


[Home](#)
[Arab Gates](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Business](#)
[Culture](#)
[Features](#)
[Letters](#)
[Links](#)
[Contact us](#)
[الصفحة العربية](#)

First Published 2009-02-19

## The US Military's Expanding Waistline

**Obama needs to ask his Pentagon commanders this: Can the US military he has now inherited do anything without KBR? And the answer will certainly be a resounding no, says Pratap Chatterjee.**

### What Will Obama Do With KBR?

President Obama will almost certainly touch down in Baghdad and Kabul in Air Force One sometime in the coming year to meet his counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he will just as certainly pay a visit to a US military base or two. Should he stay for breakfast, lunch, dinner, or midnight chow with the troops, he will no less certainly choose from a menu prepared by migrant Asian workers under contract to Houston-based KBR, the former subsidiary of Halliburton.

If Barack Obama takes the Rhino Runner armor-plated bus from Baghdad Airport to the Green Zone, or travels by Catfish Air's Blackhawk helicopters (the way mere mortals like diplomats and journalists do), instead of by presidential chopper, he will be assigned a seat by US civilian workers easily identified by the red KBR lanyards they wear around their necks.

Even if Obama gets the ultra-red carpet treatment, he will still tread on walkways and enter buildings that have been constructed over the last six years by an army of some 50,000 workers in the employ of KBR. And should Obama chose to order the troops in Iraq home tomorrow, he will effectively sign a blank check for billions of dollars in withdrawal logistics contracts that will largely be carried out by a company once overseen by Dick Cheney.

### Questions for the Pentagon

If Obama wants to find out why KBR civilian workers can be found in every nook and cranny of US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, he might be better off visiting the Rock Island Arsenal in western Illinois. It's located on the biggest island in the Mississippi River, the place where Chief Black Hawk of the Sauk nation was once born. The arsenal's modern stone buildings house the offices of the US Army Materiel Command from which KBR's multibillion dollar Logistics Civilian Augmentation Program contract (LOGCAP) have been managed for the last seven years. This is the mega-contract that has, since September 11, 2001, generated more than \$25 billion for KBR to set up and manage military bases overseas (and resulted, of course, in thousands of pages of controversial news stories about the company's war profiteering).

Even more conveniently, Obama could pop over to KBR's Crystal City government operations headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, just a mile south of the Pentagon and five miles from

## News Headlines

► [Netanyahu asked to form Israel government](#)

► [US urges IAEA to take up Syria nuclear concerns](#)

► [Piracy costing dear to Lebanon](#)

► [US, Iraqi armies in race against 2011 clock](#)

► [Tunisia concerned over Italy immigrant centre](#)

► [Tutu urges Obama to apologise for Iraq war](#)

► [Saudi crown prince to New York for tests](#)

► [Peres pushes for broad coalition](#)

► [ICG: Lebanon's Palestinian camps a 'time bomb'](#)

► [Maliki allies triumph in Iraq provincial polls](#)

the White House. On Crystal City Drive just before Ronald Reagan National airport, it's hard to miss the KBR corporate logo, those gigantic red letters on the 11-story building at the far corner of Crystal Park.

Many people who know something about KBR's role in Iraq and Afghanistan might want Obama to question the military commanders at Rock Island and the corporate executives in Arlington about the shoddy electrical work, unchlorinated shower water, overcharges for trucks sitting idle in the desert, deaths of KBR employees and affiliated soldiers in Iraq, million-dollar alleged bribes accepted by KBR managers, and billions of dollars in missing receipts, among a slew of other complaints that have received wide publicity over the last five years.

But those would be the wrong questions.

Obama needs to ask his Pentagon commanders this: Can the US military he has now inherited do anything without KBR?

And the answer will certainly be a resounding no.

### **Keeping a Volunteer Army Happy**

Tim Horton is the head of public relations for Logistical Supply Area Anaconda in Balad, Iraq, the biggest US base in that country. He was a transportation officer for 20 years and has a simple explanation for why the army relies so heavily on contractors to operate facilities today.

