POSTRmagazine

Free

Counter-Culture Chronicle

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In honour of Timmy V.G. and Hunter S. Thompson

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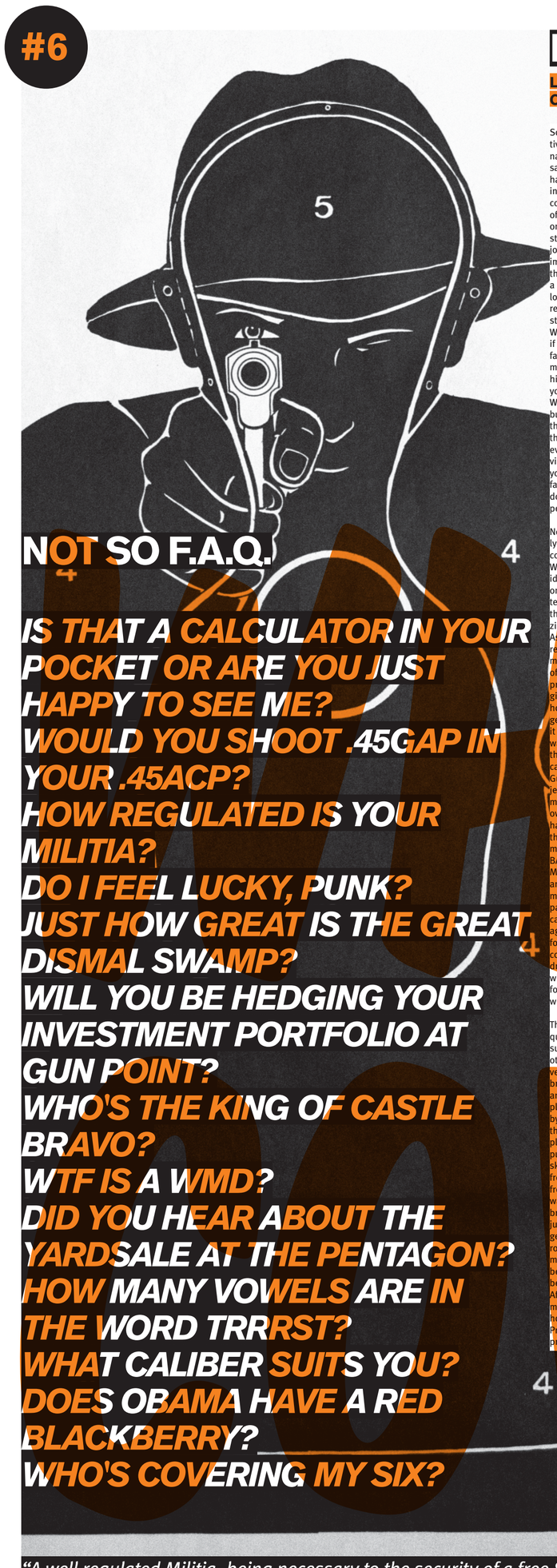


NOT SO F.A.Q.

IS THAT A CALCULATOR IN YOUR POCKET OR ARE YOU JUST HAPPY TO SEE ME?
WOULD YOU SHOOT .45GAP IN YOUR .45ACP?
HOW REGULATED IS YOUR MILITIA?
DO I FEEL LUCKY, PUNK?
JUST HOW GREAT IS THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP?
WILL YOU BE HEDGING YOUR INVESTMENT PORTFOLIO AT GUN POINT?
WHO'S THE KING OF CASTLE BRAVO?
WTF IS A WMD?
DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE YARDSALE AT THE PENTAGON?
HOW MANY VOWELS ARE IN THE WORD TRRRST?
WHAT CALIBER SUITS YOU?
DOES OBAMA HAVE A RED BLACKBERRY?
WHO'S COVERING MY SIX?

"A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is the part of the United States Bill of Rights that protects a right to keep and bear arms. Amendment II was adopted on December 15, 1791, along with the rest of the Bill of Rights. The American Bar Association has observed that there is more disagreement and less understanding about this right than of any other current issue regarding the Constitution.

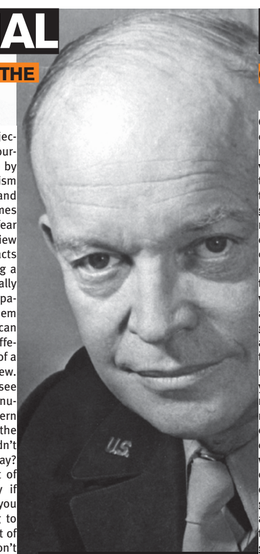
EDITORIAL

LOOKING THROUGH THE CROSSHAIRS

Some people would say that objectivity is the cornerstone of all journalism. Other people would reply by saying that the majority of journalism has become absolutely useless and ineffective thanks to our sometimes compulsive objectivity and our fear of taking a less fact-constrained view on things. Of course, getting the facts straight is the bottom line of being a journalist, but sometimes it's equally important to create a sense of empathy with your reader and to offer them a point of view from which they can look at the same scene from a different angle and see a different side of a story they thought they already knew. Well, try this one on for size and see if it fits: if you were a weapons manufacturer living in our modern Western model where maximizing profits is the highest good known to man, wouldn't you look at murder in a different way? Would you be prepared to go out of business and file for bankruptcy if that meant saving lives? Wouldn't you think that war was the best thing to ever happen, from a business point of view? Maybe you wouldn't, but don't you think it's possible that there are in fact people who do think that way? You do? Well then let's look at how those people would go to work.

