

SEAN MCFATE

**T H E M O D E R N  
M E R C E N A R Y**



PRIVATE ARMIES AND WHAT THEY MEAN  
FOR WORLD ORDER



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# The Modern Mercenary



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*To the past—farewell*

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Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling,  
And took their wages, and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

—A. E. Housman





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# FOREWORD

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In 2004, I found myself in a peculiar position. I was in Burundi, a small country in central Africa, sipping a Coke with the country's president, the US ambassador, a woman I presumed was from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the president's eight-year-old daughter. It was around nine p.m., and we were watching the local television news in his living room at the presidential palace, not speaking a word. There was nothing to say. The president's life was in danger. The United States had brought me in to keep him alive. I wasn't sure how.

Ten years earlier, the genocide of the Tutsis that began in Rwanda swept south through neighboring Burundi, leaving a wake of sorrow and ash. More than eight hundred thousand people were murdered in ninety days, which is nearly a soul a minute. The original genocide remained unfinished business for some, and a group of Hutu rebels called the Forces Nationales de Libération (FNL) yearned to conclude its grim work. When I arrived at Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, the FNL was hiding out across the border in the "Wild, Wild West" of Kivu, the easternmost region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which abuts Burundi to the west.

US intelligence organizations received credible information that the FNL planned to cross the border at night, travel the twenty kilometers to the capital, and descend on the presidential palace. Their target was the president. They knew his assassination could reignite the genocide, just as the 1994 genocide was triggered by the killings of the Burundian and Rwandan presidents.

My job was to prevent this genocide from happening. I was to keep the president alive and in public view and without anyone knowing it was a US program, including staff at the US embassy. That I did. Curiously, I was not a member of the CIA or part of a covert US military unit or even a government employee. I was from the private sector—a "contractor" to many and "mercenary" to some—working for a large company called DynCorp International. DynCorp provides a wide range of services for the US government, from repairing military jets to guarding the president of Afghanistan to flying counterdrug missions in Colombia to preventing a possible genocide in Africa.

This is increasingly how foreign policy is enacted today: through corporations. Superpowers such as the United States cannot go to war without contractors in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, which was not the case even a generation ago. Tasks that once would have been the sole province of the CIA or the military are routinely contracted out to firms listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The most disturbing aspect of this trend is the decision to outsource lethal force: paramilitary, armed civilians patrol the streets of Baghdad and Kabul for their employer, the United States of America. These small private armies are organized as multinational companies, the most infamous being Blackwater USA, which commoditize conflict. Since 9/11, this industry has exploded from tens of millions to tens of billions of dollars in the chum slick of war contracts.

For-profit warriors cause concern. I recall being lambasted as a "mercenary" and "morally promiscuous" by fellow graduate students at Harvard University, insinuating that my existence somehow imperiled world peace. Similarly, my paratrooper buddies from the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division, where I served as an officer, scowled and said that I had "gone mercenary" and was lost to "the dark side." Yet the work I was doing at DynCorp was similar to what I would have done had I remained in the military, and the pay and benefits were not that great, despite popular perceptions to the contrary. Why all the vitriol?

The critics of the private military industry do have a point: linking profit motive to warfare has

frightening implications in modern times. The growth of this industry has received copious attention in scholarship and popular literature alike. But despite the volumes of ink spilled on the subject, rigorous analysis remains thin, because private military companies are notoriously opaque. Moreover, their employers are reluctant to share information with outside researchers because of the politically sensitive nature of the work.

The secrecy surrounding the private military industry has shrouded it in mystery, myth, and conspiracy theory. Knee-jerk left-wing and right-wing critiques permeate the debate, politicizing and polarizing it. Much is highly sensationalized. What genuine study has occurred is narrow and limited to a few aspects of the industry: the legal status of armed civilian contractors on the battlefield; accountability issues relating to monetary fraud, waste, and abuse; and the experiences of high-profile companies such as Blackwater in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, broader questions remain. Why have strong countries such as the United States elected to employ private military forces after centuries of their prohibition? Does the privatization of war change warfare, and if so, does it affect strategic outcomes? What does the privatization of military force augur for the future of international relations? As a veteran of this industry, I continue to be haunted by these questions, which is why I wrote this book.

Despite the many concerns, the private military industry has a bright future. This multibillion-dollar industry will not simply evaporate once the United States withdraws from overseas deployments such as Afghanistan. In fact, the opposite will occur: contractors will help fill the security vacuum left by US forces. The industry may also grow, become more competitive, and develop into a free market for force, where the means of war are available to anyone who can afford it. Already, private military companies of all stripes are seeking new opportunities in conflict zones in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Moreover, the marketplace will likely transform, as new private military firms emerge from countries such as Russia and China, offer greater combat power, and work for the highest bidder with scant regard for human rights. New consumers of private force are appearing worldwide, seeking security in an insecure world: oil and mining companies guarding their drill sites against militias, shipping lines defending their vessels against pirates, humanitarian organizations protecting their workers in dangerous locations, countries fighting civil wars, and guerrillas fighting back. Few would welcome an unbridled market for force in world affairs, yet it is already developing.

