



BOOK REVIEW

Missing in Action

One Nation Under Contract by Allison Stanger

Reviewed by David Isenberg

Of all the books published about private military and security contractors in recent years, with more coming out all the time, few really understand the phenomenon of outsourcing roles that were formerly the preserve of government.

Either they are academic theses and dissertations rewritten for public consumption, such as Peter Singer's *Corporate Warriors*, a rare useful book on the subject; ill-concealed hysterical jeremiads masquerading as dispassionate journalism, such as Jeremy Scahill's over-the-top fulminations against Blackwater; or

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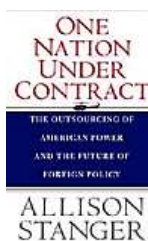
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breathless "I was there taking fire in the sandbox" memoirs from conflict zones.

Not many authors have paused to consider exactly what is going on. To paraphrase what was said about the US intelligence community after the September 11, 2001, attacks, they don't [connect the dots](#). Finally someone has.

That someone is Allison Stanger, professor of [international politics](#) and economics at Middlebury [College](#) in the United States.

Stanger points out firstly that private [contractors](#) are working for more parts of the US government than just the Pentagon or State Department. Secondly, contrary to popular assumptions, most private contractors working in areas that used to be the exclusive preserves of government, such as foreign policy, military and intelligence sectors, [homeland security](#), or foreign aid, are not a bunch of unscrupulous greed heads, although they are certainly in pursuit of profit.



Stanger does not only focus on the for-profit private contractors doing military and security work. She also looks at the Department of Homeland Security, and the non-profit players working in the [development](#) field. When foreign aid contributions by the private sector dwarf those of the US Agency for International Development, and in any case most of USAID's work is done by contractors, one wonders what the point of it is.

The ubiquitousness of such contractors is a sign that something both revolutionary and global in scope is happening that can only become more prevalent.

As Stanger recognizes, what is going on is essentially a manifestation of globalization. She notes:

Globalization and our penchant for privatization have transformed power itself, expanding the range of options for individuals to make a difference.

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When Washington outsources so much of its work in the private sector, the old debate about the size of government is rendered moot. We don't need big government or small government. We need good government. And good government in the information age will harness all the networks at its disposal to advance the public interest.

Since privatization is intimately connected to globalization, one can't do away with the former without damaging the latter.

The problem of most commentators, regardless of whether they are supporters or critics of outsourcing and privatization, is outmoded thinking. They are like the old war planners who used to worry about the Soviet Union overrunning Western Europe and not having a clue that the real threat was non-governmental groups like al-Qaeda.

The very definition of power in the 21st century has changed. While outsourcing has its problems, it can also be a source of creative bottom-up initiatives with an undeniable foreign policy impact. With Bono of the rock group U2 fighting AIDS in Africa, Walmart promoting energy efficiency, and Al Gore moving forward the global debate over [climate change](#), foreign policy isn't just for diplomats anymore.

This post-Cold War collection of actors constitutes a new kind of empire, one that has no ruler or subjects. It is truly a coalition of the willing. While it would not exist without the American contribution, the US does not control it. That makes outsourcing both inviting and unpredictable. It advances its [interests](#) through the power of ideals: economic freedom, equality of opportunity and sustainability.

This global empire could, in Stanger's view, work for the benefit of all. But doing so would have to first acknowledge that the current practice of unenlightened outsourcing creates an enormous accountability vacuum that has enabled gross fiscal irresponsibility, dangerous apathy among the public, and the "inadvertent" militarization of foreign policy. "Inadvertent" likely gives too much the benefit of the doubt to American policymakers, but that is secondary to Stanger's thesis.

It is a sign of how ideologues have dominated the debate over the role of government in society in the past few decades that her diagnosis of the pros and cons is really quite unsurprising. To argue, as she does, that "outsourcing as presently practiced is scandalous, but turning the clock back and reasserting top-down government control though it is no solution", something that Ronald Reagan and Al Gore could agree on.

Essentially, Stanger is not just calling for limits on what contractors can do, as do many critics. She is also calling for government to step up to the plate to resume its role as the irreplaceable "chief custodian of the public interest". Anybody who has even cursorily studied this issue in recent years and read the reports from auditing agencies such as the US Government Accountability Office, the Defense Contracting Audit Agency, the Defense Contracting [Management](#) Agency, various agency inspector generals and listened to congressional hearings understands that government has been missing in action.

Stanger correctly notes that it is easy to point fingers. But that risks missing the forest for the trees. She writes:

It is easy to see things gone awry and to scapegoat contractors. But contractors aren't the problem; the problem is the loss of good government. If the contractors in Iraq seem wildly expensive, it is not because corporate greed has dictated outcomes but because government's aspirations there have been far too ambitious and its controls far too few. When private security forces overstep moral bounds it is ultimately government's responsibility for having deployed them in a conflict zone with too little legal recourse if they misbehaved.

None of the above is to say that Stanger thinks outsourcing is without problems. While she recognizes it is here to stay, she is

not reluctant to list its shortcomings. In that regard, a section in chapter two detailing the US government's feeble attempts to keep track of what it is outsourcing and paying for it is revelatory.

Likewise, chapter five, where she demolishes the cost-savings arguments made by advocates of defense privatization, which have been meekly accepted as true without empirical proof for far too long, is worth the price of the book alone.

She also notes numerous examples of contracting run amuck, the difficulties of oversight due to the web of subcontracting (which the government has only recently started tracking) and the way that state secrecy, aided by contractors' frequent excuse that proprietary business information cannot be released, compounds the problem.

The bottom line for Stanger is that the laissez-faire ideology where government forks money out to the private sector and gets out of the way - so popular among free marketers and recent Republican and Democrat administrations - is not acceptable.

While the private sector is both integrated into and crucial to [American foreign policy](#), it is not entitled to a blank check or a blind eye. Government has a rightful role to play. It can start by not assigning tasks, such as reconstruction, that should belong to other agencies, to the Pentagon. Such actions only further strengthen an already grotesquely militarized US foreign policy. Such a policy plays to American weakness, not American strength, because it is economically unsustainable, alienates allies and denudes the [universal](#) values that made America popular in the world to begin with.

One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and The Future of Foreign Policy by Alison Stanger, [Yale University Press](#). ISBN-10: 0300152655. Price \$26.00, 256 pages.

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