq,” *New York Times* (October 23, 2010), at h[ttp://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/middleeast/24contractors.html?\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/middleeast/24contractors.html?_r=1) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, “Better Planning for Defense-to-State transition

   in Iraq Needed to Avoid Mistakes and Waste” (July 12, 2010), at h[ttp://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/CWC\_SR2010-07-12.pdf](http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/CWC_SR2010-07-12.pdf)  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rajiv Chandrasekran, “U.S.-Led Afghan Reconstruction Projects to End Because of Security Dispute,” *New York Times* (October 21, 2010), at h[ttp://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/21/AR2010102104977\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/21/AR2010102104977_pf.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)