Now when we think of war, we mostly think of nations fighting other countries and rebels fighting regimes. We think of war as a brutal clash of ideals, a desperate final measure we only resort to when politics have gotten so utterly corrupted or unbalanced that only the sound of bullets whizzing past does not fall upon deaf ears. As usual we have no idea of what's really going on. War has become so much more than the idealistic notion of conquering evil so that good shall prevail. Consider overhead cost. Logistics and maintenance. Food and housing. Regardless of every city that gets laid to ruins, what do you think it costs to ship 130,000 marines halfway across the world? Who do you think builds those gargantuan super carriers bobbing around in the Persian Gulf with ninety helicopter and military jets aboard each one of them? Governments buy their tools from privately owned companies who in general don't have any political motivation. Instead, they all share the same simple policy: maximize profits. Facts: the British BAE builds aircraft carriers, Lockheed Martin builds missiles and fighter jets and our very own Belgian FN Herstal makes guns. Just like a politician will pay a company to print out and set up campaign billboards. You don't have to agree with a client in order to bill him for what he's asking you to do; ask any copywriter, graphic designer or hairdresser. The product has nothing to do with the idea behind it; it's just a tool for making something else happen, whatever that something is.

The problem becomes evident fairly quick; if war is privatized it becomes subject to the same set of rules as any other branch of business. It gets advertised, not during the commercial break but on the evening news on Fox and during political debates. It gets plugged behind the scenes by lobbyists calling in favors from politicians they helped get elected. It is carefully planned and marketed to the general public until missiles soar through the skies and artillery shells rain down from heaven. It has nothing to do with freedom or evil or justice. Every new war we start, every armed conflict that breaks out, every bomb that drops is just a patch-up for a problem that only gets bigger with every new bullet that rolls of the conveyor belt. There are too many guns on this planet for there to be no war. With all the hardware that's been shipped over there, just living in Afghanistan makes it almost mathematically impossible for you not to be holding an AK-47. The Righteous Shall Prevail so they might as well make a profit while they're at it.



Eisenhower's Farewell Address to the Nation. January 17, 1961

"...Our military organization today bears little relation to that known by any of my predecessors in peacetime, or indeed by the fighting men of World War II or Korea.

Until the latest of our world conflicts, the United States had no armaments industry. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. Added to this, three and a half million men and women are directly engaged in the defense establishment. We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Akin to, and largely responsible for the sweeping changes in our industrial-military posture, has been the technological revolution during recent decades.

In this revolution, research has become central, it also becomes more formalized, complex, and costly. A steadily increasing share is conducted for, by, or at the direction of, the Federal government..."

FUNDS & AMMO

OR: HOW TO GET MORE BUCK FOR YOUR BANG

Guns and money make for a deadly combination, especially when you mix them around on an industrial level. To kick things off with a number: the annual US weapons budget is estimated at around 500 billion dollars, give or take. Now that is a lot of money for one civilized country to spend on weapons and apart from the direct economical implications that come to mind it raises some questions about the beneficiaries of this giant sum and what their true goals are. As usual, it's a matter of perspective: if you look at guns (in the broad sense of the word) as a means of conquering evil and a tool for establishing peace in troubled regions throughout the world then you could say that such an amount of money is completely justified, even necessary if you've taken on the role of the planet's peacekeeper. You can only hope that at some point you won't be needing these primitive and crude tools anymore. However, if you consider yourself a businessman and guns are your merchandise then that amount becomes something else; it turns into a figure that has profit margins attached to it. All of a sudden it comes with corporate sales figures aimed at optimizing your turnover, pie-charts that provide details about your end consumers and what new potential markets you could be moving into. Suddenly you need market studies, a public relations department, customer incentives, liability disclaimers and a brand identity.

Now it doesn't take a PR-executive to tell you that the brave, banner-waving Captain America-image is far more heroic and manlier and as such a lot easier to sell when compared to the cold, calculated approach of paradigm number two. Mathematics just doesn't have the same sex appeal; we want action figures, not math figures. So keep this in mind while you're reading this issue; there's a thin line between keeping the peace and keeping up profits and it's a line that has a bloody red DMZ of weapons embargoes and international conflicts on both sides of it. Every product has its effect on the world it gets sold in: Big Macs make people fat, guns make people dead. Scorched earth and dead civilians are merely the obesity and colon cancer of the weapons industry; they're a necessary evil if you're hoping to make a decent profit. Which means you have to advertise war in order to get your merchandise sold. And it becomes bloodcurdlingly clear that if guns are your trade, peace is bad for business.

This take on reality also explains why you don't need to expect an answer to the endearingly naïve question of why the US doesn't just spend half of its annual defense budget on humanitarian aid in order to get everybody to love them. Who needs love when you can get so filthy stinking rich you can turn the world's most powerful nation and its army into your personal goon squad?

