

Volunteers & Incentives: Buying the Bodies of the Poor

By Patrick T. McCormick

Abstract: In response to a spreading recruitment crisis among the Army, National Guard and Army Reserve during the first half of 2005 the Pentagon sought to bolster combat volunteers for Iraq by offering a wide array of enlistment and reenlistment bonuses. This use of financial incentives to recruit bodies for the Iraq war echoed earlier White House efforts to induce nations to join the ‘coalition of the willing’ by offering aid and trade packages, and paralleled the Pentagon’s decision to outsource 20,000 military jobs in Iraq to Private Military Firms. When democratic nations seek to garner support for unpopular wars by offering financial incentives to those who serve in combat, they run the risk of exploiting the poor and undermining the moral legitimacy of their authority to wage war.

Introduction

What is a pound of flesh worth? In Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice the wealthy Antonio secures a loan of 3,000 Ducats by putting up sixteen ounces of his skin and bones as collateral, and Bassanio offers Shylock ten times as much to redeem this portion of his friend. In Stephen Frears’ edgy 2002 thriller, Dirty Pretty Things the flesh merchants of an underground market in human organs offer desperate refugees and aliens a passport and safe passage to America in exchange for parts of their “illegal” bodies. Frears’ tale is, of course, more realistic and frightening than Shakespeare’s, for the traffic in human flesh will always recruit its volunteers and victims from the ranks of the poor. What else do they have to sell?

After Vietnam the United States ended the draft and shifted to an all-volunteer Army, and the Pentagon has consistently touted the advantages of this approach to recruitment, arguing that their soldiers are smarter and more dedicated than draftees.¹ Though some have argued that an all-volunteer army tends to “recruit” the poor into military service,² most politicians and voters have been glad to see the end of the draft, and for much of the past 32 years the all-volunteer Army has had no shortage of troops.³ Indeed, in the years after 9/11 the military had ample recruits for America’s war on terror.⁴ But by early 2005 there were signs of a shrinking supply of volunteers for the war in Iraq, and the Pentagon and Congress began to take steps to make military service – particularly in those branches with the most troops in a combat zone – more attractive.

Certain moral questions arise when governments – especially democratic ones – offer significant financial incentives, bonuses and increased benefits to citizens volunteering to serve in combat. At what point do financial incentives transform citizen soldiers into mercenaries? Will such incentives exploit poorer citizens by pressuring them to serve and die in combat? Are such pay outs an attempt to garner support for a justifiably unpopular war? Are we buying the bodies of the poor for the war in Iraq?

This essay examines the rise in U.S. military bonuses and benefits that took place last year in response to a deepening recruitment crisis, and notes two other attempts to recruit military personnel for Iraq by offering financial incentives. It then asks about the moral problems with this strategy, and closes with some recommendations.

A Boost in the “Death Gratuity”

At the start of 2005 the White House, Pentagon and Congress began calling for steep increases in benefits paid to families of GIs killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵ On January 31st David Chu, the Pentagon's personnel chief announced that the President's proposed 2006 budget would call for an eight-fold rise in the one-time death benefit, or "death gratuity" offered to families of troops killed in a war zone, and would make this increase from \$12,500 to \$100,000 retroactive to cover survivors of all those killed in combat since October 2001. Mr. Chu added that the President's budget would also increase the life insurance coverage for all soldiers and sailors from \$250,000 to \$400,000, with the government paying the increased premiums for any troops serving in a combat zone.

Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats in Congress were already working on legislation in support of these increases, and by early February Senators Jeffrey Sessions (R-AL) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) had collected twenty co-sponsors for a Senate bill implementing the increased benefits, while a similar House resolution had attracted 157 co-sponsors.⁶ In May the \$82 billion emergency appropriations bill President Bush signed into law included both the increased "death gratuity" and life insurance payments, and in July survivors of U.S. military personnel who had died in combat or combat-related training since October 7, 2001 began receiving an additional \$237,500 in benefits.⁷

This was not the first increase in the unfortunately named "death gratuity." Congress first approved paying a one-time "death gratuity" to the families of fallen soldiers in 1908. Military salaries were miserable and life insurance was unavailable to most soldiers, so the government offered grieving families a bonus of six months pay, which came to a few hundred dollars. In 1956 Congress increased this death benefit to \$1,800 to \$3,000, depending on the soldier's rank, and upped it again in 1991 after the Gulf War, this time to \$6,000. Three years ago Congress

doubled the “death gratuity,” made it tax free and tied it to military pay raises. In January of 2005 it reached \$12,420.⁸

Politically, voting for increased benefits for the families of fallen soldiers seems like a no-brainer. Still, there are good reasons to ask why the White House and Congress chose this moment to get behind such large increases in the death benefits paid out to families of fallen soldiers. Recent Democratic and Republican administrations have reduced military retirement benefits to balance their budgets. Senator John Kerry had recommended an identical increase in the “death gratuity” in March of 2004, to no avail; and during that summer Congress continued to reject efforts to raise the death benefits paid to the families of those killed in combat.⁹ Indeed, as late as December of that year Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ) was removed as chair of the Veterans’ Affairs Committee for pushing too hard for increases in veterans’ health benefits.¹⁰ Yet by January both Republicans and Democrats are tripping over one another in a race to provide increased death benefits to military families.

