

# US Companies Hired to Train Foreign Armies

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<http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/peacekpg/training/pmc.htm>

When the Pentagon talks about training the new Afghan National Army, it doesn't mean with its own soldiers. The Green Berets and other elite U. S. troops are needed elsewhere. Instead, the Defense Department is drawing up plans to use its commandos to jump-start the Afghan force, then hire private military contractors to finish the job.

It would be the most vital role yet taken on by a somewhat clandestine industry accustomed to operating on the fringe of U. S. foreign policy by training foreign armies. As the United States pushes its antiterrorism campaign beyond Afghanistan, the role of these private companies promises to grow right along with it.

"The war on terrorism is the full employment act for these guys," said D. B. Des Roches, spokesman for the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency.

A little-known but increasingly essential addition to the modern battlefield, the firms, studded with retired American generals, have been training the world's more ragtag armies since the 1970s when a group of Vietnam veterans discovered that there was money to be made marketing military expertise—and sold Saudi Arabia on a plan to teach its army how to guard its oil fields.

Business has burgeoned in the messy post-Cold War world. The firms—modern-day mercenary companies armed with Powerpoint presentations instead of weapons—operate today in more than 40 countries, often under contract to the U. S. government.

For the Pentagon, with one-third fewer soldiers than a decade ago but a growing number of entanglements in unlikely places, hiring out the training of foreign armies has become indispensable. Every U. S. military operation in the post-Cold War era has involved significant levels of support from private military firms, from the Persian Gulf to Somalia, Zaire, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and Croatia.

But the industry has met with growing criticism by military experts who charge that the firms work with little oversight and less accountability, particularly when hired by foreign governments.

Plans to use the firms in Afghanistan are still preliminary. Although training of an Afghan military force has begun, there is no timetable for turning the task over to contractors. With Afghanistan still volatile, Pentagon officials are grappling with just how private trainers, who typically do not carry weapons, should be employed.

Since Sept. 11 and the Pentagon's launch of the war on terrorism, the stock prices of the publicly traded contractors have soared. Already, trainers from private military companies are in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, where Al Qaeda operatives are believed to be hiding. Executives of several private military companies have met with Pentagon officials about training other armies in Central Asia.

"A lot of people have said, 'Ding ding ding, gravy train,' " Des Roches said. "But in point of fact, it makes sense. They're probably better at doing these sorts of missions than anyone else I could think of."

Boasts retired Army Lt. Gen. Harry E. Soyster, an executive at MPRI, the most prominent of the private contractors: "We've got more generals per square foot here than in the Pentagon."

Although the most successful of the U. S. firms carefully screen their employees, prohibit them from carrying arms and generally reject contracts with governments the U. S. considers unsavory, they operate in a world populated by a darker breed of ex-soldiers who serve as guns for hire to thugs throughout the world. Competing military companies in Britain and South Africa have hired out their employees as combatants in Angola and Sierra Leone. And employees of the U. S. companies have sometimes taken up weapons themselves, employees of the firms say.

"We're talking about places where the governments have very little control over their territory . . . where our government has no control over what these firms tell the sometimes very questionable people they work for about how to fight," said Deborah Avant, professor of political science at George Washington University and an authority on the role of the private sector in war. "The more and more we put these people in riskier and riskier areas, the more they have to make these judgments on their own."

The U. S.-based companies say their goals dovetail with a long-held U. S. policy of encouraging military-to-military ties worldwide in the hope that professional armies can help stabilize fragile democracies.

MPRI, founded in 1988 by former Army Chief of Staff Carl Vuono and seven other retired generals, has trained militaries throughout the world under contract to the Pentagon. It counts 20 former senior military officers on its board of directors.

The firm operates from a bland office building in Alexandria, Va., its halls as hushed as those of an insurance firm. But the decor betrays the tough credentials of its founders. A statue of a knight in armor stands in a corner of the lobby. MPRI's emblem is an unsheathed sword.

"These guys are not about to destroy reputations they've spent 30 years building just for a buck," said Soyster, who once headed the Defense Intelligence Agency. "We go someplace because we are either sent there by the U. S. government or we're contracted by another government. We do it for the money, I'm not ashamed to say. But we do it right."

The financial rewards presumably beat Pentagon salaries. Since Sept. 11, the per-share price of stock in L3 Communications, which owns MPRI, has more than doubled.

