

## Teaching Notes

# HEROES OR MERCENARIES?

### Blackwater, Private Security Companies, and the U.S. Military

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In March 2004, four former American soldiers employed by the private security firm Blackwater USA were escorting delivery trucks through Fallujah, Iraq, when their vehicles were attacked. The Americans were killed, their bodies burned, mutilated, and then suspended from a bridge at the edge of town. The incident brought attention to the increase in the use of Private Military and Security Contractors (PMSCs) in military conflict zones. Over the next several years business for Blackwater and other PMSCs in Iraq boomed. At the same time public debate intensified over the appropriate role of PMSCs in military conflicts. The debates would come to a head following a 2007 incident in which Blackwater security contractors were implicated in firing on unarmed civilians in Baghdad, causing 17 deaths.

This case uses two widely publicized events in the Iraq war involving Blackwater USA to consider how private military contractors have influenced and have been influenced by changes in the organization and perceived mission of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Institutions in Crisis case studies provide students of ethics, organizational studies, crisis management, and institutional analysis with opportunities to explore the dynamics of organizations experiencing change, ethical crisis, and evolution. For more information on the set of case studies, please visit the following website: <http://kenan.ethics.duke.edu/education/case-studies-in-ethics/institutions-in-crisis/>.

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## Target Audience

Organizational studies  
Organizational ethics  
Sociology  
Military science

## Learning Objectives

1. Explore the impact of changing resource conditions and policy environments on the military.
2. Consider the issue of accountability and its link to institutional mission and individual perceptions of purpose.
3. Better understand the role that professional identity plays in understandings of mission and purpose.

## Questions for class discussion

1. **Topic: The impact of historical shifts in the operating environment of the military.**

**How has the changing international political and economic environment affected the structure and perceived mission of the U.S. military since the 1980s?**

**Notes for the instructor:** The background information on the history of the military in this case is necessarily brief. Students can be prompted, however, to link changes in context to changes in the structure and perceptions of purpose of the military (e.g., from deterrence to disaster management).

2. **Topic: Accountability and its connection to institutional mission.**

“Accountability” refers to the obligation to explain, justify, and answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect.<sup>1</sup> Within an organization, accountability relates to who is to be held accountable, for what, to whom, through what means, and with what consequences.

**To whom are the U.S. Armed Forces accountable? To whom are PMSCs accountable?**

**If there are differing bases of accountability for these entities, what challenges do these pose for military commanders, for civilians in government who share in the management and oversight of the military, and for employees of PMSCs? How do different bases of accountability influence understandings of institutional mission? How is the nature of “natural security” altered, if at all, when security becomes privatized?**

**Notes for the instructor:** As noted in the case text the modern U.S. military structure was designed to be headed by appointed civilian officials who, as representatives of the American people, held the military accountable for its actions. PMSCs are private companies held accountable by their owners or shareholders for their profitability. Challenges arise when the completion of a task results in different outcomes—one outcome that would conform with military accountability, the other with the dictates of private business. As political scholar Elke Krahnmann argues, the broader institutional effect is the possibility that the purpose of the military—providing security for the nation—is altered when the use of private contractors becomes

<sup>1</sup> Trow, Martin. 1996. “Trust, Markets & Accountability in Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective.” *Research and Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.1.96*. University of California Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education.

more widespread.<sup>2</sup> For example, she notes that market-provisioned security services (those offered by PMSCs) are more likely to focus on individualized security: security in the private market is more likely to be focused on protecting individuals or individual buildings, rather than focused on providing collective security (e.g., setting up systems of community policing, or advocating for laws that restrict the possession of hand guns). The reason for this focus on individualized security targets is two-fold. Security companies are more likely to identify and assess threats that can be protected rather than threats against which systems of deterrence are constructed because this increases the supply of threats and thus demand for the services of PMSCs. Secondly, PMSCs are less likely to engage in broad-based prevention because it is difficult to quantify and prove that these efforts were successful. Security companies can say they have “never lost a target” (see Blackwater’s mission statement in the case text), and this is likely more compelling to potential buyers of their services than the statement that violent acts did not occur because of the expertise of the PMSC.