Senator Sessions suggested that congressional support for the increases had to do with the widespread popularity of this legislation. “The American people have responded to this (initiative) really strongly,” Sessions noted. “If someone is out there in harm's way, we ought to take care of their families.”¹¹ And this is certainly the message that had begun appearing in some newspaper editorials as early as November.¹²

At the same time, politicians on both sides of the aisle certainly saw voting for these increases in military benefits as a way to show their “support for the troops.” In 2003 Congress took the Pentagon out to the woodshed for even considering scaling back combat pay raises,¹³ and in December of 2004 Secretary Rumsfeld was rebuked by a National Guard scout complaining that troops were not being provided with adequate armor.¹⁴ Add to that the fact that

by the close of 2004 Democratic criticism of the Iraq war has shifted from the administration's inadequate planning for the invasion to its failure to provide sufficient protection and support for the troops, and it makes sense so many legislators are scrambling to sign on for these increases.

Support for the increases in military benefits was probably also being fueled by comparisons with the benefits paid to families of 9/11 victims. A RAND Corporation study released in November of 2004 reported that families of firefighters and police officers killed in the 9/11 attacks received an average of \$4.2 million in compensation.¹⁵ By comparison, the \$12,500 "death gratuity" and \$250,000 of life insurance coverage paid to families of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan was seen by military officials and members of Congress as "paltry" or "insulting" or both.¹⁶ Thus, Senator Sessions and others spoke of a need for equity in the treatment of those killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁷

Still, it is possible there was another, more troubling reason for the sudden and widespread support for increased death benefits for the families of soldiers serving in Iraq. A January 22nd news story on National Public Radio noted that Congress was calling for a boost in the death benefits just as "the death toll mounts for U.S. forces in Iraq and as enlistment efforts for the volunteer army begin to falter." In the same story Senator George Allen (R-VA) argued that keeping up recruitment in a volunteer army was dependent on making "families feel that they are going to be taken care of if their loved one makes the ultimate sacrifice."¹⁸ In other words, the growing support for an eight-fold jump in the "death gratuity" might be connected with an increasing unwillingness of young people to volunteer for combat duty in Iraq.

Recruitment Woes

Every branch of the U.S. armed forces except one met or exceeded enlistment and retention goals for fiscal 2004, which wrapped up at the end of September of that year. Indeed, the Army surpassed its recruitment goals for the fourth year in a row. Only the Army National Guard fell short, missing its recruitment goal of 56,000 soldiers by 5,000. This was the first time the Guard had not met its quota in a decade.¹⁹

In October and November, however, there were signs of a steep downturn in recruitment. Enlistments for the National Guard had fallen 30%, and the Army Reserve was 10% short of its recruitment goals.²⁰ By the end of December all the reserve components except the Marines had failed to meet their enlistment quotas for the last quarter of 2004.²¹

By January even the Marines were in trouble. For the first time since July of 1995 the Corps, which can usually turn away excess applicants, missed its enlistment quota.²² The chief of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Brig. Gen. Walter E. Gaskin, acknowledged that casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq were having an effect on enlistment efforts. That same month the National Guard met only 56% of its recruitment goal, and the Army Reserve was short 7,000 officers.

The Army missed its first recruitment goal in February, falling 27% shy of the mark. Then it failed to meet its March enlistment goal by 31%, and in April the shortfall had reached 42%. In May, in spite of having dropped that month's quota by 1,350, the Army missed its target by about 25%.²³

Soon, a number of high ranking military officers began to sound the alarm. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker told Congress in November of 2004 he would do his level best to meet the demand of commanders in Iraq for fresh bodies, but admitted that recruitment problems, especially in the Army National Guard and Army Reserve, were making the task very

difficult, and added that “It's going to get harder the longer we go with this, no question about it.”²⁴ In January the commander of the Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. James R. Helmly, sent Schoomaker a memo warning that the Reserve was “in grave danger of being unable to meet other operational requirements” and was “rapidly degenerating into a ‘broken’ force.”²⁵ Retired four-star Army General Barry McCaffrey added that “the Army's wheels are going to come off in the next 24 months.”²⁶

A RAND study released in the summer of 2005 echoed concerns that the Army and its reserve components were overstretched by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that extended and repeated deployments of regular and reserve units were having a negative impact on recruitment and retention.²⁷ One option offered by the RAND study, and recommended by a growing number of those in and out of the military, was a major and permanent increase in the ranks of the regular Army. General Schoomaker told Congress that “if the Army National Guard and Army Reserve cannot muster and provide the formations that are required, perhaps we need to increase the size of the regular Army.” A New York Times editorial argued that the recent temporary increase of 30,000 active-duty troops be made permanent, and retired General McCaffrey called for the Army to add 80,000 soldiers to its ranks.²⁸ Still, this recommendation would only increase the need to address the recruitment problem.

Meanwhile, the Air Force and Navy continued to attract more recruits than they needed, no doubt because casualties are relatively low in these branches. But the National Guard and Army Reserve, which were providing more than 40% of the troops in Iraq, were in trouble. Those who might have enlisted in these units to get money for college were suddenly facing the prospect of one or two extended tours fighting a counterinsurgency war with mounting casualties and no end in sight. And soldiers who had traditionally joined the Guard after finishing their

active duty tour worried about being shipped right back to a combat zone. Even the gung ho recruits normally drawn to the Marines had to deal with the fact that while the Corps makes up only 21% of the troops in Iraq, it was sustaining 31% of the casualties.