"What we have today is an all-volunteer army, unlike in a conscription army when they had to be here. In the old army, the standard of living was low, the pay scale was dismal; it wasn't fun; it wasn't intended to be fun. But today we have to appeal, we have to recruit, just like any corporation, we have to recruit off the street. And after we get them to come in, it behooves us to give them a reason to stay in."

Even in 2003, the US military was incredibly overstretched. For the Bush administration to go to war then, it needed an army of cheap labor to feed and clean up after the combat troops it sent into battle. Those troops, of course, were young US citizens raised in a world of creature comforts. Unlike American soldiers from their parents' or grandparents' generations who were drafted into the military in the Korean or Vietnam eras and ordered to peel potatoes or clean latrines, the modern teenager can choose not to sign up at all.

As Horton points out, the average soldier gets an average of \$100,000 worth of military training in four years; if he or she then doesn't reenlist, the military has to spend another \$100,000 to train a replacement. "What if we spend an extra \$6,000 to get them to stay and save the loss of talent and experience?" Horton asks. "What does it take to keep the people? There are some creature comforts in this Wal-Mart and McDonald's society that we live in that soldiers have come to expect. They expect to play an Xbox, to keep in touch by e-mail. They expect to eat a variety of foods."

A quarter-century ago, when Horton joined the Army, all they got was a fourteen-day rotational menu. "We had chili-mac every two weeks, for crying out loud. What is that? Unstrained, low-grade hamburger mixed with macaroni. Lot of calories, lots of fat, lots of starch, that's what a soldier needs to do his job. When you were done, you had a heart attack."

Today, says Horton, expectations are different. "Our soldiers

need to feel and believe that we care about them, or they will leave. The Army cannot afford to allow the soldier to be disenfranchised."

When I visited with him in April 2008, Horton took me to meet Michael St. John of the Pennsylvania National Guard, the chief warrant officer at one of Anaconda's dining facilities. St. John led me on a tour of the facility, pointing out little details of which he was justly proud -- like the fresh romaine lettuce brought up from Kuwait by Public Warehousing Corporation (PWC) truck drivers who make the dangerous 12-hour journey across the desert, so that KBR cooks have fresh and familiar food for the troops. Stopping at the dessert bar St. John explained, "We added blenders to make milkshakes, microwaves to heat up apple pie, and waffle bars with ice cream." The "healthy bar" was the next stop. "Here," he pointed out, "we offer baked fish or chicken breast, crab legs, or lobster claws or tails."

"Contractors here do all the work," St. John added. He explained that he had about 25 soldiers and six to eight KBR supervisors to oversee 175 workers from a Saudi company named Tamimi, feeding 10,000 people a day and providing take-away food for another thousand.

"They do everything from unloading the food deliveries to taking out the trash. We are hands off. Our responsibility is military oversight: overseeing the headcount, ensuring that the contractors are providing nutritional meals and making sure there are no food-borne illnesses. It's the only sustainable way to get things done, given the number of soldiers we have to feed."

Horton chimes in: "I treat myself to an ice-cream cone once a week. You know what that is? It's a touch of home, a touch of sanity, a touch of civilization. The soldiers here do not have bars; all that is gone. You've taken the candy away from the baby. What do you have to give him? What's wrong with giving him a little bit of pizza or ice cream?"

Between a chili-mac military and a pizza-and-ice-cream military, the difference shows -- around the waistline. Sarah Stillman, a freelance journalist with the website TruthDig, tells a story she heard about a PowerPoint slide that's becoming popular in Army briefings: "Back in 2003, the average soldier lost fifteen pounds during his tour of Iraq. Now, he gains ten."

Stillman says that the first warning many US troops receive here in Baghdad isn't about IEDs (improvised explosive devices), RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), or even EFPs (explosively formed projectiles). It's about PCPs: "pervasive combat paunches."

