

Selling Weapons - The Most Corrupt Industry in the World

By [Rod Driver](#)

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“In his [1996] arms-to-Iraq enquiry, Lord Richard Scott heard evidence that an entire tier of the Thatcher government, from senior civil servants to ministers, had lied and broken the law in selling weapons to Saddam Hussein...Thumb through old copies of the Baghdad Observer, and there are pictures of... cabinet ministers, on the front page sitting with Saddam...around the time [he] was ordering the gassing of 5,000 Kurds”. (John Pilger(1))

The US government has the highest military spending in the world, with approximately one-third of the world’s military expenditure. Britain consistently figures in the top 10.(2) Global annual weapons expenditure is \$1.8 trillion,(3) with overseas exports estimated at approximately \$100 billion. There are some important political reasons for the enormous size of the weapons trade. Firstly, the belief by our politicians that weapons sales are a good way to stay friendly with decision-makers abroad, to help keep those decision-makers in power, to get them into power in the first place and to cement relations with future rulers in the military.(4) Secondly, it is the most corrupt, secretive and unaccountable industry in the world, with everything hidden behind a fake veil of ‘national security’.(5) Thirdly, the political influence of huge weapons companies (discussed in the next post).

Keeping Repressive Regimes In Power

Earlier posts have explained that US and British foreign policies revolve around supporting leaders who will run their countries in a way that benefits the US and Britain. Good examples would be Indonesia and Columbia, where both the US and Britain have supplied weapons, despite knowing that the governments of these countries regularly murder their citizens. In return, these leaders allow Western corporations access to resources. The British Foreign Office identified 20 ‘countries of concern’, such as Egypt and Nigeria, which had very poor human rights records. Under British law it should be illegal to sell weapons to these countries, yet Britain was selling weapons to 19 of those countries from 2004-2006. More recent data confirms that this illegal selling is still common practice in Britain.(6) The United States also has a long history of selling weapons to many of the world’s worst human rights abusers throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia.(7)

Every Weapons Sale Is Illegal

In theory there is a distinction between legal and illegal sales. It is legal to sell some weapons, but not others. It is legal to sell to some countries, but not to others. In practice, the corporations and government officials making these sales ignore these distinctions. The leading expert on the subject, Andrew Feinstein, has explained that he has never come across an arms deal that is not somewhat illegal.

There are many examples of Britain and America supplying weapons to anyone, however illegal, by sending them via another country and trying to obscure the paper trail.(8) Britain has sold weapons to the Cayman Islands and the Channel Islands, yet these countries do not have militaries. Where these weapons actually end up is unknown, but they are clearly destined for other countries. Sellers are well aware that in many cases the final recipients want to slaughter or control people. This was highlighted during the 1990s when the British firm Matrix Churchill was found to have been providing equipment to make a 'supergun' to Saddam Hussein with the full backing of the British Government, even while he was committing extreme human rights abuses.

In one of the more notorious examples of US crimes, the US government supplied weapons to Iran during the 1980's in what became known as the Iran-Contra affair. The money and weapons were channelled through fake corporations, offshore bank accounts and foreign countries so that the sales could not be traced back to the US government.(9) Some of the money was then sent to Nicaragua where it was used to finance a rebel army (the contras) who were trying to overthrow the government, which was trying to create a better life for the poorest people.

Promises that a recipient country makes about the use of their new weapons, such as stating that they will only be used for training or defensive purposes, are of little value. The paperwork for the sale of aeroplanes often contains a description such as 'trainer' in order to imply that the planes will not be used for anything other than training. But advanced nations also supply the necessary components to convert that trainer into a ground attack aircraft, which can be used to repress local populations, or attack other countries. Everyone involved in the weapons industry is aware of this. All promises by governments regarding the use of weapons are just for public relations purposes, so they can deny involvement with large-scale slaughter.(10)

The Most Corrupt Industry In The World

It is estimated that 40% of all corruption is in the weapons trade. This makes it the most corrupt industry in the world, with corruption affecting all countries involved, both buyers and sellers. For example, the extremely repressive rulers of Saudi Arabia regularly purchase advanced weapons, such as military aeroplanes, from Britain. The British Serious Fraud Office (SFO) attempted to investigate corruption during these weapons sales. The biggest deal, known as Al-Yamamah, involved £6 billion in bribes. The British government stepped in and stopped the investigation, clearly demonstrating that good relations with oil-rich countries are more important than their human rights abuses, or corruption.(11) Part of any bribe sometimes comes back to the executives in the company. In the Saudi deal, expensive flats in London were given to the chief executive of British Aerospace.(12)