Recruitment for the Guard and Reserve was also probably being affected by the military's "stop-loss" policy, which was keeping active duty soldiers in Iraq past their agreed upon commitments,²⁹ and by stories that the Pentagon was considering extending the 24 month limit for reserve duty in a combat zone.³⁰

Nor was resistance to recruiters coming only from young people. Worried that their sons and daughters would be sent directly from basic training to combat in Iraq or Afghanistan, many parents were less certain that enlisting in the military was a good idea, while mothers and fathers who might have recommended Guard or Reserve duty as a way to pay for college now encouraged their children to find other ways to get by.³¹ Indeed, in a number of places parents concerned by a provision in the "No Child Left Behind" law that requires high schools to hand over the names of their students to military recruiters began to organize active resistance, forming "Leave My Child Alone" groups that helped thousands of teen-agers withhold their names from recruiters.³²

At the same time, recruitment among African Americans, long a major source of enlisted military personnel, was showing signs of decline. In 2000 blacks made up nearly a quarter of military enlistments, but by the close of 2005 their numbers had dropped by 40%, making up approximately one seventh of new recruits.³³ Part of this drastic decline is explained by improved educational and economic opportunities for blacks; but part of the blame must also be placed upon the unpopularity of the Iraq war among African Americans, who are roughly twice as likely to have concerns about the war as whites.³⁴

Throughout the summer months military recruiters made up some lost ground, but by the close of fiscal 2005 at the end of September the Army had achieved only 92% of its enlistment goals, falling short by 6,627 recruits – its worst showing in 26 years – while the Guard and Army Reserve only managed to meet 80 and 84% of their goals.³⁵

Since the start of fiscal 2006 a number of news stories have reported the improved performance of military recruiters, noting that the Army met or exceeded recruitment goals for October and November. Still, this may in part be the result of a decision to lower the monthly recruitment goal for each of these two months by about 2,000 recruits.³⁶ And it is certainly the result of a number of new recruitment efforts, including a wide array of bonuses and benefits.

New Recruiting Strategies

The Pentagon responded to the deepening recruitment crisis in a variety of ways, calling for more recruiters, more expensive, aggressive or creative recruitment strategies, and the offer of a broad array of enlistment and reenlistment bonuses, benefits and incentives – particularly to those serving in a combat zone.

In January of 2005 the Army National Guard announced it would increase the number of its recruiters from 2,700 to 4,100 – the largest boost in 15 years.³⁷ The next month Gen. Helmly reported that the Army Reserve would boost its recruitment force by 80%, bringing it up to 1,800.³⁸ The Army, which had increased its recruiters by nearly a thousand in 2004, announced that it would add another 375 officers to its ranks.³⁹ By October the Pentagon reported that it had increased Guard, Reserve and Army recruiters from 9,000 to 12,000.⁴⁰

The Pentagon nearly doubled its advertising budget between 1998 and 2003, boosting it from \$299 to \$592 million. Between 1996 and 2004 the cost of recruiting a soldier showed a

similar jump from \$7,600 to \$14,000.⁴¹ And in 2005 the Army's marketing budget was raised from \$200 to \$240 million.⁴² But the recruiting shortfall this year has pushed the Army to raise this to a whopping \$320 million for 2006.⁴³

The military is using all this money to identify and attract recruits in a variety of ways. The Army spends about \$6 million a year supporting "America's Army," the Internet's biggest game and a recruiting tool visited by over 30,000 people a day.⁴⁴ It spends about \$16 million a year on a NASCAR marketing package that includes sponsoring a race car in the Nextel Cup series and running an interactive exhibit where possible recruits can play war games.⁴⁵ And, in response to a growing perception that parents are urging their sons and daughters not to enlist, the Army has spent 10 million on a new advertising campaign directed at mothers and fathers, shifting away from an earlier focus on patriotism, adventure and career opportunities.⁴⁶ Nor were parents the only family members targeted in the military's recruitment efforts. In an attempt to address the growing dissatisfaction among military spouses contributing to the armed services' high attrition rates, the Pentagon formed partnerships with major employers like Boeing, Sears, Dell and CVS, seeking to help these spouses find jobs, and joined Monster.com on a new venture, developing an online job site for military spouses, called Military.com.⁴⁷

The military has also sought to boost recruitment and enlistment in some less palatable ways. With thousands of high school students choosing to have their names withheld from military recruiters, the Pentagon has discovered other ways to identify and contact possible recruits. In June, the Department of Defense acknowledged that, in violation of the federal Privacy Act, it had been working with a private contractor to develop an extensive database of 30 million 16-25 year-olds, including not only their names, phone numbers and addresses, but also Social Security numbers, grade-point averages, height and weight, e-mail addresses, and race.