### 3. Topic: Governance

**Governance refers to the explicit and implicit arrangements by which decision-making authority and responsibility are allocated among participants. Scholar Deborah Avant argues that greater use of private military companies redistributes power away from the state’s control of violence. It also enhances the importance of market values within the state.<sup>3</sup>**

**Consider each of these supposed results of the privatization of security. Are both necessarily negative developments? Do some of the reforms recommended after the Nisoor incident appear to redress the possibility for negative outcomes related to increased privatization?**

**Also consider the following statement by John Lovering: “The leading defense company of the future will be primarily a manipulator of opinions...[Its] key asset is the ability to influence the ways in which prospective buyers (governments and armed services) imagine the wars of the future.”<sup>4</sup>**

**Would you agree that PMSCs have more impact on public debates and values than these public debates have on the operation of PMSCs? What positive influence might PMSCs have on military conflict and on “imagining the wars of the future?” Will more attention to the substance and management of contracts (related to the increased professionalism of the contract staff, as recommended by the Gansler report) temper the potential negative influence of PMSCs on military decision-makers?**

**Notes for the instructor:** As noted in the text, the use of PMSCs appears to have become accepted as part of the military’s “total force.” A number of convincing reasons can be given for the use of contracting in the military (see those noted in the case text). Most of these are based upon the assumed economic efficiency of contracted services. In the above statement, Lovering suggests the possible unintended, and more far-reaching consequences, of having private security companies involved in decision-making and the effect this may have on the conduct of, number, and intensity of future conflicts.

2 Krahmann, Elke. 2008. “Security: Collective Good or Commodity?” *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 379-404.

3 Avant, D. *The Market for Force: The Consequences for Privatizing Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cockayne, James. 2009. *Beyond Market Forces: Regulating the Global Security Industry*. New York: International Peace Institute.

4 Lovering, John. 2000. “Loose Cannons: Creating the Arms Industry of the Twenty-first Century,” in May Kaldor, editor, *Global Insecurity*. (London: Pinter). Page 174. See also: Avant, Deborah. 2004. “The Privatization of Security and Change in the Control of Force.” *International Studies Perspectives*, 5: 153-157.

- Scholar Sarah Percy argues that the use of PMSCs by nation-states is morally problematic for two reasons: (1) to kill without an appropriate cause is unjustified and immoral and payment does not represent appropriate cause, and (2) it is morally important for citizens to contribute to the military (e.g., as participants).<sup>5</sup>**

**Do you agree that these are moral challenges to the use of PMSCs? How might we regulate the use of private force to confront and diffuse these two challenges?**

**Notes for the instructor:** This discussion can help clarify the connection of government policy to the deeply held values of citizens and illustrate how incremental changes in practices, or sudden responses to crisis situations, can bring about policy shifts that are subsequently discovered to be in opposition to core values.

- Are employees of PMSCs heroes, mercenaries, or something in between? Discuss the sense of mission and purpose associated with mercenaries, citizen-soldiers, and PMSC employees.**

**Notes to the instructor:** The dangers of a weakening in soldiers' identification with the military has been a long-standing topic of research and debate. Moskos's 1977 article examines the transformation of the military from an institution to an occupation. As an institution, the purpose of the military "[transcends] individual self-interest in favor of a presumed higher good." In contrast, military service as an occupation is one where "monetary rewards [are exchanged] for equivalent competencies."<sup>6</sup> Snider and Watkins argue that the growing bureaucratization of the Army has transformed perceptions and treatment of soldiers, from soldiers as members of a distinct profession to employees who feel no closer affiliation to their roles as soldiers than do the employees of any other organization.<sup>7</sup> As part of this discussion students could compare representations of soldiers in different eras by analyzing fictional narratives and newspaper accounts. Students could also compare current and past recruiting materials used by the armed forces against the web materials and employment applications for PMSCs like Blackwater.

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5 Percy, Sarah. 2007. "Morality and Regulation." Pp. 11–28 in Simon Chesterman and Chia Lehnhardt, editors, *From Mercenaries to Market: The Rise and Regulation of Private Military Companies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6 Moskos, Charles C. 1977. "From Institution to Occupation: Trends in Military Organization." *Armed Forces & Society* 4:41 (41-50). Pp. 42-43.

7 Snider, Don M. and Gayle L. Watkins. 2000. "The Future of Army Professionalism: A Need for Renewal and Redefinition." *Parameters*, Autumn: 5-20.