



One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy

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International relations scholar Allison Stanger shows how contractors became an integral part of American foreign policy, often in scandalous ways—but also maintains that contractors aren't the problem; the absence of good government is. Outsourcing done right is, in fact, indispensable to America's interests in the information age.

Stanger makes three arguments.

- The outsourcing of U.S. government activities is far greater than most people realize, has been very poorly managed, and has inadvertently militarized American foreign policy;
- Despite this mismanagement, public-private partnerships are here to stay, so we had better learn to do them right;
- With improved transparency and accountability, these partnerships can significantly extend the reach and effectiveness of U.S. efforts abroad.

The growing use of private contractors predates the Bush Administration, and while his era saw the practice rise to unprecedented levels, Stanger argues that it is both impossible and undesirable to turn back the clock and simply re-absorb all outsourced functions back into government. Through explorations of the evolution of military outsourcing, the privatization of diplomacy, our dysfunctional homeland security apparatus, and the slow death of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Stanger shows that the requisite public-sector expertise to implement foreign policy no longer exists. The successful activities of charities and NGOs, coupled with the growing participation of multinational corporations in development efforts, make a new approach essential. Provocative and far-reaching, *One Nation Under Contract* presents a bold vision of what that new approach must be.

One Nation Under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy Details

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Libby says

Super interesting and important. I read this book with my mouth open.

Jim says

This is not your "sit back in the easy chair and enjoy a good book" type of book. The subject matter is detailed and sometimes complicated. One has to take time to think about the author is saying. Nevertheless, it is an important contribution to the study of U.S. Government and its manner of operations.

The book reviews the operations of four separate U.S. Government departments: State, Defense, USAID (which is now part of State) and Homeland Security. In each case, the departments have turned more and more to outsourcing much of their operations to private contractors. The author does not see this as necessarily bad, but she cautions that the Government must still maintain responsibility for oversight of contracts and must provide transparency regarding its contracts and what it is asking the private sector to do. She also cautions the the Government must decide on what functions are inherently government functions that only the government can perform: an example of this is combat in a war zone; she cautions strongly against using private military contractors to augment military forces in combat roles (even providing security for bases).

The author also points to the increased militarization of foreign policy. As is the case in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Government, when confronted with a crisis or problem that needs immediate solutions, turns to the Department of Defense, which has proven uniquely able to respond quickly to unexpected needs. This, however, has large downsides: the military's assumption of reconstruction efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan have proven to be disastrous; the use of the military gives the impression of coercion to people and countries that the U.S. Government is attempting to assist as a matter of foreign policy. The author also believes that foreign policy and aid are becoming products of government and private sector efforts, and she cautions that for assistance and foreign policy to be effective, they must promote sustainability and be measured for success in terms of the freedom they give the people and countries they are trying to assist.

Schnauckl says

This is a good book for basic facts and a general overview of the pervasiveness of outsourcing. It's more than a little scary and should make anyone think about what they're actually saying when they claim they want to cut government jobs.

Her central point, that government needs to have a real conversation about what constitutes essential

government functions is well taken. That's clearly the first step in reigning in some of the fraud, overspending, and abuse.

The book does have some problems though. It's incredibly dry. It took me a long time to finish it because I had to force myself to read it ten pages or so at a time.

Stanger is clearly very pro capitalism. It's especially apparently (and annoying) in the first couple of chapters where more than once she lauds how capitalism lets anyone succeed regardless of race, sex, orientation, or class. If you're living behind Rawls' veil of ignorance that may be true. In the real world, not so much.

She also suggests that the Internet and TV news gives the average person the same access to information as the government. Even leaving aside Internet lockdowns in other countries, I'd really hope that my government has better information than the Internet and the 24 hours news networks. (Though God knows, that would explain some things).

