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Rooting the Privatization of War in a Broader Political Context

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Rooting the Privatization of War in a Broader Political Context

Abstract

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Keywords

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

Rooting the Privatization of War in a Broader Political Context

by Ali Wyne

On the issue of military outsourcing, I think that it would be valuable to place Jeremy Scahill's research and critique in a broader context. In particular, his concern about private soldiers' lack of accountability offers a point of departure for issuing two observations:

- The war in Iraq has been conducted in an unusually secretive manner; and
- The current American grand strategy has its roots in post-Cold War neoconservatism (based on the characterization that its proponents have offered, neoconservatism is a persuasion that inclines one to advocate the spread of American values and the advancement of American interests, relying heavily on force and unilateral assertion).

The United States intends to establish its largest system of military bases in Baghdad, [an important fact that has elicited little attention in the mainstream media](#). Furthermore, it has recently come to light that President Bush has expressed interest in a "[Korea model](#)" for Iraq, whereby American troops would be stationed there indefinitely to provide security between the warring factions. The war has already inflamed international opposition against American foreign policy in the Middle East, and establishing a quasi-permanent power structure in the region's heart is likely to exacerbate such sentiments. Even if one accepts the conventional wisdom that [neoconservatism's influence is receding](#), its consequences for American legitimacy and power are likely to be enduring.

Indeed, it bears mentioning that the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq follows hawkish prescriptions that were formulated in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Even though neoconservatives had been agitating to imbue American foreign policy with a more assertive character during the Clinton administration, the relative calm of those eight years ensured that they could not. In a January 1998 letter to President Clinton, 18 of the Project for a New American Century's (PNAC's) founders urged him to address a "threat in the Middle East [that is] more serious than any we have known since the end of the Cold War" by demonstrating "[a willingness to undertake military action as diplomacy](#)." The threat to which they were referring, of course, was Iraq.

While most individuals viewed the United States' demilitarization during the 1990s as a natural response to Soviet implosion, PNAC warned that it represented complacency in the face of growing threats (in particular, they judged, those that emanated from the Middle East). [When Clinton assumed office in 1993, defense spending accounted for 4.8 percent of our Gross Domestic Product; by 2000, that proportion had fallen to 3 percent. During that same time period, the number of American troops deployed overseas fell from 295,000 to 210,000.](#) Citing this data, among other developments, PNAC's leadership called for a restoration of America's "eroded" military. While acknowledging that the 1990s were a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity for the United States, they warned that "[no moment in international politics can be frozen in time; even a global Pax Americana will not preserve itself](#)."

These ideas found a sympathetic ear in President Bush, whose [2002 National Security Strategy](#) reaffirmed America's hegemonic imperative. It is encouraging to note that criticism of that

document (and the policies to which it gave rise) transcends partisan divisions. Indeed, many in the intellectual establishment would concur with the assessment that it set forth [“a neoimperial vision.”](#)

While most Americans have become disenchanted with the prosecution of the global “war on terrorism,” they tend to believe that neoconservatives have suddenly emerged and “hijacked” the Bush administration’s decision-making processes. The reality is that many of today’s influential policymakers were equally, if not more, influential during the Reagan administration (which similarly proclaimed the necessity of democracy promotion).

This disconnect—between perception and reality—is one of the chief characteristics of war. However, it has reached an alarming level in the case of the Iraq war. In his testimony, Scahill remarks, “I think it is a disturbing commentary that I have received phone calls from several Congress members asking me for government documents on war contractors and not the other way around.” If the sole organ that is authorized to declare war knows so little of the manner in which it is being conducted what must we conclude about the state of our national security?

If present trends persist, the privatization of war, of which Scahill and others are fearful, will likely continue. From 2001 to 2006, [the defense revenue of the world’s top 10 defense companies doubled from \\$90 billion to \\$180 billion](#). As the security situations in Afghanistan and Iraq deteriorate, the demand for these companies’ services will rise. It seems reasonable to suggest that the President’s hesitation to wage war will continue to diminish as the ability to pursue this course in a clandestine manner increases. This prospect demands greater vigilance not only from our elected leaders in Congress, but also from ordinary citizens who profess their commitment to democracy.

Ali Wyne is a senior at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he is pursuing dual degrees in Management and Political Science, as well as a minor in Economics. He serves as Vice-President of the Undergraduate Association, and as Editor-in-Chief of the [MIT International Review](#), MIT’s first journal of international affairs. He will be contributing a chapter, “How World Opinion Challenges American Foreign Policy,” to a forthcoming volume, *The Public Diplomacy Handbook* (Routledge 2008). He maintains a blog on global problems and solutions, [“The Struggle of Memory Against Forgetting.”](#)