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June 22, 2006

Shadow Company

By John Defore

AUSTIN -- Readers seeing the words "Iraq," "military," and "private corporations" in the description of a new documentary may understandably expect a screed, or at least a film whose position on certain issues is loud and clear. They'd be surprised by "Shadow Company," which is less interested in the rightness or wrongness of our current war than in the long history of one of the ways we're fighting it. Detailing the growth of the modern "private military company" (PMC), it is surprisingly even-handed, an approach that makes it satisfying for both hawks and doves. Reaching both audiences may take some doing on the publicity side, but the potential exists for solid boxoffice in comparison to other current-events docs.

That's not to say that the picture it paints is rosy. While depicting the use of PMCs as not inherently problematic, the doc outlines a number of flaws in the current system. Commentators describe 9/11 as the private-military equivalent of the Internet boom, fostering the birth of many new companies, some of which are far less competent (or less ethical) than others. The Iraq war is described as a "wild west" scenario, in which contracts for security operations are so plentiful, and assigned so freely, that companies can get them before they've figured out how to fulfill their requirements.

This overreliance on the private sector is shown as a natural result of trends in American government, which is now happy to farm out essential activities that the Army once did on its own. Going far beyond food prep and base construction, the role of private firms extends now even to some soldier training. Critics complain that many contracts are awarded without competitive bidding, costing taxpayers more than necessary and that the scarcity of rules for contractors leads inevitably to difficulty.

The latter issue can become dire with companies that, instead of playing a support role for the military, are actually at work in the field. Private armies are hired to protect "nouns" -- people, places, and property -- and they enjoy far more latitude in the Middle East than they do, say, on bodyguard assignments in Europe. The Coalition Provisional Authority has declared that Iraqi law does not apply to contractors, and of course they're not subject to the military code of conduct; according to

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interviewees here, no contractor has been prosecuted for a crime committed in Iraq.

If systemic issues (as described by traditional soldiers and those who study PMC activity) are grim, the film shows the other side by spending a good deal of time talking with actual contractors. The soldiers-for-hire interviewed here are on the whole intelligent men, thoughtful about their role and asserting (some more convincingly than others) that they operate under solid ethical guidelines. South African mercenary Cobus Claassens is particularly well-spoken, criticizing the behavior of some of his peers while describing ways in which a solid PMC can operate to everyone's benefit.

Filmmakers Nick Bicanic and Jason Bourque round things out with a brief history of mercenaries, showing the surprisingly large role soldiers of fortune have played compared to "official" national armies while outlining the mid-'90s emergence of corporate-style military organizations. Throughout the film manages to educate without being dry and to illustrate controversies without prejudice. For a subject that plays such a large part in America's foreign policy and is so little understood, "Shadow Company" is an excellent and engaging primer.

SHADOW COMPANY

Purpose Films

Credits:

Directors: Nick Bicanic, Jason Bourque

Writers: Nick Bicanic, Jason Bourque

Producers: Nic Bicanic, Remy Kozak

Executive producer:

Director of photography: Jason Bourque, Jarred Land

Music: Andrew Wanliss-Orlebar

Editor: Les Lukacs

No MPAA rating

Running time -- 86 minutes

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