David Chu argued that such measures were necessary to ensure the success of an all-volunteer force and avoid the threat of conscription.⁴⁸

At the same time, the military has loosened requirements for enlistees. In February the Pentagon raised the maximum age for National Guard and Reserve recruits from 34 to 39.⁴⁹ And in October the Department of Defense, while denying that it was lowering standards for Army recruits, announced that it would be accepting a higher percentage of high school dropouts and those with lower scores on intelligence tests.⁵⁰

Bonuses and Death Benefits

Still, the centerpiece of Pentagon efforts to address recruitment shortfalls has been, and continues to be, a reliance on bonuses and increased benefits.⁵¹ In December of 2004 the Guard raised enlistment bonuses for new recruits from \$6,000 to \$10,000, and both the Guard and Army Reserve tripled enlistment bonuses for those with prior military service from \$5,000 to \$15,000. By January of 2005 the Pentagon was offering Guard and Reserve troops who had completed their maximum 24 months in Iraq a tax free bonus of \$1,000 a month to extend their stay. The Marines soon began offering some enlisted combat veterans as much as \$30,000 to sign up for another tour, and the Army announced it would spend over \$1 billion in 2005 on bonuses and benefits enticing people to enlist or reenlist.⁵²

The Army, which spent \$125 million on bonuses in 2004, budgeted \$207 million in 2005, giving the average new recruit just under \$6,000 (or just over \$9,000 for infantry) and providing most soldiers who reenlisted with \$6,000 to \$12,000.⁵³ In July and August the Army boosted reenlistment bonuses for deployed troops to \$22,500 and has offered bonuses reaching \$50,000 to soldiers with special skills willing to stay past twenty years.⁵⁴ And by the end of 2005 the

Army was asking Congress to double the top enlistment bonus to \$40,000, provide a \$25,000 down payment for troops serving four years or more, and offer a \$2,500 “finders fee” to soldiers who bring in a fresh recruit.⁵⁵

Given the Pentagon’s widespread use of bonuses and benefits to attract and retain recruits for America’s “all-volunteer” Army, as well as a spreading and deepening recruitment crisis that began to affect the Army, National Guard and Army Reserve in the first half of 2005 and provoked a wide range of new recruiting and retention strategies, it is hard to believe that the sudden, broad and nearly simultaneous support for huge increases in the death benefits paid out to the families of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan is a completely unrelated phenomenon. It seems much more likely that on some level the boost in the “death gratuity” and life insurance payments were related to larger efforts to address to Pentagon’s need for fresh troops. In other words, the eightfold increase in the “death gratuity” was a bonus or incentive, offered at least in part to recruit or retain troops.

Americans and the rest of the world were horrified to discover in 2002 that Saddam Hussein was paying the families of Palestinian suicide bombers \$25,000. For though Palestinians claimed that these attacks were motivated by rage and religious zeal, a leader of the Arab Liberation Front admitted that the payments helped tip the scales for some bombers, and both Israel and the U.S. condemned Iraq for offering incentives to murder.⁵⁶ Offering an extra \$237,500 to the families of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq is clearly not an incentive for murder, but is it not at least partially an inducement for recruitment? And, if so, who exactly might be enticed by the “death gratuity” and other benefits? Stories about the compensated families of Palestinian suicide-bombers also mentioned their desperate poverty. Is it reasonable to expect that America’s

poor will feel unduly pressured to volunteer for combat service when offered a \$20,000 signing bonus?

Exploiting the Poor

The first problem with using enlistment bonuses of \$20,000 to \$40,000 in order to secure more volunteers for the war in Iraq is that such incentives could be exploitive of the poor, who make up a large proportion of military recruits, and, indeed, of enlisted personnel.

Recent demographic studies indicate that just under half of current recruits come from lower-middle-class to poor households, with almost 65% of the Army's 2004 enlistments coming from counties where the median household income was below national median.⁵⁷ And there can be little debate that military recruiters know to target communities and persons with limited financial opportunities. For example, in September of 2005 the National Guard negotiated a contract with a national temp agency, Labor Ready, allowing the Guard to recruit day laborers who walk into the agency's 700 nationwide offices.⁵⁸

And since many who enlist in the military remain trapped in poverty, it is easy to see how the offer or promise of a \$20,000 tax free reenlistment bonus could entice financially strapped soldiers to risk another tour or two in Iraq. Approximately 25,000 military families currently qualify for food stamps; the most current Pentagon study reports that 40% of lower ranking soldiers suffer "significant financial difficulties," and combat soldiers in Iraq can make less than \$16,000 a year.⁵⁹ In 2004 at least 26% of military families turned to payday lenders charging over 300% interest, and a recent Senate hearing discovered large numbers of National Guard soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to face mounting debts and high rates of unemployment.⁶⁰ An earlier Pentagon report indicated that 30% of reservist households lose

income when activated, driving many into financial stress and bankruptcy.⁶¹ If over a quarter of military families are unable to defend themselves from predatory lending practices, it hardly seems a stretch to suggest that the offer of a \$20,000 signing bonus will not be easily resisted. Nor is it surprising to discover that the military has been more successful at retention than recruitment.

