

# Obama's War: Why is the Largest Military Machine on the Planet Unable to Defeat the Resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq

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## Just how powerful is the U.S. military today?

Why is the largest military machine on the planet unable to defeat the resistance in Afghanistan , in a war that has lasted longer than World War II or Vietnam ?

Afghanistan ranks among the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world today. It has one of the shortest life expectancy rates, highest infant mortality rates and lowest rates of literacy.

The total U.S. military budget has more than doubled from the beginning of this war in 2001 to the \$680 billion budget signed by President Barack Obama Oct. 28. The U.S. military budget today is larger than the military budgets of the rest of the world combined. The U.S. arsenal has the most advanced high-tech weapons.

The funds and troop commitment to Afghanistan have grown with every year of occupation. Last January another 20,000 troops were sent; now there is intense pressure on President Obama to add an additional 40,000 troops. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. More than three times as many forces are currently in Afghanistan when NATO forces and military contractors are counted.

Eight years ago, after an initial massive air bombardment and a quick, brutal invasion, every voice in the media was effusive with assurances that Afghanistan would be quickly transformed and modernized, and the women of Afghanistan liberated. There were assurances of schools, roads, potable water, health care, thriving industry and Western-style "democracy." A new Marshall Plan was in store.

Was it only due to racist and callous disregard that none of this happened?

In Iraq , how could conditions be worse than during the 13 years of starvation sanctions the U.S. imposed after the 1991 war? Today more than a third of the population has died, is disabled, internally displaced and/or refugees. Fear, violence against women and sectarian divisions have shredded the fabric of society.

Previously a broad current in Pakistan looked to the West for development funds and modernization. Now they are embittered and outraged at U.S. arrogance after whole provinces were forcibly evacuated and bombarded in the hunt for Al Qaeda.

U.S. occupation forces are actually incapable of carrying out a modernization program. They are capable only of massive destruction, daily insults and atrocities. That is why the U.S. is unable to win “hearts and minds” in Afghanistan or Iraq . That is what fuels the resistance.

Today every effort meant to demonstrate the power and strength of U.S. imperialism instead confirms its growing weakness and its systemic inability to be a force for human progress on any level.

### **Collaborators and warlords**

Part of U.S. imperialism’s problem is that its occupation forces are required to rely on the most corrupt, venal and discredited warlords. The only interest these competing military thugs have is in pocketing funds for reconstruction and development. Entire government ministries, their payrolls and their projects have been found to be total fiction. Billions allocated for schools, water and road construction have gone directly into the warlords’ pockets. Hundreds of news articles, congressional inquiries and U.N. reports have exposed just how all-pervasive corruption is.

In Iraq the U.S. occupation depends on the same type of corrupt collaborators. For example, a BBC investigation reported that \$23 billion had been lost, stolen or “not properly accounted for” in Iraq . A U.S. gag order prevented discussion of the allegations. (June 10, 2008)

Part of the BBC search for the missing billions focused on Hazem Shalaan, who lived in London until he was appointed minister of defense in 2004. He and his associates siphoned an estimated \$1.2 billion out of the Iraqi defense ministry.

But the deeper and more intractable problem is not the local corrupt collaborators. It is the very structure of the Pentagon and the U.S. government. It is a problem that Stanley McChrystal, the commanding general in Afghanistan , or President Obama cannot change or solve.

It is the problem of an imperialist military built solely to serve the profit system.

### **Contractor industrial complex**

All U.S. aid, both military and what is labeled “civilian,” is funneled through thousands and thousands of contractors, subcontractors and sub-subcontractors. None of these U.S. corporate middlemen are even slightly interested in the development of Afghanistan or Iraq . Their only immediate aim is to turn a hefty superprofit as quickly as possible, with as much skim and double billing as possible. For a fee they will provide everything from hired guns, such as Blackwater mercenaries, to food service workers, mechanics, maintenance workers and long-distance truck drivers.

These hired hands also do jobs not connected to servicing the occupation. All reconstruction and infrastructure projects of water purification, sewage treatment, electrical generation, health clinics and road clearance are parceled out piecemeal. Whether these projects ever open or function properly is of little interest or concern. Billing is all that counts.

In past wars, most of these jobs were carried out by the U.S. military. The ratio of contractors to active-duty troops is now more than 1-to-1 in both Iraq and Afghanistan .

During the Vietnam War it was 1-to-6.

In 2007 the Associated Press put the number in Iraq alone at 180,000: “The United States has assembled an imposing industrial army in Iraq that’s larger than its uniformed fighting force and is responsible for such a broad swath of responsibilities that the military might not be able to operate without its private-sector partners.” (Sept. 20, 2007)

The total was 190,000 by August 2008. (Christian Science Monitor, Aug. 18, 2008)

Some corporations have become synonymous with war profiteering, such as Halliburton, Bechtel and Blackwater in Iraq , and Louis Berger Group, BearingPoint and DynCorp International in Afghanistan .