Other fears exist, too. Private military companies will increasingly use military robotics such as armed drones that are becoming ever more available and advanced, making even small companies lethal. Companies are already engaging in cyber-warfare, offering clients offensive “hack-back” capabilities against intruders. These cyber-mercenaries are currently illegal in many countries, including the United States, yet they have a growing market among people and organizations that need to protect critical information.

Another worry is that a private military company might start an armed conflict that others must finish. For example, a client hires a company to stage an armed humanitarian intervention in a war-torn country to save innocent lives, but the company’s actions backfire and make the situation worse rather than better, necessitating an emergency follow-on intervention by the United Nations or the United States.

Finally, a new type of warfare may emerge—contract warfare—that encourages war. As with contract killing, wealthy clients would hire private armies to wage wars for their own interests. Consequently, other wealthy actors would employ different private armies in self-defense, creating a security dilemma as both sides escalate and possibly use their arsenals of mercenary force. Contract warfare is literally a free market for force, where private armies and clients seek each other out,

negotiate prices, and wage wars for personal gain.

This book examines why and how the private military industry—called mercenaries by many—has reemerged in modern times. [Chapter 1](#) questions the common assumption that profit and warfare are always evil. Sometimes they are not. I saved many lives as a private military contractor. However, linking profit motive to killing invites serious moral concerns, and a better understanding of today's industry is required to grasp its benefits and dangers.

[Chapter 2](#) does this by analyzing the current market for force, which was largely driven by the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This chapter penetrates this secretive business from an insider's perspective and explains what kinds of companies operate where, whom they work for and who works for them, and what they do. It also offers definitions for the different kinds of security firms working in the marketplace and provides a new typology to understand the industry.

[Chapter 3](#) reveals a disturbing trend: there is a growing codependency between the United States and this industry. Short of a national draft, it is unlikely that the superpower could go to war without the private sector. If a military colossus such as the United States finds these firms valuable, others will likely follow suit, establishing a new norm in international relations.

[Chapter 4](#) explains how this situation developed and finds that private armies, present throughout the course of history, never really went away. Instead, they were subdued by states over the past four centuries and are now returning after a mere four-hundred-year hiatus.

[Chapters 5 and 6](#) analyze the timeless advantages and risks of employing private force and turn to the high Middle Ages in Europe for insights, since contract warfare and mercenaries were common back then. The *condottieri*, Swiss companies, *landsknechts*, and other "free companies" dominated war from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries throughout much of Europe. One lesson from this era is clear: private warriors change warfare and therefore war's outcomes, altering the course of international relations.

To better understand the implications of this, [chapter 7](#) explores the making of the modern world order and how private armies shaped it. The medieval world was messy, and a wide host of political actors—popes, kings, city-states, wealthy families, and so on—all made overlapping claims of sovereignty over the same parcels of land and society. Disputes inevitably erupted and frequently were settled on the battlefield, often fought by each side's mercenaries. From this medieval din, one political actor emerged victorious: states. Kings and other rulers of states monopolized the market for force by investing in their own standing armies, loyal only to them, and outlawing mercenaries, leaving their nonstate adversaries defenseless. Out of this arose a new and state-centric world order, where only states have the privilege of enforcing their political will through violence. This order still exists today.

However, this order is changing. The reemergence of private armies heralds the slow return to the status quo ante of the Middle Ages, when states did not enjoy primacy in international politics and instead shared a crowded world stage with other actors. Drawing on the scholarship of Hedley Bull and others, [chapter 8](#) explains the features of this emerging order and describes it as *neomedievalism*: a non-state-centric and multipolar world order characterized by overlapping authorities and allegiances. It does not foretell the ruin of states or the onset of anarchy. Instead, this new global system will persist in a durable disorder that contains rather than solves problems.

Given the important relationship between authority and war, [chapter 9](#) investigates neomedieval warfare and how it could shape world affairs. A key challenge of neomedievalism is the commodification of conflict. Offering the means of war to anyone who can afford it will change warfare, why we fight, and the future of war. If money can buy firepower, then large corporations and



ultra-wealthy individuals could become a new kind of superpower.

Chapters 10 and 11 offer two glimpses into the industry's future through case studies. The first examines DynCorp International, a large private military company operating in Liberia, a small West African country. After I helped prevent genocide as a grad student in Burundi, raising an army in Liberia became my primary mission. This chapter explains how we did it. The second case concerns Somalia's budding market for force. Market actors are more like medieval mercenaries, fighting for the highest bidder and even becoming predatory. By contrast, DynCorp is a "military enterpriser," building an army for the client rather than deploying it. These different types of market actors create different kinds of marketplaces. Somalia is a free market for force, with "lone wolf" mercenaries, while Liberia is a mediated market, with the company working closely with its government client in a public-private partnership. The case studies conclude that private military actors worsen security in a free market such as Somalia but increase it in a mediated market such as Liberia and under the right market circumstances could even prove a powerful tool for the United Nations and others.