The early deals by the new African National Congress (ANC) government that took power in South Africa in 1994 provide another excellent case study. The new government had no military enemies, and no need of expensive weapons, yet they spent \$10 billion on their first deal, including \$300 million in bribes. They bought aeroplanes that were more expensive than the ones the military wanted. Many of those aeroplanes have never flown because there is no money to fuel them, or to train pilots, and they serve no purpose. Decisions were taken by just 6 ministers. The Queen of England invited all 6 ministers aboard her yacht, to help 'lubricate' the deals. South African President Zuma faced over 700 prosecutions relating to the deal, but all charges were dropped. The South African state and the ANC

Party have been engulfed by corruption ever since. When the SFO was able to investigate this deal, along with 8 others, the main British company involved, British Aerospace, admitted to accounting irregularities and was fined the trivial sum of half a million pounds.(13) Weapons companies are effectively above the law.

The US and Britain are not interested in ending weapons sales

There are numerous international agreements, known as conventions or treaties, regarding the sale or use of weapons, but these do not work unless everyone agrees to them, and everyone enforces them. Countries are not compelled to sign up to them and the US has failed to sign up to or enforce numerous conventions on biological, incendiary and other weapons.(14) A few years ago there was an international focus on landmines. Thousands of people are still killed by landmines every year, many of them children, and there are millions of unexploded mines lying around the world. In 1996, the US called for the eventual elimination of all anti-personnel mines, but in 2004, President George Bush changed US policy and made it clear that he had no intention of joining the mine ban treaty.(15) More recently, Donald Trump removed US restrictions on the use of landmines.(16) Whilst the UK sometimes signs up to treaties, it uses loopholes to get around them.(17) For example, although it has signed up to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), it was still supplying them to Saudi Arabia as recently as 2016.

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*Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the eighth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.*

Notes

1) John Pilger, 'Dance on Thatcher's Grave, but remember there has been a coup in Britain', 25 April 2013, at <http://johnpilger.com/articles/dance-on-thatcher-s-grave-but-remember-there-has-been-a-coup-in-britain>

2) SIPRI, 'Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017', SIPRI, March 2018, at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssipri_at2017_0.pdf

3) 'SIPRI yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security', at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/yb19_summary_eng_1.pdf

4) Norman Schwarzkopf, cited in Mark Curtis, *The Great Deception*, 1998, p.203

5) Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside The Global Arms Trade*, 2011

6) Saferworld, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: A decade of labour's arms exports', May 2007,

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Rick Kelsey, 'From Egypt to Saudi Arabia, here's who the UK is selling arms to', BBC Newsbeat, 19 Dec 2016,

at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/38365529/from-egypt-to-saudi-arabia-heres-who-the-uk-is-selling-arms-to>

7) Thalif Deen, 'US ramps up arms supplies to repressive regimes', May 26, 2005, at www.antiwar.com/ips/deen.php?articleid=6080

8) Amnesty International, 'The Arms Campaign Report', 7 August 2003, at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/100000/act300012003en.pdf>

9) Time magazine, 'Pursuing The Money Connections', Jan 2007, at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1582830,00.html>

10) Alan Clark, interviewed in John Pilger, *Death of A Nation*, 1994

Also see Norman Schwarzkopf discussing how control of spare parts can limit the use of weapons after they have been sold, cited in Mark Curtis, *The Great Deception*, 1998, p.150

11) George Monbiot, 'Promoting Peace Is For Wimps - Real Governments Sell Weapons', Aug 24, 2006, at <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/columnist/story/0,,1856916,00.html>

12) Andrew Feinstein, 'The Shadow World of the Global Arms trade', talk at Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, 22 Nov 2017, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCjZXCyD_8c

13) Andrew Feinstein, 'The Shadow World of the Global Arms trade', talk at Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, 22 Nov 2017, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCjZXCyD_8c

14) Andrew Buncombe, 'Incendiary Weapons: The Big White Lie', Nov 17, 2005, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/incendiary-weapons-the-big-white-lie-515664.html>

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15) Human Rights Watch, 'The Bush Administration's Landmine Policy', 7 Dec, 2004, at <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/arms/arms0805/2.htm>

16) Idrees Ali, 'Trump eases restrictions on land mine use by US military', 31 Jan 2020, Reuters, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-war-landmines-idUSKBN1ZU2GA>

17) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_Cluster_Munitions

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