

Obama to Bring More Mercenaries to Afghanistan — Sound Familiar?

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Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to war we go!

As President Barack Obama begins winding down the Bush war in Iraq, he is building up his own war farther east. We're told that it will be a new, expanded, extra-special American adventure in Afghanistan, involving a vigorous surge strategy to "stabilize" this perpetually unstable land.

The initial surge will add 17,000 troops to the 36,000 already there. Then, later this year, there is to be a second troop surge of another 17,000 or so. This mass of soldiers is expected to be deployed to a series of new garrisons to be built in far-flung regions of this impoverished, rural, mostly illiterate warlord state that is ruled by hundreds of fractious, heavily armed tribal leaders. We're not told how much this escalation will cost, but it will at least double the \$2 billion a month that American taxpayers are already shelling out for the Afghan war.

The extra-special part of this effort is to come from a simultaneous "civilian surge" of hundreds of U.S. economic development experts. "What we can't do," said Obama in an interview last Sunday, "is think that just a military approach in Afghanistan is going to be able to solve our problems." To win the hearts (and cooperation) of the Afghan people, this development leg of the operation will try to build infrastructure (roads, schools, etc.), create new crop alternatives to lure hardscrabble farmers out of poppy production and generally lift the country's bare-subsistence living standard.

What Obama has not mentioned is that, in addition to soldiers and civilians, there is a third surge in his plan: private military contractors. Yes, another privatized army, such as the one in Iraq. There, the Halliburtons, Blackwaters and other war profiteers ran rampant, shortchanging our troops, ripping off taxpayers, killing civilians and doing deep damage to America's good name.

Already, there are 71,000 private contractors operating in Afghanistan, and many more are preparing to deploy as Pentagon spending ramps up for Obama's war. The military is now offering new contracts to security firms to provide armed employees (aka, mercenaries) to guard U.S. bases and convoys. Despite the widespread contractor abuses in Iraq, Pentagon chief Robert Gates defends the ongoing privatization push: "The use of contractor security personnel is vital to supporting the forward-operating bases in certain parts of the country," he declared in a February letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

What the gentle war secretary is really saying is this: "We don't have a draft, and I don't see

a lot of senators' kinfolks volunteering to put their butts on the line in Afghanistan, so I've gotta pay through the nose to find enough privateers to guard America's Army in this forbidding place."

Meanwhile, here's an interesting twist to Obama's contractor surge: the for-hire guards protecting our bases and convoys will not likely be Americans. The Associated Press has reported that of the 3,847 security contractors in Afghanistan, only nine are U.S. firms.

Actually, being an American contractor is not a plus in the eyes of the Afghan people, for they've had bitter experiences with them. They point to DynCorp, a Virginia-based contractor that got nearly a billion dollars in 2006 to train Afghan police. The bumbling "Inspector Clouseau" of comic fame could've done a better job. At least he might have amused the people.

What they got from DynCorp was a bunch of highly paid American "advisors" who were unqualified and knew nothing about the country. Some 70,000 police were to be trained, but less than half that number actually went through the ridiculous eight-week program, which included no field training.

A 2006 U.S. report on the DynCorp trainees deemed them to be "incapable of carrying out routine law enforcement work." Meanwhile, no one knows how many of the trainees ever reported for duty, or what happened to thousands of missing trucks and other pieces of police equipment that had been issued for the training.

The punch line of this joke is that DynCorp got another contract (\$317 million) last August to "continue training civilian police forces in Afghanistan."

Excuse me for saying it, but Obama is about to sink us — and his presidency — into a mess.

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