GOOGLE MOTHERFUCKER DO YOU SPEAK IT

PUBLIC ENEMY N° WHO CARES

So if you're a weapons manufacturer in the wealthiest nation on Earth, how do you get your civilian public to support a war? Obviously the first thing you need is an enemy. WWII featured the Germans, truly an adversary of epic proportions: the NAZI's ran a tight Boot and were generally acknowledged as being evil. They sported some snazzy uniforms, were ahead of their time when it came to logos and slogans and of course an anally-retentive control freak with a skid mark on his upper lip as maniacal leader. In short, great marketing material for any defense department. Then the Russians became public enemy n°1, the Red Giant lying in wait to invade the US and force everybody to wear the same grey pajama's and eat government-approved cereal for breakfast. The great thing about the Cold War was that it expanded the market place to a global level: why wait until your enemy has occupied a nation when it's easier, cleaner and more profitable to turn those countries into allies and sell them a lot of guns so they can defend themselves? Harry Truman popularized the revolutionary term containment: if a country turns communist, you supply the countries on every side of it with enough tanks, gunships and military support to ensure regional security, loyalty to America and detente-based revenue for years to come. The concept paved the way for 40 years of blank checks for the defense department which in its turn handed out billion-dollar government contracts to their favorite corporate gunsmiths.

Every product is an answer to a need whether that need is natural or man-made. So if you want to sell guns you need people to be in need of weapons. Up until WWII this was mainly a matter of delivery-on-demand where ironsmiths and factories worked together to supply governments with the weapons they needed. But things changed; dropping a nuclear bomb on two Japanese cities was one of the first major landmarks in the history of the military-industrial complex. It showed the Russians what the US were technically and mentally capable of doing in order to establish themselves as the man with the biggest plutonium-charged penis. On August 6th 1945, at 8h15 local time, the 393d Bombardment Squadron B-29 Enola Gay dropped the "Little Boy" bomb over Hiroshima with the device missing its initial target and instead exploding over Shima Surgical Clinic, killing around 80,000 people immediately. Some estimates claim that by 1950 the radiation diseases and other long-term effects such as cancer and leukemia had raised that number up to 200,000. Call us cynical but that is one revolutionary piece of viral marketing. It only took two bombs to keep our heads buzzing for half a century to come. They sparked the beginning of an arms race that made the entire world hold its breath until the bricks in the Berlin Wall came crumbling down. They eventually caused the entire USSR to go bankrupt and turned half a communist planet into a new playground for the free market model. One of the pinnacles of this particularly exclusive and highly expensive branch of weapons technology is the Peacekeeper missile, designed and developed by US scientists in 1985. The Peacekeeper is an intercontinental ballistic missile (or ICBM) that can hold up to 10 separate warheads with a destructive force of 300 kilotons each (that means 10 times 25 times Hiroshima, go ahead and let that mental image sink in for a second).

Call us cynical but bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was one revolutionary piece of viral marketing.

If you take a small step back and look at the ideological and tactical-strategic concept behind the Peacekeeper Missile, you might be inclined to say: "Hey. Are you out of your fucking mind?" Seriously, just one of these things can take out the entire European west coast and at one point in time the US had fifty of these continent-killers in its arsenal, pointed at nobody in particular. Sounds insane, no? Now take a further step back and you'll see that if you look at the bigger picture, there's nothing about the Peacekeeper that is more warped, deformed or completely out of control than the rest of what you're looking at. In a world where lobbyists constantly promote war to senators and dirty communists threaten your sacred way of life, those missiles are not even one bit out of place. Fact of interest: the Peacekeeper missile was ordered by none other than the 40th president of the US, Ronald 'The Great Communicator' Reagan, the man who went on national television and called the Soviet Union an 'Evil Empire' and struck fear into communist hearts with the 'Star Wars' program (setting up a network of armed satellites that would be able to take out ICBM's with molecule-vaporizing laser cannons or some other yet-to-be-conceived Doomsday device). But wait, you say, wasn't he the one who shook hands with Gorbachev thereby setting the stage for a whole new era of post-Cold War peace and unity? Yes, he was. Ronald Reagan effectively ended a war by pushing America's military budget to unprecedented heights. He became a peacemaker by continually building things like the Peacekeeper and a fleet of B-1 bombers until the USSR collapsed under the weight of its own military arsenal. He then struck another blow by gently persuading Saudi Arabia to drop its oil prices, thereby putting even more strain on the already faltering Soviet economy which had already been utterly exhausted by the incessant increase of its military forces. But we'll remember him for his great smile and impeccable haircut, not for building giant bombs and the whole Iran-Contra affair.