### **Privatizing the US Army**

KBR has grossed more than \$25 billion since it won a 10-year contract in late 2001 to supply US troops in combat situations around the world. As of April 2008, the company estimated that it had served more than 720 million meals, driven more than 400 million miles on various convoy missions, treated 12 billion gallons of potable water, and produced more than 267 million tons of ice for those troops. These staggering figures are testimony to the role KBR has played in supporting the US military in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries targeted in President Bush's Global War on Terror.

And in the first days of the new Obama administration, the company continues to win contracts. On January 28, 2009,

KBR announced that it had been awarded a \$35.4 million contract by the US Army Corps of Engineers for the design and construction of a convoy support center at Camp Adder in Iraq. The center will include a power plant, an electrical distribution center, a water purification and distribution system, a waste-water collection system, and associated information systems, along with paved roads, all to be built by KBR.

How did the US military become this dependent on one giant company? Well, this change has been a long time coming. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s, a consortium of four companies led by the Texas construction company Brown & Root (the B and R in KBR) built almost every military base in South Vietnam. That, of course, was when Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texan with close ties to the Brown brothers, was president. In 1982, two years into Ronald Reagan's presidency, Brown & Root struck gold again. It won lucrative contracts to build a giant US base on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, a former British colony.

In 1985, General John A. Wickham drew up plans to streamline logistics work on military bases under what he dubbed the Logistics Civilian Augmentation Program (LOGCAP), but his ideas would remain in a back drawer for several years. In the meantime, Dick Cheney, as Secretary of Defense in the administration of the elder George Bush, loosed the American military on Iraq in the First Gulf War in 1991, and hired hundreds of separate contractors to provide logistics support. The uneven results of this early privatizing effort left military planners frustrated. By the time Cheney left office, he had asked Brown & Root to dust off the Wickham LOGCAP plan and figure out how to consolidate and expand the contracting system.

President Bill Clinton's commanders took a harder look at the new plan that Brown & Root had drawn up and liked what they saw. In 1994, that company was hired to build bases in Bosnia and later in Kosovo, as well as to take over the day-to-day running of those bases in the middle of a war zone.

By the time Donald Rumsfeld took over as Secretary of Defense under the younger George Bush, he had embraced the revolution that Wickham had begun, and Clinton and Cheney had implemented. At a Pentagon event on the morning of September 10, 2001, one day before three aircraft struck the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Rumsfeld identified the crucial enemy force his assembled senior staff would take on in the coming years:

"The topic today is an adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America. This adversary is one of the world's last bastions of central planning. It governs by dictating five-year plans. From a single capital, it attempts to impose its demands across time zones, continents, oceans, and beyond. With brutal consistency, it stifles free thought and crushes new ideas. It disrupts the defense of the United States and places the lives of men and women in uniform at risk. You may think I'm describing one of the last decrepit dictators of the world. The adversary's closer to home. It's the Pentagon bureaucracy.

"We must ask tough questions. Why is DOD [Department of Defense] one of the last organizations around that still cuts its own checks? When an entire industry exists to run warehouses efficiently, why do we own and operate so many of our own? At bases around the world, why do we pick up our own garbage and mop our own floors, rather than contracting services out, as many businesses do?"

He outlined a series of steps to slash headquarter staffs by 15% in the two years to come and promised even more dramatic changes to follow. While the invasion of Afghanistan the following month was conducted by military personnel, Rumsfeld's ideas started to be implemented in the spring of 2002. Indeed, the building of bases in Kuwait in the fall of 2002 for the coming invasion of Iraq was handled almost entirely by KBR.

Today, there is one KBR worker for every three US soldiers in Iraq -- and the main function of these workers, under LOGCAP, is to build base infrastructure and maintain them by doing all those duties that once were considered part of military life -- making sure that soldiers are fed, their clothes washed, and their showers and toilets kept clean. While many stories have been written about the \$80,000 annual salaries earned by KBR truck drivers, most of the company's workers make far less, mainly because they are hired from countries like India and the Philippines where starting salaries of \$300 a month are considered a fortune.