Chapter 12 draws insights from these case studies and identifies four mutually reinforcing trends in the private military industry: resilience, globalization, indigenization, and bifurcation. The industry will endure after the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, seeking new clients. In fact, it is already doing so, globalizing as new customers and companies appear around the world. And as the industry goes global, it is concurrently indigenizing or "going native." Warlords and others have adopted the private military model to make a living, and international clients, including the United States, are buying. Finally, the industry is beginning to bifurcate between a mediated market with military enterprisers and a free market populated by mercenaries. Whichever trajectory wins the market in the coming years is important, because it will influence the future of war.

The world is at a crossroads, and if the industry is left on autopilot, it may morph into a situation of perpetual and predatory mercenarism similar to that of medieval Italy. However, other options exist that harness the industry's benefits while mitigating its risks. It is important that its evolution happen in a deliberate and nonreckless manner, because the private military industry is here to stay. As in the European Middle Ages, private warfare has the power to shape international relations and the world.



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
ARTEP	Army Readiness Training Evaluation Program
BTC	Barclay Training Center
CBO	Congressional Budget Office
COIN	counterinsurgency
COTR	contracting officer's technical representative
CPA	comprehensive peace agreement
DDR	disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DDRR	disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration
DOD	US Department of Defense
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GDP	gross domestic product
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDIQ	indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contract
IDP	internally displaced person
IET	initial entry training (military "basic training")
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISOA	International Stability Operations Association (formerly International Peace Operations Association, or IPOA)
LOGCAP	Logistics Civil Augmentation Program
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MEJA	Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act
MOD	Ministry of Defense or Ministry of National Defense
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia

MPRI	Military Professional Resources Inc.
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NTGL	National Transitional Government of Liberia
NTP	notice to proceed
ODC	Office of Defense Cooperation
OECD- DAC	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—Development Assistance Committee
PA&E	Pacific Architects and Engineers
PSD	personal security detail
PKO	peacekeeping operations
PMC	private military company
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RFP	request for proposal
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SAS	Special Air Services
SOW	statement of work
SSR	security sector reform
TCN	third-country national
TO&E	table of organization and equipment
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UCMJ	Uniform Code of Military Justice
UNDP	UN Development Program
UNDPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMIL	UN Mission in Liberia
UNOSOM	UN Operation in Somalia
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicles
WPPS	Worldwide Personal Protective Services



## Peace through Profit Motive?

I'll get paid for killing, and this town is full of men who deserve to die.

—Sanjuro, masterless samurai

The 1961 Japanese movie *Yojimbo*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, tells the story of Sanjuro, a masterless samurai, or *ronin*, who arrives at a small town that has been torn asunder by two competing criminal gangs. The *ronin* persuades each crime lord to hire him as protection from the other, and through skillful political manipulation and the bloody use of his sword, he successfully pits the rival gangs against each other. The gangs soon annihilate each other in battle, while the *ronin* enriches himself; he then moves on to the next crime-ridden town. By acting in his economic self-interest, the *ronin* brings peace to the town, albeit with much collateral damage.

*Yojimbo* may serve as an apt analogy for where today's private military industry is heading. Private military organizations—from ancient mercenaries to modern private military companies (PMCs) such as Blackwater USA—are expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs that kill or train others to kill. It is certainly conceivable that a PMC today could secretly and simultaneously serve two clients at war with each other, as did the *ronin* in *Yojimbo*, expanding the conflict for profit until both sides destroy each other, after which the company would move on to the next conflict and business opportunity.

More nuanced scenarios also abound. A human rights organization such as Amnesty International could hire a PMC such as Blackwater, currently rebranded as “Academi,” to stage a humanitarian intervention in a place like Darfur to save lives and curb the ongoing genocide, which has claimed more than three hundred thousand lives. This, in turn, could prompt the Sudanese government to hire an opposing PMC sourced from countries such as Russia or China, which have troubled human rights records, to counter Blackwater and help Sudan “pacify” Darfur. If PMCs are truly profit-maximizing entities, like the *ronin* in *Yojimbo*, it is likely that these two PMCs would cut deals between themselves, either explicitly or implicitly, to promote their parochial business interests, namely, spreading and elongating war for the sake of profit.

The result would be two or more PMCs fighting an artificially prolonged proxy war in Africa for state and nonstate actors, with far-reaching implications for international relations. Combining profit motive with war will introduce a new kind of warfare—contract warfare—that will likely increase armed conflict worldwide.

### Not Just Fantasy

The above scenario may sound like a movie script, but it is not. In 2008, I was asked to participate in such a plan. Millionaire actress Mia Farrow had approached Blackwater and a few human rights



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