WAR IS A MARKETPLACE

In short, after Little Boy and Fat Man leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki it didn't take a lot of effort to convince the general public that the only way to be safe was to always have a bigger bomb than the Russians on standby. This in its turn caused the Russians to develop a bigger bomb and so on and so on, until the nomenklatura's eventually ran out of money to spend and products to deprive their comrades of. Some people will say there are no winners in an arms race and maybe that is true. The Cold War achieved nothing except a global state of paranoia, a lot of physical and economical casualties and a military budget that dwarfed the costs of WWII. But a budget is just a big word for a bill and every bill has a collector on the business end of it. Any public benefit whatsoever was non-existent but weapons development is a private business and even without any actual bombs dropping, business was booming. However, there is one thing you shouldn't forget: the people who currently claim to be our Planetary Police force are just the temporary board of directors of the only company that ever put its nuclear arsenal to use. Considering the fact that Japan no longer posed a real military threat to the Allied Nations, one could get the impression that they mainly dropped those two bombs in order to prove a point; namely to tell the Soviets that America was prepared to go the distance in order to be number one. The nukes that exploded over Japan gave new meaning to the term military-industrial complex, pissed Stalin off to no end and in addition to that they kicked off an arms race that would rage on for at least 40 years before tensions subsided even the tiniest bit. It was with good reason that president Dwight Eisenhower used his farewell address to the nation to warn the American public about the exponentially growing weapons industry; he realized that the arms industry had become necessary in the aftermath of WWII but also understood what that meant in a nation that would for the foreseeable future be on the brink of an all-destroying war with the communist giant it shared the planet with. He saw the infectious nature of capitalism and the implied danger of an industrial-sized weapons manufacturer with a need for turnover. Peace does not sell bullets and any CEO worth his paycheck will look for a way to make his company grow, whatever it is that company does. Sadly, the American public (or any other public for that matter) does not exactly get to share its opinion (whatever that opinion may be) with the people who decide whether or not it's a good idea to spend $70 million on a single missile.

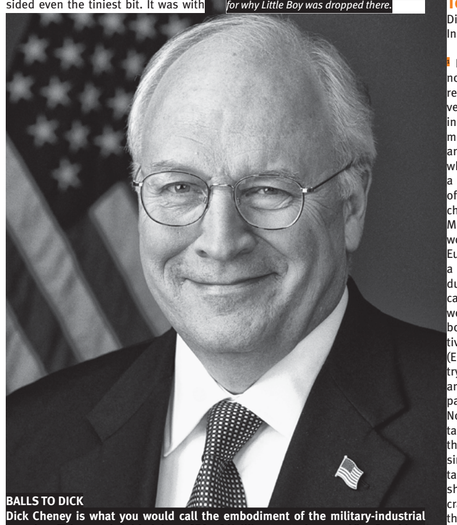
So then what happened after the fall of the Iron Curtain? The division of the world could start anew and this time there were no Russian diplomats around to shoo off US-friendly lobbyists and corporate scouts who showed up waving contracts and offering military support against potentially crazy neighboring states like Iraq and North Korea. The concept of the 'rogue nation' was introduced, a new type of enemy mostly governed by a blatantly evil dictator (c.q. Saddam Hussein). The rogue nation sits on the world map like a ticking time bomb so there is no time to be wasted arguing about what to do with it. Let the humanitarians sort out the rubble after it has been disarmed. Why only 'liberate' Iraq and not North Korea? Because Kim Jong-Il wasn't sitting on the oil you'd been so carefully lobbying for, that's why. Saddam's attitude of 'my country, my oil' did not fit into the US geopolitical dream of one Arabian world under the Mighty Dollar, especially after he nationalized the Iraqi Petroleum Company. The IPC was a company that was jointly owned by a handful of European oil magnates, governments (the British government owned 50% through its control of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company) and other companies like Holland's number one, Shell. Mainly people who were still getting rich from British colonial efforts after WWI. Yes, in case you did not know, Iraq had been a British colony from 1920 to 1932; didn't you people see Lawrence of Arabia? Now we all know that Saddam was a certified psycho who used biochemical weapons against Kurdish civilians and his own population, but we should also know that Iraq was 'liberated' due to geopolitical motives, not humanitarian ones. History's web of greed and betrayal is weaved from a million threads and the spiders that crawl around in it have been sucking blood for longer than any of us have been watching the evening news.

THERE EMBARGOES THE NEIGBORHOOD

By now, the whole Middle East is no longer the arms dealers' wet dream; throughout the years it has grown into an intercontinental gangbang of geopolitics and modern day capitalizing on history's fuckups. We for one do not expect American troops to be pulling out just yet, at least not until the region has been stabilized or until the West's blind thirst for more oil is somehow quenched. So Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, watch where you're walking with that enriched uranium you're supposed to be getting from Turkey soon, there might be some people lying in wait to seize exactly that opportunity to rev up the old fear-machine and gain some public support for kicking in your door with those big army issue boots of theirs. Might as well, especially since they're already in the neighborhood, no?

If at one point your sales pitch doesn't take anymore, you just wave the bill around and offer to take care of the check if people will just stop asking annoying questions. Blood money is still the only kind of dirty laundry you can hang out to dry without staining your public image. The most important thing to do is to keep a war going, on whatever front possible, so people and politicians have something else to be outraged about while your factories keep on shipping guns and ammo to troubled regions worldwide. It's like mailing matchboxes to oil spills, at some time, in some place, somebody is going to set something on fire and you'll be able to put out the flames. Now before anyone accuses anyone of being a bunch of leftist, conspiracy-theory-hatching crackpots: we're not implying that some shady, faceless inner circle of right-wing ex-generals and corporate commanders conscientiously maneuvered the US and by extension the rest of the planet into 60 years of guns going off. But it sure would make a lot of things make a lot more sense that any official press statement made during the past half century.

Footnote:
The city of Hiroshima housed one of the most secret facilities of Unit 731 where Japanese scientists conducted research into the development of chemical and biological weapons, producing over six kilotons of mustard gas. During the 1930's, the island it was located on was even removed from maps in order to hide its existence. This does shed a different shade of fiery red on the bombing of Hiroshima and possible ulterior motives for why Little Boy was dropped there.



