

An Army for Hire: Trump Wants to Make Money by Renting Out American Soldiers

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To say that there has been some strange stuff coming out of the White House lately would be an understatement. If President Donald Trump knew a bit more about history, he would understand that countries that rent out their national armies to serve as mercenaries usually wind up holding the short end of the stick. There is the example of Pyrrhus of Epirus in the third century B.C., for whom the expression “Pyrrhic victory” was coined, and, more recently there was the British employment of 30,000 Hessian and other German soldiers in the American revolution. Hessian regiments were rented out by their prince to the King of England to pay the expenses of his government. The use of mercenaries by the British was cited by the colonists as one of their principal grievances and the Hessians became the losers in one of the few early colonial victories at Trenton.

There is currently considerable evidence surfacing suggesting that Trump views the United States military as some kind of mercenary force, a cash and carry security option for those who can come up with the dough. In [a recent interview](#) that Trump gave to Laura Ingraham of Fox News, the president boasted that “We have a very good relationship with Saudi Arabia. I said, listen, you’re a very rich country. You want more troops? I’m going to send them to you, but you’ve got to pay us. They’re paying us. They’ve already deposited \$1 billion in the bank.”

Some readers might just suspect that they’ve heard language like that before, but they are most likely recalling The Godfather part 1 movie where Marlon Brando playing a young Vito Corleone was running a protection racket for small businesses and shopkeepers in New York’s Little Italy. Corleone first had to kill the Black Hand extortionist Don Fanucci in order to take over his racket, something that has a certain resonance with what is going on currently in Iraq.

Trump has long complained that America’s allies are not paying enough to compensate the United States for the protection that it provides all over the world. He has pressured allies to pay for the U.S. military presence, even demanding that the Iraqis and South Koreans should reimburse the construction costs of airfields and other defense installations that have been used as bases by the American army and air force. Indeed, not surprisingly, the only country that gets away with having a U.S. base without any Trumpean demand for compensation is Israel, which actually gets the base plus more than \$3.8 billion a year in “aid.”

In the case of the Saudis, the government in Riyadh has ponied up the money to pay for the Trump relocation of 3,000 American soldiers. The move is intended to help protect the Kingdom from possible attack by Iran or its proxies, a particular concern given the

devastating attack staged by an unidentified someone on the major Saudi oil refinery on September 14th. One might recall, however, that the “unholy” presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia prior to 9/11 was a major grievance successfully exploited by al-Qaeda, resulting in 15 of the 19 presumed airline hijacking terrorists being Saudis.

Trump’s logic on the issue is that of an accountant who works for a protection racket. He looks to make a profit, without regard for the collateral costs that cannot be entered in double entry book keeping. The reality is that sending soldiers to places where they should not necessarily be largely because some foreign country can foot the bill loses sight of the fact that some of those people being ordered abroad will die. That is unacceptable and it makes the American Army little better than a mercenary force, hardly a “force for good” as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo would have it.

Kelley Vlahos of The American Conservative [reports how](#) the U.S. military in Saudi Arabia will man “...assets designed to help the Saudi military guard against Iranian attacks, including four Patriot batteries, a terminal high-altitude area defense system, or THAAD air defense system, and two squadrons of fighter jets. She also observes the “clincher” in the deal, which is that “...one important aspect of the deployment is the presence of American forces in more locations across the kingdom. They believe Iran has demonstrated its reluctance to target American personnel, either directly or indirectly, in part because Trump has made clear that would trigger a military response.”

In other words, as Vlahos observes, U.S. military personnel would be serving as human shields for the Saudis, to deter possible Iranian attacks. That sounds like a very bad bit of thinking on the part of whichever lunkhead in Washington came up with the scheme.

If the Saudi case were not bad enough, the Washington Post has also recently published an article extracted from a new book entitled A Very Stable Genius: Donald J. Trump’s Testing of America, by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, which includes detailed accounts of meetings [between the president and his senior staff](#).

