

Bombings Bring U.S. 'Executive Mercenaries' Into the Light

By William D. Hartung | May 16, 2003

You had probably never heard of the Vinnell Corp. before the brutal bombing that killed at least nine of its employees in Saudi Arabia this week, but you should have.

This is the second time Vinnell's Saudi operations have been targeted. The first attack, in November 1995, hit the headquarters of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, or SANG, and a nearby office complex that housed Vinnell employees. Though both attacks were decried by U.S. officials as senseless violence, they actually had a chillingly clear, brutal logic.

Vinnell's job in Saudi Arabia is to train the national guard, which *Jane's Defense Weekly* has described as "a kind of Praetorian Guard for the House of Saud, the royal family's defense of last resort against internal opposition." That is why company employees were targeted in 1995 and again last week. The story of how an obscure American firm ended up becoming an integral part of the Saudi monarchy's handpicked internal security force is a case study in how unaccountable private companies have become a central tool of U.S. foreign policy.

Vinnell was founded in 1931 as a small Los Angeles-area construction firm. According to a 1975 profile of the company in the *New York Times*, the firm's early growth was tied to the building of the LA freeway system, work on the Grand Coulee Dam, and the construction of Dodger Stadium.

But by the end of World War II, the company was already dabbling in military work, funneling guns to Chiang Kai-shek to fuel his efforts to displace the communist regime in Beijing. In a memoir, former CIA operative Wilbur Crane Eveland described using his title as Vinnell vice president as a cover while working in Africa and the Middle East in the early 1960s.

Vinnell's military contracts took off after that. The *Times'* article reported that the company landed work building military airfields in Okinawa, Taiwan, Thailand, South Vietnam, and Pakistan. At the

height of the Vietnam conflict, Vinnell had 5,000 personnel in that country. According to a March 1975 article in the *Village Voice* that quoted an anonymous Pentagon source, the company did everything from base construction to military operations. The source described Vinnell as "our own little mercenary army in Vietnam."

Also in 1975, the company received a \$77-million contract to train the Saudi National Guard. The deal raised eyebrows at the time both among Senate hawks like Henry Jackson and John C. Stennis—who questioned the propriety of a private company undertaking such a sensitive military training mission—and reformers like then-Wisconsin Rep. Les Aspin, who found evidence suggesting Vinnell had used a middleman to bribe Saudi officials for the contract. When Peter Arnett, then an Associated Press reporter, asked one of Vinnell's "men in Riyadh" whether he viewed himself as a mercenary he was told: "[W]e are not pulling the triggers. We train people to pull the triggers. Perhaps that makes us executive mercenaries."

There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that at times Vinnell employees went beyond "training people to pull the triggers." In 1979, when a rebellion rocked the Saudi regime and opposition forces occupied the Grand Mosque at Mecca, Vinnell "trainers" were reportedly on the scene, helping to coordinate the Saudi military response. By 1981, when Ronald Reagan declared that he would not let Saudi Arabia become "another Iran," Vinnell's role in propping up the regime had become even more critical.

The question now is what to do about companies like Vinnell, which is currently a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman Mission Systems, and which received a new \$831-million, five-year contract in 1998.

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There have been recriminations in recent days about whether Saudi officials did enough to protect the Vinnell compound, but these criticisms miss the larger point: Why is it necessary for a U.S. company to play such a central role in training the Saudi regime's Praetorian Guard? And if the hired "protectors" of the Saudi regime can't even protect their own employees in the kingdom, has the time come to rethink the U.S. commercial/military presence in Riyadh?

Just as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has suggested decreasing the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia, it may be time to look at reducing the role of private military companies there as well.

As the second attack on Vinnell in eight years suggests, in the context of Saudi society, the presence of "executive mercenaries" is apparently no less provocative than the presence of uniformed personnel.

While we're looking at the Saudi situation, let's also review the wisdom of using private military companies

like Vinnell, DynCorps, and Halliburton to do everything from bombing drug labs in Colombia to rebuilding Iraq. If we are going to rely more heavily on these firms to carry out U.S. policies, let's at least set some clear ground rules for their operations, to ensure a higher level of transparency and accountability.

Curbing the privatization of our foreign policy would be good for our democracy, good for America's global reputation, and good for the employees of companies like Vinnell, who have all too often been put in harm's way.

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