The top five executives at Science Applications International Corp. of San Diego made between \$825,000 and \$1.8 million in salaries in 2001, and each held more than \$1.5 million worth of stock options.

Revenues from the global international security market, of which the firms are a part, are expected to rise from \$55.6 billion in 1990 to \$202 billion in 2010, according to a 1997 study by Equitable Services Corp., a security industry analyst.

The renting out of trained killers dates back hundreds of years, and privately recruited regiments were common in the U. S. Civil War. But selling military expertise has its roots in Vietnam, when commercial teams funded by the Pentagon provided military and police training to South Vietnamese forces.

In 1975, McLean, Va.-based Vinnell Corp. won a \$77-million contract to train Saudi Arabian infantry and artillery battalions to defend oil fields. It was the first time that American civilians had been permitted to sell military training directly to a foreign military. The job was controversial, and Senate Democrats held hearings. But the contract stuck. And other similar firms began to emerge.

The end of the Cold War led to dramatic growth. Suddenly, there was a pool of skilled former officers, some from Special Forces units, eager to sell the expertise they had developed as relatively low-paid soldiers. They found a ready market at the Pentagon, and in dozens of countries in Africa, Asia and the former Soviet sphere eager to professionalize their militaries.

The major U. S. firms in the field include MPRI, Vinnell, BDM International Inc. of Fairfax, Va., Armor Holdings Inc. of Jacksonville, Fla.; DynCorp of Reston, Va., and SAIC. Armor Holdings was among Fortune magazine's 100 fastest-growing companies in 1999 and 2000, one of the few firms on the list not related to technology.

The people they hire are hardly soldiers of fortune.

They are generally former military officers with 20 to 30 years of experience, generously pensioned retirees for whom the money is just part of the allure. Many describe their work as public service, a way to practice military diplomacy. Often they freelance, taking on contracts that send them abroad for a year or so.

They train armies how to use such complex hardware as armored personnel carriers, surface-to-air missiles, shoulder-fired antitank missiles, ships and aircraft, and other equipment typically sold to foreign armies by the United States. They prep officers in military strategy, run battle simulation centers, and have helped support peacekeeping efforts in troubled regions under contract to the Pentagon and the State Department.

MPRI has trained military forces in dozens of countries, including Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Colombia. DynCorp trained the Haitian police force after the 1994 U. S. intervention in the island nation. And MPRI and several other firms, under contract to the State Department, established the African Center for Strategic Studies to teach fledgling democracies how to run professional armies.

In other words, the French Foreign Legion they are not.

"One leitmotif of the business is how boring the individual jobs can be on almost all of the contracts that the big U. S. firms have. It is like being in the peacetime Army, Navy or Air Force," said one former member of Special Forces and airborne infantry units who for more than two decades has trained foreign militaries in Indochina and the Middle East.

"I'm not a mercenary," this trainer said. "I like excitement, but I have to be on the side of angels. Do not look for me to look for excitement [by] working on the side of vicious people."

But even the most polished of the firms have blemished histories. Employees of DynCorp were fired after being accused two years ago of keeping Bosnian women as concubines. Companies hired by the CIA in the 1980s trained foreign fighters later charged with atrocities in El Salvador and Honduras.

When the firms are hired by the Pentagon or State Department, as they would be in Afghanistan, their work is audited and sometimes supervised by U. S. military personnel, a process the State Department says helps prevent abuse.

But when they sell their services directly to other countries, there are minimal controls

. The only U. S. regulation of such foreign contracts is through the State Department, which issues export licenses under the Arms Export Control Act. The law regulates the sale of military services just as it does the export of a crate of guns. The department reviews applications to ensure that no sales are made or services performed that would "undercut U. S. interests," spokesman Jason Greer said.

The firms say this prevents them from working with governments that the U. S. disapproves of. When MPRI tried to get a license to train the Angolan army in 1994, for example, the State Department turned it down.

But Congress is notified only of contracts worth more than \$50 million. Sometimes there are conflicting views of what is in the U. S. interest. And once a license is granted, there are no reporting requirements or oversight of work that typically lasts years and takes the firms' employees to remote, lawless areas.