BALLS TO DICK
Dick Cheney is what you would call the embodiment of the military-industrial complex. This man left his job as CEO of Halliburton to become Vice President of the US and basically handed every contract he could get his greedy, sweaty hands on to the company he left only months earlier. Cheney is what's wrong with the free market in the pudgy, pale flesh. The only conflict he ever solved was his own conflict of interest, requesting no less than five deferments to avoid going to Vietnam when he was drafted, achieving his last bailout by getting his wife pregnant.

President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev at the first Summit in Geneva Switzerland.

Blackwater working at the Republican Palace in Bagdad, Iraq.

KNEE-DEEP IN THE MURKY WATERS OF PRIVATE SECURITY

Go hiking through the Great Dismal Swamp on the border of North Carolina and Virginia and you might stumble upon something you'd never expect to find in a National Wildlife Reserve. One second you're enjoying nature, watching sunlight fall through the leaves and listening to the songs of birds and all of sudden, you'll find yourself standing in the middle of what looks like a village that was only recently a war zone. Deserted streets strewn with empty bullet shells and abandoned wooden houses, riddled with impact holes from machine guns and grenades. But none of these houses will have curtains behind their windows and none of the doorbells will have any names next to them. The whole place looks like an entire prefab ghost town; built, occupied and liberated in just one day. You won't find a single drop of blood here.

Welcome to Little Baghdad, the main training facility of Xe Services, formerly known as Blackwater Worldwide; the world's largest private military company that provides highly trained 'contractors' to an exclusive clientele consisting mainly of US or US-friendly governments, embassies, diplomats and private companies such as BP who currently employ Blackwater and their private warship (bought from the US Navy after it was decommissioned) to protect their oil tankers from Somalian pirates in the Gulf of Aden. Their personnel consists mainly of former military personnel like Special Forces and Navy SEALS but also include police officers and SWAT members freelancing to make some extra money outside office hours. They are the kind of hitmen for hire whose job contract comes with a health plan and liability disclaimer. In short, these guys are what you would call corporate mercenaries.

Blackwater was founded in 1997 by Erik Prince; an active Navy Seal who suddenly inherited a fortune when his father, the founder of the company that invented the lighted vanity mirror for cars, had died unexpectedly two years earlier. The Prince-family was the kind of family for whom the Republican Party just wasn't republican enough; the outer feathers on right-wing America, the type of hardliner Christians who believe more in casting a holy flame of Divine Vengeance than turning the other cheek. Erik Prince served as a White House intern under the first Bush (senior) administration but left when he felt that the President and the rest of the Neocons were going soft on him. He did not agree with inviting in homosexual groups, passing the Clean Air Act and other hippie-esque policymaking not worthy of the name Republican. When the death of his father made him rich, Prince ended his career with the Navy Seals to make time for his family and hatch a plan that would make him richer than his father had ever been. He bought 24 km2 of marshy wasteland in North Carolina and along with a few of his military friends started up Blackwater, a private security firm that would not only offer special additional training programs to military and police personnel but could also provide their own operatives to do the armies' job. Well, that's Prince's version of the story; other co-founders are now contesting that version, saying Prince mainly supplied the required funds while they came up with the ideological (ha!) concept. Business started off fairly slow but increased quickly thanks to the companies' obvious connections to top brass military, politicians and private companies of all sorts. And then there was 9/11.

LICENSE TO BILL

We can make a long story a lot shorter by giving you the numbers right away: Blackwater's annual revenue bounded from a measly $200,000 per year pre-Iraq to a flourishing $600 million in 2007 and increasingly more after that. We're not implying anything; we're just reading out facts and figures. The company is currently building several new high-tech training facilities in the US and raking in very lucrative contracts (one of which for $2,5 billion, shared with two other private security firms) for every oil company that gets one of its tankers hijacked or embassy that gets a stone thrown at its bullet-proof windows. They are a well-organized corporate structure with a customer support service and very user-friendly website (which has an About-section that sounds like the standard PR template promo-text thanks to some very clean, euphemistic and non-descript copywriting). The main difference is that they don't just supply the guns; they supply entire squads of marksman-level shooters to go with them, complete with top-of-the-line military equipment, backed up by planes, helicopters, unmanned drones and artillery support. Blackwater could successfully invade a small country and take down a regime that is deemed unfit by whoever can come up with the required budget (going off on a tangent; maybe we should all pitch in to hire Blackwater to take down our own epically failing government).

Think of the Dirty Dozen with a pension plan.

Blackwater operatives are among the most highly trained military forces on the planet which makes them expensive to hire but also very effective. The question that needs answering is: do we really want it to be legal for there to be an army that does not need to answer to anyone? Once you go Blackwater, things become very murky on a legal level. How does a nation court martial a soldier that's not in its own army? Blackwater contractors seem to operate with total impunity since they have no real chain of command that they must answer to and the people they work for don't seem to find it necessary to hold them accountable. If the job gets done, the job gets done – no questions asked. But if that job entails putting 50 bullets through the windshield of an Iraqi civilian that drove a bit too close to your motorcade, those questions might indeed need asking. And make no mistake, this happens. These are the kind of 'incidents' that give your company such a bad name that an angry mob will partake in hanging the burned bodies of your employees from a bridge in Fallujah (March 31, 2004). It all depends on what the company policy is and in this case, those policies do not coincide with for example the Geneva Conventions. Because according to Prince, most of the people his company is fighting "don't know where Geneva is, let alone that there was ever a convention there."