The exploitive character of these incentives is also seen in the way the promise of a \$20,000 signing bonus or the chance of securing up to \$70,000 for college tuition are used in a bait and switch approach, luring in recruits who rarely qualify for anything like the full amount of these incentives. Critics of the military's bonus system report that recruits only discover the exact size of their bonus in the moments moments before signing their enlistment contract, and those with the poorest educational background and employment opportunities – having been drawn in by ads and offers suggesting much more money – tend to receive little or no bonuses for enlisting. One former recruiting officer saw this as particularly exploitive of the poor.⁶²

Unfortunately, the U.S. government's use of financial incentives to recruit bodies or support for the war in Iraq has not been limited to offering bonuses to poor Americans. In the first Gulf War the United States recruited a number of those in the "coalition of the willing" by promising various types of economic or military aid, and after the war the White House rewarded those who had volunteered and sanctioned those who had not. The use of incentives was even more crucial to attempts to enlist support for the current war in Iraq. In order to create what critics have described as a "coalition of the bribed and coerced" the White House turned to a number of relatively poor and weak nations eager for or dependent on U.S. aid or trade, or hoping for American or British support for their applications for membership in NATO or the European Union.⁶³ And in the months after the invasion of Iraq the president rewarded those who

had volunteered and punished a number who had opposed the invasion. Not surprisingly, many of the nations that “volunteered” their support for the war in Iraq were among the poorest countries on the planet.⁶⁴ That they were unwilling volunteers for this venture is shown by the fact that the people of most of these countries were opposed to the war, and many of their leaders had to assure their populace that there would be little real involvement in the conflict.⁶⁵

A particularly crass example of the sort of incentives offered to recruit support and troops for the war in Iraq occurred in May of 2005. Soon after Australia announced that it would maintain its forces in Iraq (unlike a number of other coalition members discussing timetables for withdrawal), the U.S. State Department boosted the number of annual visas granted citizens from that country by 10,000.⁶⁶ Government officials denied any connection.

The U.S. government is also, albeit indirectly, offering financial incentives to tens of thousands of desperately poor laborers trafficked to Iraq to do much of the menial labor supporting military and reconstruction efforts. Exploited, deceived, and held hostage by a network of brokers and subcontractors hired by American companies working for the Pentagon, foreign laborers from South and Southeast Asian nations are funneled to Iraq through an illegal pipeline, believing they are headed for safe, high paying jobs in Kuwait and Jordan. Though the U.S. opposes human trafficking, and the State Department recently added some of the Middle Eastern states involved in this pipeline to its human trafficking watch list, the White House has decided not to sanction these important allies in the war on terror, and the U.S. military and its contractors have failed or refused to take steps to protect these workers or end the trafficking.⁶⁷

Hiring Mercenaries

In the previously noted memo to General Schoomaker, the head of the Army Reserve expressed another concern about the use of bonuses to attract more recruits for the war in Iraq – that such incentives could transform volunteers into mercenaries. “We must consider,” General Helmly wrote, “the point at which we confuse ‘volunteer to become an American soldier’ with ‘mercenary.’”⁶⁸ Helmly’s point here would seem to be that while there is staunch opposition in the Pentagon and Congress to addressing the current recruiting crisis by returning to a draft, the specter of replacing an “all volunteer” Army with paid legions of mercenaries should be no less troubling.

Many will argue that Helmly’s comment was alarmist, that a volunteer Army that has met its recruitment goals for three decades with few problems is in little danger of morphing into a force of mercenaries. Still, Peter W. Singer of the Brookings Institute argues that the U.S. military, particularly in the current war in Iraq, has become increasingly dependent upon Private Military Firms (PMFs), and that the U.S. military has outsourced a wide range of menial and dangerous military tasks to corporations and contractors hiring soldiers of fortune from the U.S. and around the globe.⁶⁹

Spurred by Cold War reductions that released upwards of six millions soldiers into civilian life, the rise of small and medium-sized conflicts and a shift to hi-tech military technology requiring experts with specialized training and talents, Singer reports that the PMF industry mushroomed over the past decade into a field with over 600 firms operating in fifty nations around the globe and taking in annual revenues in excess of \$1 billion. Along with providing consultation and expertise, logistical support and supplies, PMFs also provide security and combat services for a wide range of nations and armed forces, including its largest client – the U.S. military.⁷⁰

Singer reports that the U.S. had 3,000 contracts with PMFs between 1994 and 2002, spending about \$3 billion outsourcing a wide range of military services. This reliance on PMFs has only increased since the inception of the war in Iraq, in which the Pentagon has outsourced military jobs in unprecedented ways, leading the Economist to describe Iraq as “the first privatized war.” With some 20,000 private military personnel working in Iraq, and 6,000 non-Iraqi civilians providing armed tactical functions, Singer reports that it is the PMFs “coalition of the billing” that makes up America’s largest ally. Indeed, with private soldiers of over 30 nationalities, PMFs provide President Bush with a significantly broader alliance of troops than the official “coalition of the willing,” most of whose members signed on in name only. And in the three years since the war began these private military personnel have suffered more casualties than any of the coalition partners.⁷¹

Private soldiers are an expensive proposition. Employees of PMFs working in Iraq tend to make two to ten times as much as a soldier doing the same job – though the tab is much lower for private soldiers from places like Nepal or Columbia, proving once again that financial incentives for those serving in combat will always exploit the poor. Moreover, these lucrative salaries have proven particularly costly to the military, creating a “brawn drain” that siphons off the cream of special forces and other highly trained and skilled soldiers unable to resist the temptation of salaries that could allow them to retire in a few years.⁷²