Stanger does point out some of the problems with having so many private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan. For one thing, a lot of the guys who are hired by these private security firms are ex-military. That means that the US government expends the money to train them, then pays them far more than the men and women currently in the military to do the same job when they hire them as private contractors. So if the point of outsourcing is to save money, the fact is, we aren't. What she doesn't mention is that not only are we paying the private contractors a much higher amount than those currently serving (in fact, many military families suffer economic hardship) we're actually paying the contractors who then pay the Taliban to not attack a certain place. They gladly take the money and use it to fund an attack on US troops in some other area. And...apparently everyone is okay with that. (Incidentally she points out that mercenaries have been involved in all our wars but it was Clinton's use of them in Yugoslavia and Columbia that really ushered in the way they're used now).

She seems in favor of businesses acting like ambassadors in other countries. She certainly thinks it's good that China has sent an ambassador (yes, an ambassador) to Facebook. But she never seems to consider that while once upon a time the goals of American corporations may have matched that of the government, these days that's not necessarily true. In fact, I'd argue it's probably not true at all. You only need to look at where the jobs are going, how corporations offshore their profits to avoid taxes, and where they're expanding to see that. It seems to me that the government serves business, not the other way around.

I'm also not nearly as enamored of the public-private partnership in foreign aid as she appears to be. Yes, it's great that the foundations of people like Bill Gates and former president Clinton try to alleviate problems worldwide. In fact, Clinton and George H.W. Bush managed to raise double the amount of the U.S. government for tsunami relief after the 2004 catastrophe. And certainly that reflects well on America. However, when Clinton's foundation does things like donate crappy, unsafe trailers to Haiti after the massive earthquake there, that also reflects on America. And unlike the US government, Clinton isn't accountable to the general public. He might lose donors (though I kind of doubt it) but otherwise there's no accountability. (There may be legal remedies, but I don't know what they would be and I doubt people who have lost everything could take on Clinton or his foundation in court).

For the record, I used to really like Clinton but more and more I find his administration to be highly problematic and not because of his personal indiscretion.

I want to share this quote from early in the book:

It is hard to grasp the scale of his shadow government. The biggest federal contractor, Lockheed Martin, which spent \$53 million on lobbying and \$6 million on donations from 2000 to 2006, gets more federal money each year than the Department of Justice or Energy. Lockheed Martin sorts your mail, tallies up your taxes, cuts social security checks, counts people for the U.S. census, runs space flights, and monitors air traffic. Almost 80 percent of its revenues come directly from the U.S. government. And Lockheed is just one such beneficiary. The top five U.S. contractors-Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop, General Dynamics, and Taytheon- reaped *profits* totaling 12.94 billion in 2005. For a sense of just how lucrative government contracts can be, consider that former Wall Street juggernaut Goldman Sachs at the height of its powers reported profits of \$5.6 billion that same year.

Federal government reliance on contractors accelerated rapidly in the George W. Bush years. Contract spending more than doubled during President Bush's time in office, having grown from \$201.3 billion in 2000 to \$377.5 billion by 2005 alone, an 86 percent increase. In 2007, Washington spent \$439.5 billion on contracts. By that time, the federal government was spending more than 40 cents of every discretionary dollar on contracts with private companies.

Now with that in mind, let me point out the other theme running through the book. As the amount of contracting has risen, the money to pay the people in charge of getting and more importantly monitoring these contracts has decreased. As people have retired they have not been replaced. In many areas we've outsourced the job of monitoring contractors to the contractors themselves, who, of course, have no incentive to mention problems and every incentive to lie about how great a job they're doing. Stanger may be heavily pro capitalist, but she identifies this as an urgent problem.

This is a little off topic, but I submit that a deeply partisan Congress is only part of the problem with our government today. It's a big part of the problem, to be sure. But it's also a big problem that everything has become so fragmented to various private companies. How can there be a coherent vision of where the country or even an individual agency is going when there are so many fingers in the pie? The answer is that it can't.

Emily says

Dr. Stanger has written a fascinating exploration of how our government uses outsourcing to accomplish much of what it does. She comes across as very balanced and moderate, with a focus on the long-term. There's very little, if any, demonizing of either political side going on in *One Nation under Contract*. She points out that the trend toward outsourcing actually began in the Clinton years with the effort to "reinvent government" while President Bush certainly continued in that direction.