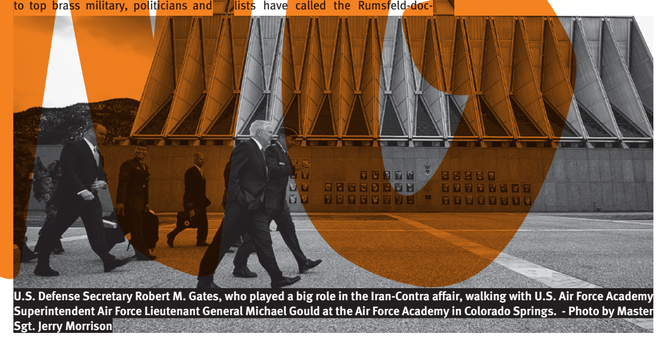
OBSCENITY PREVAILS

Erik Prince and Blackwater profited greatly from what political journalists have called the Rumsfeld-doctrine; a strategic military approach in which small numbers of highly trained ground troops scout the terrain in order to provide detailed information which can then be applied to conduct bombing attacks. A small military force equipped with all kinds of superior technology. The idea is based on striking at crucial points and leaving a small footprint while achieving maximum efficiency. Of course every doctrine sounds great and really smart in theory but in reality, the bombs that were supposed to be pinpointed right in the middle of some terrorist leader's unibrow mainly killed civilians and turned a lot of hearts and minds very bitter. It does however reduce the number of required military personnel and increases the need for unmanned drones, military jets and Stealth bombers; the kind of stuff you buy from a weapons manufacturer. If you're already going down that path, employing Blackwater and other security firms to protect US Administrator Paul Bremer makes perfect sense. Supposedly.

We realize that discussing security matters is always a walk on a very thin line; a well-regulated militia is indeed a necessity in order to keep whatever sort of peace there may be, but Blackwater and by extension the entire world of private security is much more than that. It does not take a lot of imagination to conjure up an image of the things that can and will go very wrong if your posse's political beliefs are mainly based on making a profit and the less lovable parts of the Bible. We're not talking about a bunch of rogue rednecks waving flags and shotguns, this is a private army of highly trained, well-equipped elite soldiers backed up by an armada of corporate lawyers providing legal cover. Think of the Dirty Dozen with a pension plan. Blackwater has a variety of divisions, each one with their own specialty and training grounds; naval combat training for sailors, driving courses for car escorts and motorcades, a canine unit that trains dogs for sniffing out explosives and narcotics and the list goes on. Our personal favourite amongst Blackwater's business units is Greystone, a private security firm registered in Barbados that employs third country nationals through yet another affiliate firm called Satelles Solutions, Inc. That entire sentence just reeks of legal loophole.

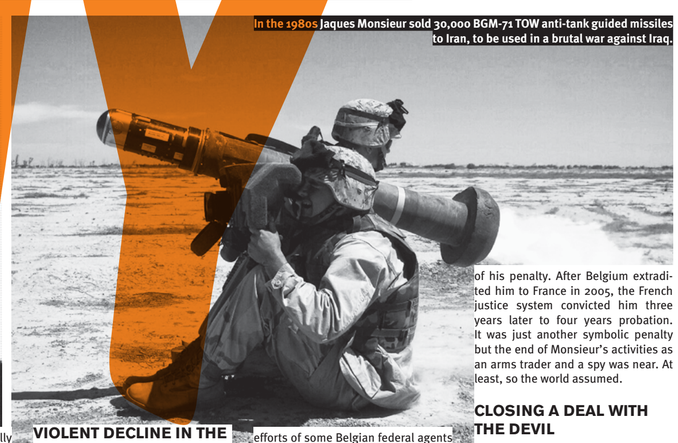
Blackwater is just the jagged tip of an iceberg that is steadily increasing in size and on a crash-course with every code of ethics regarding armed conflicts. Since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, private security firms have been popping up everywhere and even if their contractors are not preventively shooting innocent civilians or drunkenly killing Iraqi military personnel (yes, that also happened, October 2006), it's not a good plan. Even in the case of Dick Cheney's Halliburton (whose personnel only provide logistical services) it's not fair to every soldier who does the same job but gets a shitty pay instead of $200,000 per year. Especially if it turns out those private firms are doing a lousy job and overcharging taxpayers while doing so. And once you start giving these guys guns, a bonus per bullet fired and a license to kill, you're setting the backdrop for all sorts of crimes against humanity.

Already being continued all around you.



U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, who played a big role in the Iran-Contra affair, walking with U.S. Air Force Academy Superintendent Air Force Lieutenant General Michael Gould at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. - Photo by Master Sgt. Jerry Morrison

SEND LAWYERS, GUNS AND MONEY



In the 1980s Jaques Monsieur sold 30,000 BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missiles to Iran, to be used in a brutal war against Iraq.

The clumsy nation wherefrom this piece of editorial artillery is being discharged might seem nothing but a tiny player in the global game of war. But the Truth is that when it comes to both legal and illegal gun trafficking, Belgium is situated high up on the international charts. For many years our government tried to avoid any form of violent involvement in the world's toughest battles while the true faces of evil were incessantly gazing and gaining underneath this seemingly peaceful surface, always ready to assess, intervene and exploit any conflict that is ransacking our world.