A second problem with private military personnel concerns legal accountability for any misdeeds or crimes they commit while working for PMFs overseas. They are not governed by the military code of conduct, can usually elude punishment by the local authorities, and their actions abroad are not normally covered by US criminal law. More than a few of those found responsible for the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib were employees of PMFs, but

none of them were arrested, convicted or punished.⁷³ Indeed, Singer points out that although PMFs have 20,000 personnel in Iraq, not a single employee has been convicted or punished for a criminal offense.⁷⁴

Still, Singer believes that hiring mercenaries has provided the Pentagon and White House with distinct, albeit troubling, advantages. Outsourcing 20,000 military jobs in Iraq relieves the pressure to fill these slots with U.S. or coalition troops, a task made increasingly difficult by the growing recruitment crisis and rising unpopularity of the war. With the regular Army, National Guard and Army Reserve overstretched and struggling with recruitment woes, and with Democrats increasingly calling for an exit strategy or schedule, hiring expensive private military personnel may seem like a political, if not financial bargain. This is all the more true when one considers that the political cost of fatalities among private military personnel is significantly lower – especially if they are foreigners. Such casualties are not included in the official list of those killed in combat, and voters and audiences at home are significantly less disturbed by such deaths than those of “our boys” in uniform.⁷⁵

An extra advantage provided by PMFs is that private military personnel can often be used for missions that Congress would be loath to fund or sanction, and might be willing to take actions ordinary soldiers would refuse to perform. Such private soldiers have been particularly useful in providing more U.S. support for Columbia’s war on drugs than Congress had warranted. And private soldiers without real legal accountability could provide policymakers with plausible deniability.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Three years into the war in Iraq, as casualties climbed, confidence in the president and support for the war ebbed, and the Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve struggled with recruitment, the Pentagon sought to shore up enlistments and retention with a wide range of fresh strategies – including the offer of bonuses and benefits for recruits and their families. This reliance on financial incentives to purchase bodies and support for the war in Iraq was consistent with the White House’s earlier attempt to build a “coalition of the willing” by offering dozens of smaller and poorer nations some combination of aid or trade packages, or threatening to delay or deny such assistance to those unwilling to “volunteer.” It also bore some similarity to the U.S. military’s increasing reliance on private military personnel, or mercenaries, to provide needed support for the war effort in Iraq.

Seeking to ensure bodies and support for an increasingly unpopular Iraq war by offering financial incentives to U.S. citizens and prospective allies, or by outsourcing military support and work to private soldiers from over two dozen nations poses at least three moral problems.

First, the use of large bonuses and benefits, particularly when offered to those with limited or few alternatives, represents an exploitation of the poor, and we take one large step towards buying the bodies of the poor for the war in Iraq. As Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) has argued, “It’s not fair that the people we ask to fight the war are people who join the military because of economic conditions.”

Admittedly, in a free market society without a military draft a large proportion of those “willing” to serve in combat (or to volunteer for dangerous work as police officers, firefighters, or taxi drivers) will be drawn from the ranks of the poor. And there is nothing inherently exploitive about compensating the military personnel (and/or their families) who place themselves in harm’s way. Nonetheless, the fact that 40% of lower ranking military personnel

are so inadequately compensated that they experience severe financial duress, that over a quarter of military personnel qualify for food stamps, and that a similar percentage borrow money from usurious pay day lenders indicates an extraordinarily vulnerable population, one not well positioned to defend itself from exploitive proposals, or even to discern the real long term costs of easy money. The fact that payday lenders and high interest creditors regularly target military personnel is evidence enough of the susceptibility of this population.⁷⁷

Second, attempting to buy support for an increasingly unpopular war, particularly one initiated under false premises, by offering bonuses and benefits to troops and aid or trade packages to poor nations, goes a long way towards invalidating any claims at America's "legitimate authority" to wage this war.

Despite resistance from the UN Security Council, the Bush administration defended its "legitimate" moral authority to launch a preventive war against Iraq by pointing to broad support from the American people and a "coalition of the willing." However, much of the coalition's support came from impoverished and developing nations seeking favor from the Bush White House, or from private military contractors hired for America's first "outsourced" war. And much of the early popular support of the war at home was based on false intelligence and the promise of a swift and relatively bloodless victory.

As the protracted and ill-planned invasion of Iraq became increasingly unpopular with Americans who discovered that there were neither weapons of mass destruction nor an effective exit strategy, the percentage of voters who continued to support the war began to decline, as did the ranks of those willing to volunteer for military service in Iraq. For a government that had already "bought" the support of allies and mercenaries it may not have been a big step to offer financial incentives to reluctant recruits, but for a democratic state to attempt to shore up support

for an increasingly unpopular war by promising large signing bonuses to soldiers goes a long way to undermining its legitimate moral authority to wage this war.

And finally, whatever moral advantages are provided by an “all volunteer” Army – namely that citizens of a democracy are not being conscripted into military service, but freely choosing to make this sacrifice for a mixture of personal and public ends – these are lost as the nation becomes increasingly willing to purchase this service from those motivated by profit. A growing willingness to buy bodies and support for an unpopular war, undercuts the legitimacy of that war and the democracy that wages it, while exploiting those most likely to join the “coalition of the bribed.”

