

The Army We Don't See. The Private Soldiers Who Fight in America's Name

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*The way mercenary leader [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#) and his private army have been waging a significant part of **Vladimir Putin's** war in Ukraine has been well covered in the American media, not least of all because his firm, the Wagner Group, draws [most](#) of its men from Russia's prison system. Wagner offers "freedom" from Putin's labor camps only to send those released convicts to the front lines of the conflict, often on brutal [suicide missions](#).*

At least the Russian president and his state-run media make no [secret](#) of his regime's [alliance](#) with Wagner. The American government, on the other hand, seldom acknowledges its own version of the privatization of war — the [tens of thousands](#) of private security contractors it's used in its misguided [war on terror](#), involving military and intelligence operations in a staggering [85 countries](#).

At least as far back as the [Civil War](#) through World Wars [I](#) and [II](#), the [Korean](#) and [Vietnam Wars](#), and the first [Gulf War](#), "contractors," as we like to call them, have long been with us. Only recently, however, have they begun playing such a large role in our wars, with an estimated [10% to 20%](#) of them directly involved in combat and intelligence operations.

Contractors have both committed horrific abuses and acted bravely under fire (because they have all too often been under fire). From torture at [Abu Ghraib](#) prison in Iraq to interrogations at the [Guantánamo Bay](#) detention camp, from employees of the private security firm Blackwater [indiscriminately firing](#) on unarmed Iraqi civilians to contractors [defending](#) a U.S. base under attack in Afghanistan, they have been an essential part of the war on terror. And yes, they both killed Afghans and [helped](#) some who had worked as [support contractors](#) escape from Taliban rule.

The involvement of private companies has allowed Washington to continue to conduct its operations around the globe, even if many Americans think that our war on terror in [Afghanistan](#), [Iraq](#), and elsewhere has ended. I tried looking for any kind of a survey of how

many of us realize that it continues in [Iraq](#) and elsewhere, but all I could find was pollster Nate Silver's [analysis](#) of "lessons learned" from that global conflict, as if it were part of our history. And unless respondents were caring for a combat-wounded veteran, they tended [not](#) to look unfavorably on sending our troops into battle in distant lands — so scratch that as a lesson learned from our forever wars.

None of this surprises me. American troops are [no longer getting killed](#) in significant numbers, nor are [as many](#) crowding the waitlists at backlogged Veterans Affairs hospitals as would be the case if those troops had been the only ones doing the fighting.

At points during this century's war on terror, in fact, the U.S. used more civilian contractors in its ongoing wars than uniformed military personnel. In fact, as of 2019, according to Brown University's Costs of War Project, which I co-founded, there were [50% more contractors](#) than troops in the U.S. Central Command region that includes Afghanistan, Iraq, and 18 other countries in the Middle East, as well as Central and South Asia. As recently as December 2022, the Pentagon had about [22,000 contractors](#) deployed throughout that region, with [nearly 8,000](#) concentrated in Iraq and Syria. To be sure, most of those workers were unarmed and providing food service, communications aid, and the like. Even more tellingly, [roughly two thirds](#) of them were citizens of other countries, particularly [lower-income](#) ones.

In 2020, retired Army Officer Danny Sjursen [offered](#) an interesting explanation for how the war on terror was then becoming ever more privatized: the Covid-19 pandemic had changed the Pentagon's war-making strategy as the public began to question how much money and how many lives were being expended on war abroad rather than healthcare at home. As a result, Sjursen argued, the U.S. had begun deploying ever more contractors, remote drones, CIA paramilitaries, and (often abusive) local forces in that war on terror while U.S. troops were redeployed to Europe and the Pacific to contain a resurgent Russia and China. In other words, during the pandemic, Washington placed ever more dirty work in corporate and foreign hands.

(Not) Counting Contractors

It's been a challenge to write about private security contractors because our government does anything but a good job of counting them. Though the Defense Department keeps [quarterly records](#) of how many civilian contractors it employs and where, they exclude employees contracted with the Central Intelligence Agency or the State Department.

When Costs of War first tried to count contractor deaths by searching official government sources, we came up short. The spouse of a gravely wounded armed contractor directed me to her blog, where she had started to compile a list of just such deaths based on daily Google searches, even as she worked hard caring for her spouse and managing his disability paperwork. She and I eventually lost touch and it appears that she stopped compiling such numbers long ago. Still, we at the project took a page from her book, while adding reported war deaths among foreign nationals working for the Pentagon to our formula. Costs of War researchers then estimated that [8,000 contractors](#) had been killed in our wars in the Middle East as of 2019, or about [1,000](#) more than the U.S. troops who died during the same period.

Social scientists [Ori Swed and Thomas Crosbie](#) have tried to extrapolate from reported contractor deaths in order to paint a picture of who they were while still alive. They believe

that most of them were white veterans in their forties; many were former Special Forces operatives and a number of former officers with college degrees).