Every part of the U.S. occupation has been contracted out at the highest rate of profit, with no coordination, no oversight, almost no public bids. Few of the desperately needed supplies reach the dislocated population traumatized by the occupation.

There are now so many pigs at the trough that U.S. forces are no longer able to carry out the broader policy objectives of the U.S. ruling class. The U.S military has even lost count, by tens of thousands, of the numbers of contractors, where they are or what they are doing—except being paid.

### **Losing count of the mercenaries**

The danger of an empire becoming dependent on mercenary forces to fight unpopular wars has been understood since the days of the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago.

A bipartisan Congressional Commission on Wartime Contracting was created last year to examine government contracting for reconstruction, logistics and security operations and to recommend reforms. However, Michael Thibault, co-chair of the commission, explained at a Nov. 2 hearing that “there is no single source for a clear, complete and accurate picture of contractor numbers, locations, contracts and cost.” (AFP, Nov. 2)

“[Thibault said] the Pentagon in April counted about 160,000 contractors mainly in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait, but Central Command recorded more than 242,000 contractors a month earlier.” The stunning difference of 82,000 contractors was based on very different counts in Afghanistan . The difference alone is far greater than the 60,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan .

Thibault continued: “How can contractors be properly managed if we aren’t sure how many there are, where they are and what are they doing?” The lack of an accurate count “invites waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer money and undermines the achievement of U.S. mission objectives.” The Nov. 2 Federal Times reported that Tibault also asked: “How can we assure taxpayers that they aren’t paying for ‘ghost’ employees?”

This has become an unsolvable contradiction in imperialist wars for profit, markets and imperialist domination. Bourgeois academics, think tanks and policy analysts are becoming increasingly concerned.

Thomas Friedman, syndicated columnist and multimillionaire who is deeply committed to the long-term interests of U.S. imperialism, describes the dangers of a “contractor-industrial-complex in Washington that has an economic interest in foreign expeditions.”

(New York Times, Nov. 3)

## **Outsourcing war**

Friedman hastens to explain that he is not against outsourcing. His concern is the pattern of outsourcing key tasks, with money and instructions changing hands multiple times in a foreign country. That only invites abuse and corruption. Friedman quoted Allison Stanger, author of "One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy," who told him: "Contractors provide security for key personnel and sites, including our embassies; feed, clothe and house our troops; train army and police units; and even oversee other contractors. Without a multinational contractor force to fill the gap, we would need a draft to execute these twin interventions."

That is the real reason for the contracted military forces. The Pentagon does not have enough soldiers, and they don't have enough collaborators or "allies" to fight their wars.

According to the Congressional Research Service, contractors in 2009 account for 48 percent of the Department of Defense workforce in Iraq and 57 percent in Afghanistan . Thousands of other contractors work for corporate-funded "charities" and numerous government agencies. The U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development make even more extensive use of them; 80 percent of the State Department budget is for contractors and grants.

Contractors are supposedly not combat troops, although almost 1,800 U.S. contractors have been killed since 9/11. (U.S. News & World Report, Oct. 30) Of course there are no records on the thousands of Afghans and Iraqis killed working for U.S. corporate contractors, or the many thousands of peoples from other oppressed nations who are shipped in to handle the most dangerous jobs.

Contracting is a way of hiding not only the casualties, but also the actual size of the U.S. occupation force. Fearful of domestic opposition, the government intentionally lists the figures for the total number of forces in Afghanistan and Iraq as far less than the real numbers.

## **A system run on cost overruns**

Cost overruns and war profiteering are hardly limited to Iraq , Afghanistan or active theaters of war. They are the very fabric of the U.S. war machine and the underpinning of the U.S. economy.

When President Obama signed the largest military budget in history Oct. 28 he stated: "The Government Accountability Office, the GAO, has looked into 96 major defense projects from the last year, and found cost overruns that totaled \$296 billion." This was on a total 2009 military budget of \$651 billion. So almost half of the billions of dollars handed over to military corporations are cost overruns!

This is at a time when millions of workers face long-term systemic unemployment and massive foreclosures.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have now cost more than \$1 trillion. The feeble health care reform bill that squeaked through the House, and might not survive Senate revisions next year, is scheduled to cost \$1.1 trillion over a 10-year period.

The bloated, increasingly dysfunctional, for-profit U.S. military machine is unable to solve the problems or rebuild the infrastructure in Afghanistan or Iraq , and it is unable to rebuild the crumbling infrastructure in the U.S. It is unable to meet the needs of people anywhere.

It is absorbing the greatest share of the planet's resources and a majority of the U.S. national budget. This unsustainable combination will sooner or later give rise to new resistance here and around the world.

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