Notes

- ¹ “Pentagon Challenges Call for a Draft,” Los Angeles Times (January 14, 2003): A12; “A Return to the Draft?” Wilson Quarterly 29/4 (2005): 83-4.
- ² Stephen A. Holmes, “Modern Military: Volunteers or Victims?” Seattle Times (April 6, 2003): A10; Barbara Ehrenreich, “Bush’s Odd Warfare State,” The Progressive (April 2004): 24-5.
- ³ Holmes, “Modern Military,” A1.
- ⁴ W. Thomas Smith Jr., “Recruits Join Armed Forces Seeking War,” Washington Times (November 7, 2005): A01.
- ⁵ “Bush to Seek Rise in Benefits for Survivors of Those Killed in War,” New York Times (February 1, 2005): A10.
- ⁶ Gail Russell Chaddock, “Why the Sudden Push for Military Benefits; A Move to Raise Death Pay for Soldiers Sets up Clash Between Deficit Constraints and Bush's Global Aspirations,” The Christian Science Monitor (February 3, 2005): 2.

-
- ⁷ “Increased Military Death Benefit Takes Effect,” Los Angeles Times (July 2, 2005): A 23.
- ⁸ James Barron, “For Families of Fallen Soldiers, The 2nd Knock Brings \$12,000,” New York Times (January 26, 2005): A1.
- ⁹ Charles Babington, “Senators Seek Increase in Death Benefit for Soldiers,” Washington Post (January 22, 2005): A 4.
- ¹⁰ Chaddock, “Why the Sudden Push,” 2.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Frank Schaeffer, “Caring for Those Left Behind; Soldiers' Survivors Need Real Benefits More Than Yellow Ribbons,” Washington Post (November 19, 2004): A.29; “Pricing the Ultimate Sacrifice,” [Editorial] New York Times (January 26, 2005): A.16.
- ¹³ John Files, “White House Backs Retaining Pay Raises for Troops Abroad,” New York Times (August 16, 2003): A.5.
- ¹⁴ Eric Schmitt, “Troops’ Queries Leave Rumsfeld on the Defensive,” New York Times (December 9, 2004): A.1.
- ¹⁵ Lloyd Dixon and Rachel Kaganoff Stern, Compensation for Losses from the 9/11 Attacks (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 88.
- ¹⁶ Scott Shane, “Senate Panel on Benefits for Survivors Hears Critics,” New York Times (February 2, 2005): A11; Chaddock, “Why the Sudden Push,” 2.
- ¹⁷ David Welna, “Congress Eyes Boost in Iraq Death Benefits,” Weekend All Things Considered, National Public Radio (Jan 22, 2005) at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4462891 (downloaded January 2, 2005).
- ¹⁸ Welna, “Congress Eyes Boost.”
- ¹⁹ Mark Thompson, “Where Are the New Recruits?” Time (January 17, 2005): 36-9.

-
- ²⁰ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 36.
- ²¹ Ann Scott Tyson, “Army Considers Extending Reserve; Move Would Help Meet Iraq Demand,” Washington Post (February 3, 2005): A22.
- ²² Eric Schmitt, “Marines Miss January Goal for Recruits” New York Times (February 3, 2005): A12.
- ²³ Robert Burns, “Army Falls Short of Recruits for Year,” Columbian (June 9, 2005): A1.
- ²⁴ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 38.
- ²⁵ Mark Mazzetti, “Leader of Army Reserve Fears a ‘Broken Force’” Los Angeles Times: (January 6, 2005): A14.
- ²⁶ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 36.
- ²⁷ Lynn Davis et al., Stretched Thin: Army Forces for Sustained Operations (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), xii.
- ²⁸ “The Army We Need,” Editorial, New York Times (Jan 2, 2005): 4.8; “Uncle Sam’s Recruiting Problems,” Editorial, Washington Times (October 13, 2005): A20; Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 37.
- ²⁹ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 39.
- ³⁰ Ann Scott Tyson, “Army Considers Extending Reserve; Move Would Help Meet Iraq Demand,” Washington Post (February 3, 2005): A22.
- ³¹ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 39.
- ³² Jackie Burrell and Joyce Tsai, “East Bay Teens Opt Out of Military Recruitment,” Contra Costa Times (October 29, 2005): A1; Maria Sacchetti and Jenna Russell, “Students Rebuffing Military Recruiters,” Boston Globe (November 13, 2005).

-
- ³³ David Moniz, “Opportunities, Opposition to Iraq War Cut into Recruiting,” USA Today (November 4, 2005): 6.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ “Uncle Sam’s Recruiting Problems,” Editorial, Washington Times (October 13, 2005): A20.
- ³⁶ Josh White, “Army Meets a Recruitment Goal,” Washington Post (November 11, 2005): A23; Rowan Scarborough, “Army Recruiting Tops New Goals,” Washington Times (December 12, 2005): A9.
- ³⁷ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 37.
- ³⁸ Scott Tyson, “Army Considers Extending Reserve,” A22.
- ³⁹ John Hendren, “Army to Bolster its Ranks,” Los Angeles Times (August 6, 2004) A29; Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 37.
- ⁴⁰ Scott Tyson, “Recruiting Shortfall Delays Army’s Extension Plans,” Washington Post (October 4, 2005): A7.
- ⁴¹ Thompson, “The New Recruits?” 37.
- ⁴² Brian MacQuarrie, “Army Scouts NASCAR Circuit for Recruits,” Boston Globe (August 28, 2005): A1.
- ⁴³ David Kelly, “Uncle Sam Wants You in the Worst Way,” Business Week (August 22, 2005): 40.
- ⁴⁴ Seth Schiesel, “On Maneuvers with the Army’s Game Squad,” Phi Kappa Phi Forum 85/2 (Summer 2005): 39.
- ⁴⁵ MacQuarrie, “Army Scouts NASCAR,” A1.