Limited Choices for Veterans

How do people of relative racial, economic, and gendered privilege end up in positions that, while well-paid, are even more precarious than being in the armed forces? As a therapist serving military families and as a military spouse, I would say that the path to security contracting reflects a deep [cultural divide](#) in our society between military and civilian life. Although veteran unemployment rates are [marginally lower](#) than those in the civilian population, many of them tend to seek out what they know best and that means military training, staffing, weapons production — and, for some, combat.

I recently spoke with one Marine infantry veteran who had completed four combat tours. He told me that, after leaving the service, he lacked a community that understood what he had been through. He sought to avoid social isolation by getting a government job. However, after applying for several in law enforcement agencies, he “failed” lie detector tests (owing to the common stress reactions of war-traumatized veterans). Having accidentally stumbled on a veteran-support nonprofit group, he ultimately found connections that led him to decide to return to school and retrain in a new profession. But, as he pointed out, “many of my other friends from the Marines numbed their pain with drugs or by going back to war as security contractors.”

Not everyone views contracting as a strategy of last resort. Still, I find it revealing of the limited sense of possibility such veterans experience that the [top five](#) companies employing them are large corporations servicing the Department of Defense through activities like information technology support, weapons production, or offers of personnel, both armed and not.

The Corporate Wounded

And keep in mind that such jobs are anything but easy. Many veterans find themselves facing yet more of the same — quick, successive combat deployments as contractors.

Anyone in this era of insurance mega-corporations who has ever had to battle for coverage is aware that doing so isn’t easy. Private insurers can maximize their profits by holding onto premium payments as long as possible while denying covered services.

A federal law called the [Defense Base Act \(1941\)](#) (DBA) requires that corporations fund workers’ compensation claims for their employees laboring under U.S. contracts, regardless of their nationalities, with the taxpayer footing the bill. The program grew exponentially after the start of the war on terror, but insurance companies have not consistently met their obligations under the law. In 2008, a [joint investigation](#) by the *Los Angeles Times* and *ProPublica* found that insurers like Chicago-based CAN Financial Corps were earning up to 50% profits on some of their war-zone policies, while many employees of contractors lacked adequate care and compensation for their injuries.

[Even after](#) Congress called on the Pentagon and the Department of Labor to better enforce the DBA in 2011, some companies continued to operate with impunity *vis-à-vis* their own workers, sometimes even failing to purchase insurance for them or refusing to help them file claims as required by law. While insurance companies made tens of millions of dollars in

profits during the second decade of the war on terror, between 2009 and 2021, the Department of Labor [fined](#) insurers of those contracting corporations a total of only \$3,250 for failing to report DBA claims.

Privatizing Foreign Policy

At its core, the war on terror sought to create an image of the U.S. abroad as a beacon of [democracy](#) and the [rule of law](#). Yet there is probably no better evidence of how poorly this worked in practice at home and abroad than the little noted (mis)use of security contractors. Without their ever truly being seen, they prolonged that global set of conflicts, inflicting damage on other societies and being damaged themselves in America's name. Last month, the Costs of War Project reported that the U.S. is now [using](#) subcontractors Bancroft Global Development and Pacific Architects and Engineers to train the Somali National Army in its counterterrorism efforts. Meanwhile, the U.S. intervention there has only helped precipitate a further [rise](#) in terrorist attacks in the region.

The global presence created by such contractors also manifests itself in how we respond to threats to their lives. In March 2023, a self-destructing drone [exploded](#) at a U.S. maintenance facility on a coalition base in northeastern Syria, killing a contractor employed by the Pentagon and injuring another, while wounding five American soldiers. After that drone was found to be of Iranian origin, President Biden ordered an air strike on facilities in Syria used by Iranian-allied forces. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [stated](#), "No group will strike our troops with impunity." While he later expressed condolences to the family of the contractor who was the only one killed in that attack, his [statement](#) could have more explicitly acknowledged that contractors are even more numerous than troops among the dead from our forever wars.

In late December 2019, a contractor working as an interpreter on a U.S. military base in Iraq was [killed](#) by rockets fired by an Iranian-backed militia. Shortly afterward, then-President Trump ordered an [air strike](#) that killed the commander of an elite Iranian military unit, sparking concern about a dangerous escalation with that country. Trump later [tweeted](#), "Iran killed an American contractor, wounding many. We strongly responded, and always will."

I can't believe I'm saying this, but Trump's tweet was more honest than Austin's official statement: such contractors are now an essential part of America's increasingly privatized wars and will continue to be so, in seemingly ever greater numbers. Even though retaliating for attacks on their lives has little to do with effective counterterrorism (as the Costs of War Project has [long](#) made clear), bearing witness to war [casualties](#) in all their grim diversity is the least the rest of us can do as American citizens. Because how can we know whether — and [for whom](#) — our shadowy, shape-shifting wars "work" if we continue to let our leaders wage an increasingly privatized version of them in ways meant to obscure our view of the carnage they've caused?

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