If all goes well, Jacques Monsieur will be back in his villa in France breeding quality horses before the beginning of this summer.

Aptly nicknamed the Field Marshal, Jacques Monsieur had a considerable impact on some of the world's bloodiest wars of the last decades. He's included in a sinister list of international scofflaws who made a living out of warfare as he is believed to be among the biggest arms traffickers in Europe. While strolling the path of impunity he followed for decades, Monsieur violated UN arms embargoes as if they were simple traffic rules, sometimes with the approving wink of government officials. But ironically enough, these same officials are now trying to get rid of the erstwhile essential shackles that Monsieur and his fellow old-fashioned arms dealers used to be. The Field Marshal is currently awaiting trial in the Baldwin County jail close to Mobile, Alabama after he was framed and arrested by undercover agents in New York in 2009. One year earlier American DEA agents had already arrested the notorious Victor 'Lord of War' Bout – with whom he had cooperated through his company Joy Slovakia – during a similar operation. While these two men await their trial, Mönzer Al-Kassar (aka the Prince of Marbella) was already arrested, convicted and sentenced to thirty years imprisonment for dealings with alleged arms suppliers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

But were these men framed or just fucked over by the people once protecting them from legal scrutiny? It seems that the players in this dirty game are about to be replaced and one could wonder whether or not this attempt by the US to clean up its own mess has something to do with the ongoing war on terror. Maybe these arms dealers simply do not fit into the picture anymore? Whatever the case, the cruel and highly profitable market of war and weaponry, which appears to be foggier than the city of Al Hajarah in Yemen, goes on undisturbed. And this already impenetrable tangle of illegal governmental deals and Machiavellian arms merchants will only get more complicated and remain unrevealed before finally crashing and crumbling down with the rest of our planet.

VIOLENT DECLINE IN THE MOTHER OF CONTINENTS

Little is known about the illegal activities of Jacques Monsieur. He was born in Halle in 1953 as the son of a notary and achieved his Law Degree before he started working for the Belgian Military Intelligence and Security Staff Department (ACOS IS). Soon he would share his knack for spying with similar departments in the United States, Israel and France. Becoming a spy for those nations allowed him to create a clear picture and to gain exclusive know-how on the field of funds and ammo. As Jacques Monsieur smelled big money, he started his death-dealing business in the mid 1980's when he sold 30,000 BGM-71 TOW guided anti-tank missiles to Iran to be used in a brutal war against Iraq. This deadly cargo with a price tag of 83 million dollars actually belonged to the US military who had given these missiles to Israel. It turned out to be an operation that fitted in a complicated scheme that is written down in history books as the Iran-Contra affair or simply Irangate. It would be the start of an anonymous course of illegal weapons traffic and million dollar deals during which Monsieur managed to escape the righteous hand of justice every time. Of course, it's highly assumable that Monsieur was permanently protected by high-ranking officials considering the almighty network he was able to set up as a vicious, globetrotting informer. Still it raises questions about why our national politicians never even considered tracking down this unscrupulous vulture that was indirectly involved with the brutal killing of thousands of people. Despite the efforts of some Belgian federal agents who already proved his plans to export a batch of grenade launchers in 1986, it took until the late 1990's before Belgian and French law enforcement authorities knocked on his door in France with a search warrant.

The end of his reign as an arms trader was already inevitable the moment Monsieur became heavily involved with the scandals around the French oil company Elf in 1997. After Belgium became too risky to serve as a secure home base, Jacques Monsieur's strong ties with the French external intelligence agency DGSE (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure) had made him move to the city of Bourges, France in 1993. For years he lived there in the open, dwelling in a luxurious mansion as a breeder of Lusitanian horses. In the meanwhile he continued and expanded his illegal business by shipping 60 million dollars in helicopters, rockets, missiles and bombs to Congo-Brazzaville. This gigantic deal was commissioned by Elf and involved some French top politicians who – according to their hidden agenda – attempted to regain access to the rich oil reserves after sub-Saharan Africa and Algeria gained independence. Officially investigated by the French justice system, Monsieur tried to escape to Teheran but was almost immediately arrested upon his arrival at the airport. Iran sentenced him to ten years imprisonment for spying in favor of Belgium and the US but Monsieur only did 18 months. Although a Belgian judge sentenced him to another 40 months of prison as soon as he returned, he was never sent to jail because his time in Iran would count as the effective part of his penalty. After Belgium extradited him to France in 2005, the French justice system convicted him three years later to four years probation. It was just another symbolic penalty but the end of Monsieur's activities as an arms trader and a spy was near. At least, so the world assumed.

CLOSING A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

In August 2009, Jacques Monsieur was arrested in New York after flying in from France. The Belgian arms dealer was charged by a federal grand jury with six counts of conspiracy, smuggling, money laundering and violating weapons-trafficking laws and export controls related to a US trade embargo in Iran. In February 2009, Monsieur contacted a person he thought could supply him with engines for F-5 fighter or C-130 cargo transport aircrafts. The supplier turned out to be an undercover agent of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) which has a unit to prevent terrorist groups and countries hostile to the US from getting their hands on US weaponry and technology. Although Monsieur subsequently met with undercover agents in Paris and London, it's questionable why a cunning businessman with years of experience in the field would suddenly rush to the US for a questionable deal of outdated weaponry with Iran. A complex undercover US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operation had already convinced Viktor Bout he was selling weapons to a Colombian group, finally leading to his arrest in Thailand. The entire story grows even more questionable when you consider that both Monsieur and Bout often arranged illegitimate arms deals with the approval of the US.