-
- ⁴⁶ Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Army a Tough Brand to Sell," Toronto Star (August 28, 2005): A15; Joe Garofoli, "Military Recruiting Ads Zero in on Mom and Dad," San Francisco Chronicle (October 18, 2005): A1.
- ⁴⁷ Sue Shellenbarger, "Military Recruits: Companies Make New Efforts to Hire Spouses of Soldiers," Wall Street Journal (December 15, 2005): D1.
- ⁴⁸ Damien Cave, "Age 16 to 25? The Pentagon Has Your Number, and More," New York Times (June 24, 2005): A18; Abe Procter, "Pentagon Adopts New Recruiting Tactics," The Skanner (June 29, 2005): 1.
- ⁴⁹ Mark Sappenfield, "As War Stretches On, Recruiters Scramble," Christian Science Monitor (March 28, 2005): 1.
- ⁵⁰ Joseph L. Galloway, "Army Moves to Recruit More High School Dropouts," Mercurynews.com at www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/news/politics/12809004.htm (October 3, 2005).
- ⁵¹ Damien Cave, "Critics Say It's Time to Overhaul Army's Bonus System," New York Times (August 15, 2005): A15.
- ⁵² Thompson, "The New Recruits?" 37; Schmitt, "Marines Miss January Goal," A12; Mazzetti, "Leader of Army Reserve," A14.
- ⁵³ Scott Tyson, "GIs in Iraq Choosing to Re-Up," Washington Post (December 18, 2005) A 27; Cave, "Time to Overhaul Bonus System," A15.
- ⁵⁴ Scott Tyson, "GIs in Iraq," A 27.
- ⁵⁵ Scott Tyson, "Recruiting Shortfall," A7.
- ⁵⁶ Mohammed Daraghmeh, "Saddam Will Give \$25,000 to Suicide Bombers," Columbian (April 4, 2002) A1; Ferry Biedermann, Global Information Network (March 20, 2003): 1.

-
- ⁵⁷ Scott Tyson, "Going Deep: Recruiters target Isolated, Depressed Areas," Seattle Times (November 9, 2005): A3.
- ⁵⁸ Jim Hightower, "Bush's Economic Draft," The Texas Observer (September 9, 2005): 15.
- ⁵⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich, "Bush's Odd Warfare State," The Progressive (April 2004): 24-5.
- ⁶⁰ Diana B. Henriques, "Seeking Quick Loans, Soldiers Race Into High Interest Traps," New York Times (December 7, 2004): A1; Kimberly Wetzel, "Senators Told of Guard Struggles," Seattle Times (October 20, 2005): B4.
- ⁶¹ Anne Marie Cusac, "An Army of Debt; While reservists and National Guard members risk their lives in Iraq, their families are risking bankruptcy at home," Metroland (April 15, 2004): 14.
- ⁶² Cave, "Time to Overhaul Bonus System," A15.
- ⁶³ Sarah Anderson, "Payback Time: How the Bush Administration is Snubbing or Rewarding Governments for their Positions on Iraq," (May, 12, 2003) Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, D.C. 20005.
- ⁶⁴ Paul Gilfeather, "Coalition of the Bribe, Bullied & Blind," Mirror.co.uk (March 22, 2003).
- ⁶⁵ Anderson et al., "Coalition of the Willing or Coalition of the Coerced?" (March 24, 2003) Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, D.C. 20005.
- ⁶⁶ Cam Simpson, "Australia, with Troops in Iraq, Gets Annual U.S. Visa Bonus of 10,500," Chicago Tribune (May 13, 2005): 4.
- ⁶⁷ Cam Simpson and Aamer Madhani, "U.S. Cash Fuels Human Trade," Chicago Tribune (October 9, 2005): 15.
- ⁶⁸ Mazzetti, "Leader of Army Reserve," A14.

-
- ⁶⁹ Peter W. Singer, “Outsourcing War,” Foreign Affairs (March 1, 2005): 125-26. See also, James Dao, “‘Outsourced’ or ‘Mercenary,’ He’s No Soldier,” New York Times (April 25, 2004): 4.3.
- ⁷⁰ Singer, “War, Profits, and the Vacuum of Law,” Columbia Journal of Transnational Law 42 (2004): 521-22.
- ⁷¹ Ann Scott Tyson, “Private Firms Take on More Military Tasks,” Christian Science Monitor (April 2, 2004): 3; Singer, “Warriors for Hire in Iraq,” Salon.com (April 15, 2004).
- ⁷² Singer, “Outsourcing War,” 128-29.
- ⁷³ Singer, “The Contract the Military Needs to Break,” Washington Post (September 12, 2004): B23.
- ⁷⁴ Singer, “Outsourcing War,” 128-30.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 127-28.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Henriques, “Seeking Quick Loans,” A1.