The book is admittedly designed as a hit piece on Trump and it tends to beatify the military and its senior officers while also uncritically accepting America’s global role, but some of the invective hurled at the generals and admirals by Trump is, quite frankly, disgusting. One particular meeting held at the Pentagon’s top security Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting room called “The Tank” is reported in detail, clearly from the notes and recollections of participants or possibly even from a recording. It took place six months into the Trump administration on July 20, 2017, and included Vice President Mike Pence, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph F. Dunford, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Deputy Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and the leaders of the military branches. Trump’s personal “strategist” Steve Bannon was also in attendance. Per the article, Mattis and other cabinet members present had arranged the meeting because they had become alarmed by Trump’s lack of knowledge of the key international alliances forged by Washington following after World War II. Trump had been routinely dismissing America’s allies as worthless.

Mattis, Cohn, and Tillerson used PowerPoint presentations for ninety minutes in the belief that it would keep Trump from getting bored. The graphics showed where U.S. troops were stationed and explained the security arrangements that had led to America’s global defense

and national security posture.

Trump occasionally spoke up when he heard a word he didn't like, describing American overseas bases as "crazy" and "stupid." His first complaint was over his perception that foreigners should pay for U.S. protection. Regarding South Korea he fumed, "We should charge them rent. We should make them pay for our soldiers. We should make money off of everything."

Trump also called NATO useless, not because of their lack of a *raison d'être*, but instead based on what they owed. "They're in arrears," he shouted and gesticulated, as if they were late on their rent payments, before directing his ire against the generals. "We are owed money you haven't been collecting! You would totally go bankrupt if you had to run your own business."

Trump then got specific, naming Iran, saying of the nuclear pact with that country, which he had not yet withdrawn from, "They're cheating. They're building. We're getting out of it. I keep telling you, I keep giving you time, and you keep delaying me. I want out of it." And Afghanistan? A "loser war. You're all losers. You don't know how to win anymore."

Trump then went into a rage as he demanded oil to pay for the troops stationed in the Persian Gulf. "We spent \$7 trillion; they're ripping us off. Where is the fucking oil? I want to win. We don't win any wars anymore...We spend \$7 trillion, everybody else got the oil and we're not winning anymore." Glaring around the room he concluded "I wouldn't go to war with you people. You're a bunch of dopes and babies."

The only one in the room who responded to Trump's tirade was Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who objected "No, that's just wrong Mr. President, you're totally wrong. None of that is true. The men and women who put on a uniform don't do it to become soldiers of fortune. That's not why they put on a uniform and go out and die... They do it to protect our freedom."

After the meeting ended and the participants were departing, Tillerson famously shook his head and opined "He's a fucking moron."

In a follow-up meeting in December, Trump called together his generals and other senior officials in the Situation Room, the secure meeting room on the ground floor of the West Wing. The subject was how to come up with a new policy for Afghanistan. Trump started the discussion by saying "All these countries need to start paying us for the troops we are sending to their countries. We need to be making a profit. We could turn a profit on this. We need to get our money back."

Tillerson was again the only one to respond: "I've never put on a uniform, but I know this. Every person who has put on a uniform, the people in this room, they don't do it to make a buck. They did it for their country, to protect us. I want everyone to be clear about how much we as a country value their service." Trump was angered by the rebuke and three months later Tillerson was fired. Mattis subsequently resigned.

Even if one discounts, as many do, the rationalizations made by senior military officers and diplomats for staying the course in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, where they admittedly have screwed the pooch, there is something deplorable in a bullying president who sees everything in transactional terms, buying and selling. Sending American soldiers into

potential death traps like Saudi Arabia as part of a non-existent strategy to make money is beyond criminal behavior. People on both sides die when the decision making coming out of the White House is bad, and there has been no president either more ignorant or worse in that respect than Donald J. Trump.

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