Dr. Stanger champions effective public-private partnerships and highlights several success stories, but she also mentions the negatives: the lack of accountability, the opacity, the convoluted plate of spaghetti that is contractors and subcontractors and NGOs and government agencies and hybrids that no one - literally no one - truly has a handle on. Instead of reacting with short-sighted political expediency, we as a nation need to develop a long-view of what government's job is, what can be better accomplished in the private sector, and

how to regulate and organize oversight to ensure that tax dollars are being spent appropriately. If we're going to award billions of dollars of contracts to private firms, there ought to be true competition for the contracts. Outsourcing ought to be pursued when it is truly the best, most efficient and cost-effective path to meeting the goal at hand, not because it is the "path of least political resistance." A great deal of good can come out of the private sector and she suggests several ways for government to encourage that, or simply to lower barriers and get out of the way.

Dr. Stanger beats the drum of transparency over and over again, with good reason. An environment of opacity encourages lack of efficiency at best and corruption at worst. Clear lines of decision-making authority would prevent stagnancy and confusion, especially during a crisis. Dr. Stanger proposes "demilitarizing" American foreign policy as well. Because the Pentagon is so powerful and has so many resources, it is often the default actor, even when other approaches may be more appropriate.

My quibbles with the book are rather silly and are going to make me sound old. The print was too small, the chapters too long. There's so much data that it gets overwhelming - just break it down a little further into easier bites. The information is incredibly valuable and important, but I found myself going cross-eyed trying to read; maybe I need better glasses. And it was a bit dry and academic occasionally.

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Steve says

The nation would be well-served if more people read this book. The media and, sadly, too many of our elected officials have convinced themselves and the public that contractors - upon which the federal government relies heavily - are fundamentally evil, corrupt, and/or incompetent. The villification of these contractors is inaccurate, unfair, and unproductive. Here's a serious scholar concluding: "It is easy to see things have gone awry and to scapegoat contractors. But contractors aren't the problem; the problem is the loss of good government...." OK, this is not light, bedtime reading. Having said that, I got a kick out of the author's breadth of research and knowledge, and she has a wonderful way with words as well.

Matt says

I saw her speak at George Washington University, she had some very interesting ideas and I'm curious to learn more.

ETA: Finally finished this. Anyone who's spoken to me for the last few months has probably realized already how impressed I was by this book. It gives one of the most nuanced views of government contracting that I've seen. Explaining its good points to those who oppose it, and the importance of changing how we do it to those who like things the way they are. The result is a great explanation of the way things currently work, and interesting suggestions for what should be done going forward.

Adam says

Cemented my conviction that Baghdad was the occult 'silicon valley' of last decade.

Michael Harley says

I couldn't finish it. I saw the author on The Daily Show and thought I'd try to give it a go. I struggle with non-fiction books anyway but I just didn't find the topic interesting as I struggled through the part that I did read.

Thomas Stevenson says

Is outsourcing of diplomacy good or bad? That is the central question of Stanger's book. The answer is really that is had happened and we cannot go back. The history of this shift is presented very clearly. I was left with the lingering question if contracting was really cost efficient or just government giving money to corporations.

Joan Snodgrass Callaway says

Shocking! Little wonder that we have such an inept Congress. They're not inept, they're just doing what they've been bought to do. Not sure that one party is any better than another. We've got the best government that money can buy. The Supreme Court has now given the corporate world what they have always wanted - the ability to influence government in untold ways. Please note that irony was intended..."untold ways"...what the public doesn't know won't hurt them - much.

It seems apparent to me that as long as contractors are getting rich off of wars, we will have wars. It's in their interest.

Tony says

Just re-read this book some interesting 'Facts'. This info is going to be even more relevant now that state, county,city govs are going to start outsourcing MORE jobs to contractors.

Kai Palchikoff says

Yale University Press