Monsieur was initially facing 65 years in prison but an agreement with the U.S. government shows that given a worse case scenario he will go to prison for five years which he will probably be allowed to sit out in Belgium. So if all goes well, Jacques Monsieur will be back in his villa in France breeding quality horses in a perfume of lavender before the beginning of this summer. But how is it possible that a man with such an incriminating track record manages to alleviate his charges to such extent? We've tried to find the answer by calling Monsieur's lawyer Arthur J. Madden who's based in Mobile, Alabama and who turned out to be a man who keeps his lips very, very sealed. 'I never discuss any matters regarding my clients. That's my standard practice. All documents are available online and they speak for themselves. As for his penalty I wouldn't speculate on that, nor will I reveal how or why I took on this case.'

Although we never saw the official charges as they are stored on a protected government website, the answer is quite simple. Arms traders are middle men who serve the interests of Western intelligence services and corporate elites. The only thing that matters in their backroom deals is tipping the balance in armed conflicts for the benefit of business interests. Both Robert Gates, currently serving as the US Secretary of Defense and Richard Holbrooke, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan under the Obama administration played lead roles in the Iran-Contra affair as well as in the bloody conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia. Monsieur later claimed to have shipped weapons to these war zones, thus violating UN embargoes with the approval of both the CIA and the French DST. Naturally, both these men aren't exactly anxious to see Monsieur in a court room, dropping their respective names every other minute. Belgian investigative media reported that on Wednesday November 23, 2009, the American government and Jacques Monsieur arranged a deal outside of court. Most of the charges have been inexplicably dropped and Monsieur will be only accused of conspiracy to smuggle parts of the F-5 fighter to Iran, the lightest charge available in this case. So when the judge bangs that hammer on June 21st, we still won't have the faintest clue as to what really happened.

THE EXPERTS

QUESTIONS:
1. Do you think the Military Industrial Complex is necessary and why (not)?
2. Isn't it questionable that weapons are becoming part of the logic of the market like other consumer goods?
3. Do you think a weapons manufacturer would stop it's business if that meant world peace?
4. Was the end of the cold war good or bad for the trade in weapons?

Tomas Baum
Director of the Flemish Peace Institute.

In a perfect world weapons would not be needed and conflicts would be resolved through dialogue. I'm however not an idealist. I am aware that in the world we are living in today, most people feel military capabilities are needed and also need to be used when necessary. Accordingly there is a market that takes care of the supply of arms and weapon systems. But the challenge is to control this so-called Military Industrial Complex so that it won't start living a live of its own. In Europe we now note efforts to create a European wide shared military industrial base. In the nineties it became clear that armed forces in Europe were depending too much on the US, both for material needs and for effective operations. Since 2004 the EDA (European Defense Agency) has been trying to provide for more integration and increasing the joined military capacities of European member states. Now the European Commission has taken up the gauntlet by liberalizing the market for defense products. I sincerely believe this will have a substantial impact. The problem that we should address is the degree of democratic control of what is happening in the area of defense and security. One cannot say there is a culture of transparency when defense and security are concerned. Still, most of the time it are governments buying the products, with tax-payers money. They should be held accountable. Every aspect of a democratic society is being controlled, but foreign policy, national security and defense the least. So I do not plead against the existence of a relationship between the military and the industry, however it should not be too intimate.

The trade in strategic goods, as we call them, is being regulated through a control regime. So foreign trade in military material or civil goods that could contribute to the development of weapons of mass destruction is regulated. To give an example: it is not easy to export nuclear technology to Iran from a European country nowadays. These strategic goods are not traded in a free market system. Still you are right to question the increased liberalization of the market for military and security goods. The logic of profit and the quality of security as global public good are not that easily wed. Should we promote a European wide shared military industrial base just for meeting our own defense needs, or should we develop it with a view to export to countries outside the EU? Recently another important shift has occurred: the demand for classic defense products went down and the demand for security products went up. Earlier, states protected themselves mainly against other enemy states that where situated beyond the border, whereas today protection is focusing more and more within the state itself, often by using cutting edge technology. These goods that can be used for domestic oppression within Europe and elsewhere are under much less scrutiny. Society seems increasingly in the grip of this amalgam of security products. The defense industry has understood this shift very well and adapted to the new trend. Big industry fares increasingly focus on these new security products. Governments are rather purchasing 'intelligent' security camera installations than investing in a new set of fighter jets. The economic crisis dictates the making of choices. The move to securitizing the domestic area makes me feel uncomfortable: I don't like to live in a society wherein every aspect of my relations with other people can be controlled.

Of course, if they amount of money for the pay off is big enough. But, FN Herstal is an interesting case. The company is owned by the Walloon government, so it would be interesting to ask them what they would do with this question. One should, however not forget that in Liege the production of weaponry goes back a long way, it is a part of the local culture. Liege was already center of weapon manufacturing during the 17th and 18th century so it is a self-evident presence