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Can the Next American President Switch the Tracks?

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Can the Next American President Switch the Tracks?

Abstract

For decades the Washington mantra has been privatization. As Secretary of Defense in Bush 41's administration and as CEO of Haliburton, Dick Cheney was influential in the application of this idea to defense policy. Now as Vice President of the United States, he and his coterie of followers have taken the idea to a new level. According to Jeremy Scahill, the United States has reached a tipping point in waging the Iraq war, with dire consequences for defense policy, democratic accountability, and the global perception of who we are and what we stand for.

Keywords

Human rights, United States, Iraq, Security forces, Privatization

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Can the Next American President Switch the Tracks?

For decades the Washington mantra has been privatization. As Secretary of Defense in Bush 41's administration and as CEO of Haliburton, [Dick Cheney was influential](#) in the application of this idea to defense policy. Now as Vice President of the United States, he and his coterie of followers have taken the idea to a new level. According to [Jeremy Scahill](#), the United States has reached a tipping point in waging the Iraq war, with dire consequences for defense policy, democratic accountability, and the global perception of who we are and what we stand for.

The success of the privatization *idée fixe* calls to mind [Max Weber's insight](#) that "not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest."

Privatization is occurring in an international environment where, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, America's global power has been [unmatched and unbalanced](#) by any other major power or group of powers. In the last six years, under the guise of responding to an act of terror on American soil, the Bush administration has used this power to act unilaterally and with disdain, not only for international institutions, but also for the other branches of American government.

Like Rome and Great Britain in the heyday of their power, the U.S. confronts a choice between democracy and empire, for empire requires military power without constraint to police the globe while democracy requires accountability. This choice is analyzed in Chalmers Johnson's book [Nemesis](#) and Cullen Murphy's [Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America](#). As the U.S. defines its role in the world, the privatization mantra and its implementation obscure the [financial and moral costs of empire](#). In the hands of foreign policy mandarins, privatization skews America's choice in favor of empire and away from democracy.

Can the next President, to use Max Weber's metaphor, switch the track along which America is moving? Does dependency on private campaign financing make that impossible? Is the allure of empire impossible to resist?

With these contradictions at work, it seems appropriate to offer 10 questions and one scenario to focus the next President's attention like a laser beam:

- What are the consequences of private contracting in the national security arena?
- What is the process of selecting contractors and what are the terms being negotiated in the various contracts?
- What exactly are the [functions being performed](#) by military contractors, especially in battle zones?
- What is the chain of command once the contract is negotiated?
- What rules of American and international law apply to contractors, especially in military zones?
- Under what circumstances does a contractor become an autonomous force in a zone of intervention?

- What are the patterns of recruitment within the military and from the military to the private contractors? Who defines the rules? And what is the [movement of personnel from government to private sector](#)?
- What is the involvement of private contractors in implementing the so-called “[revolution in military affairs](#)”?
- Who are the owners of the military contracting firms? Are these firms multinational? Where is their management located? How can we determine when they are no longer American firms? And what is their impact on political campaigns?
- If military contractors are market-driven, what will prevent them from offering their services to the highest bidder, and what would be the [strategic implication](#) of this result?

These questions become of particular importance given the following possible scenario: the Chinese government becomes a major shareholder of the military contractor Blackwater. The Chinese hire Blackwater to guard oil facilities and personnel in Sudan. Simultaneously, the U.N. imposes sanctions on the Sudan, and deploys a U.N. force to stop the genocide and the selling of Sudanese oil, with the U.S. providing logistical support. The Chinese, operating through Blackwater, decide to aid the Sudanese government by supplying intelligence to a group like the *Janjiweed* and military support to the Sudanese government as it repels the U.N. force. The Blackwater personnel, who are former American military, [trained in the use of U.S. technology and strategy](#), serve Chinese interests. Consequently, the U.N. mission fails in a major blow to U.S. foreign policy. This type of situation is realistic and demonstrates the pitfalls of increased privatization in the military sector.

Unless the next President finds answers to such questions, suggested by the recent reporting on private contracting, American decline in the emerging multi-polar world will be hastened. In that environment, the new President, despite his/her campaign slogans, will not be able to “switch” tracks as U.S. power hurls forward on a fatal course mapped by privatization. Democratic accountability at home and international law abroad will be the early casualties. Then the President will surely confront Hamlet’s insight: “For ‘tis the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard” ([Hamlet - Act 3. Scene IV](#)).

Harry Kreisler is Executive Director of the [Institute of International Studies](#) at the University of California at Berkeley. In that role, he shapes, administers, and implements interdisciplinary academic and public affairs programs that analyze global issues. He is also creator, executive producer and host of [Conversations with History](#), an interview program, broadcast nationally every Thursday evening on satellite television, and on [cable](#) throughout California.

Conversations with History is also a critically acclaimed online archive containing more than 360 one-hour interviews with distinguished men and women from all over the world who talk about their lives and their work. Harry Kreisler is also Executive Producer of [Connecting Students to the World](#), a World Wide Web -based program that introduces students and retirees to leading figures in international affairs through online curricula, preparatory workshops, and Internet conversations.