In 1998, MPRI applied for a license to help the government of Equatorial Guinea build its coast guard. The tiny African country is run by a military dictator who has been implicated in human rights abuses. It has no U. S. Embassy.

The contract was initially rejected by two State Department desks, according to a department official and Soyster. But the decision was reversed two years later after MPRI lobbyists argued that if it was not allowed to do the job, a competitor from another country would.

"There are people who think you should not help people, that they don't deserve to be helped, even though they want to make a change," Soyster said. "We say, don't let past mistakes get in the way of doing something that should be done today."

Even when doing the job they describe, the firms' role is sometimes cloudy.

In 1995, during a U. N. embargo on arms sales to Croatia, Bosnia- Herzegovina and Yugoslavia, MPRI persuaded the State Department to grant it a license to train Croatia's military, pledging that it would teach only leadership skills, budgeting and military ethics.

When the Croatian military, in a highly effective offensive called Operation Storm, captured the Serb-held Krajina enclave later that year, there were suspicions that MPRI instructors must have been directly involved. The operation played a key role in reversing the tide of war against the Serbs and, consistent with American policy, in bringing both sides to the negotiating table. But the same Croatian military was subsequently implicated in uprooting more than 150,000 Serbs from their homes.

The company denies that its employees played any direct role in the Croatian army's sudden transformation into an effective fighting force.

"I can assure you if we had the capability to train an army in a month to turn it around that fast, I wouldn't be talking to you, I'd be flying you over to the Riviera on the way to see it for yourself," Soyster said. "If we could do that to Croatia, we could straighten out Afghanistan in a couple of months."

But critics charge that the help MPRI provided the Croatians may have allowed the U. S. to secretly influence events in the war while maintaining its neutral posture and without sending U. S. troops, advisors or trainers.

"MPRI had all these different meetings with top Croatian defense officials right before the offensive. It's inconceivable that they did not have some kind of impact," said one military analyst who has followed the company's involvement in the Balkans. "It was followed by massive ethnic cleansing. Now, had American troops been on the ground, we would have been held accountable for that. The fact that it was a private company made the connection a lot less clear."

In this murky world, the line between training foreign troops and fighting with them sometimes blurs.

When Saddam Hussein's army invaded the Saudi Arabian border town of Khafji in February 1991, Vinnell employees accompanied Saudi national guard units into combat, according to two employees of Vinnell and an employee of another private military company who was in Saudi Arabia at the time.

The Vinnell employees had been stationed in the region to instruct Saudi soldiers in operating heavy weapons systems.

"Their job was to teach those guys, not to fight with them, but sure, the Vinnell instructors accompanied those units into combat," an employee who witnessed the counterattack said. "Under extraordinary circumstances, but very, very rare circumstances, you will see employees of the MPRIs of this world get into a circumstance where they can't say no. . . . Let's face it, they're human beings."

Said Vinnell spokesman Kevin O'Melia: "I'm not aware that that happened, and our company policy is that they not be directly involved. They're hired as advisors only . . . and that's the capacity in which we expect them to act."

In Afghanistan, the plan is for up to 150 U. S. Special Forces troops to begin training Afghan recruits, then to turn the effort over to private U. S. contractors. Defense officials have said for months that only by having an army of its own can Afghanistan hope to create the stability that is critical if the country is to avoid remaining a haven for terrorists. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has said he might seek money from Congress and other foreign governments to finance the army.

Some basic training of several hundred Afghan recruits is already underway, led by British and German members of the international security force there.

But thousands of other potential Afghan soldiers have yet to be tapped, and international financial support for building Afghanistan's army has been slim.

It is unclear how large an Afghan force would be needed to suppress factional conflicts and patrol the country's borders. But some defense officials have put the number at more than 20,000.

"I think we'll start off with our own guys because the Afghans are more comfortable at this point with people in uniform who they know," said a senior defense official familiar with the plan. "But at some point down the pike, we will move to contractors. We have to. We don't have the people to do it all ourselves."

And if the corporate warriors succeed in Afghanistan, the Pentagon will be eager to send them elsewhere, defense officials said.

"This is big business among these companies. They are furiously bidding on involvement in Afghanistan and the war on terrorism," said P. W. "Pete" Singer, an Olin Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "The minute the Pentagon started to use the phrase 'a program to train and equip the Afghan army,' buzzers went off."