### **Outsourcing the Kitchen Patrol**

The majority of KBR's labor force, some 40,000 workers (the equivalent of about 80 military battalions), are "third country nationals" drawn largely from the poorer parts of Asia. In April 2008, I flew to Kuwait city where I spent time with a group of Fijian truck drivers who worked for a local company, PWC, doing subcontracting work for KBR.

My host was Titoko Savuwati from Totoya Lau, one of the Moala Islands in Fiji. He picked me up one evening in a small white Toyota Corolla rental car. The cranked-up sound system was playing American country favorites and oldies. Six feet tall with broad, rangy shoulders, short-cropped hair, and a goatee, Savuwati had been a police officer in Fiji. He was 50 years old and had left at home six children he hadn't seen in four years. When he got out of his car, I noticed that he had a pronounced limp and dragged one foot ever so slightly behind him.

We joined his friends at his apartment for a simple Anglican prayer service. Deep baritone voices filled the tiny living room with Fijian hymns before they sat down to a meal of cassava and curried chicken parts and began to tell me their stories. Each had made at least 100 dangerous trips, driving large 18-wheeler refrigeration trucks that carry all manner of goodies destined for US soldiers from Kuwaiti ports to bases like LSA Anaconda. They sleep in their trucks, not being allowed to sleep in military tents or trailers along the way.

Savuwati had arrived in Kuwait on January 14, 2005, as one of 400 drivers, hoping to earn \$3,000 a month. Instead, his real pay, he discovered, was 175 Kuwaiti dinar (KWD) a month (US\$640), out of which he had to pay for all his food and sundries, even on the road, as well as rent. Drivers were given an extra 50 dinar (\$183) allowance on each trip to Iraq.

"I came to Iraq because of the large amount of money they promised me," he said, sighing. "But they give us very little money. We've been crying for more money for many months. Do you think my family can survive on fifty KWD?" He sends at least 100 dinars (\$365) home a month and has no savings that would pay for a ticket home at a round-trip price of roughly \$2,500.

I did a quick calculation. For every trip, if they worked the 12-hour shifts expected of them, the Fijians earned about \$30

a day, or \$2.50 an hour. I asked Savuwati about his limp. On a trip to Nasariyah in 2005, he told me, his truck flipped over, injuring his leg. Did he get paid sick leave? Savuwati looked incredulous. "The company didn't give me any money. When we are injured, the company gives us nothing." But, he assured me, he had been lucky -- a number of fellow drivers had been killed on the job.

The next day, I stopped by to see the Fijians again, and Savuwati gave me a ride home. I offered to pay for gasoline and, after first waving me away, he quickly acquiesced. As he dropped me off, he looked at me sheepishly and said, "I've run out of money. Do you think you could give me one KWD [\$3.65] for lunch?" I dug into my pocket and handed the money over. As I walked away, I thought about how ironic it was that the men who drove across a battle zone, dodging stones, bullets, and IEDs to bring ice cream, steak, lobster tails, and ammunition to US soldiers, had to beg for food themselves.

This, of course, is the real face of the American military today, though it's never seen by Americans.

### **Obama's Army**

Pentagon commanders often speak of a "revolution in military affairs" when summing up the technological advances that allow them to stalk enemies by satellite, fire missiles from unmanned aerial vehicles, and protect US soldiers with night-vision goggles, but they rarely explain the social and logistical changes that have accompanied this revolution.

Today, US soldiers are drawn from a video-game culture that embraces computers on the battlefield, even as the US Army bears ever less relation to the draft armies that did the island-hopping in the Pacific in World War II or fought jungle battles in Vietnam. Indeed, the personnel that Obama will soon visit in Iraq and Afghanistan is generally supplied with hot food and showers around the clock in combat zones in the same way they might be on a Stateside base -- by workers like Savuwati.

Undoubtedly, an Obama administration could begin to cut some of the notorious fat out of the contracts that make that possible, including multi-million dollar overcharges. Obama's potential budget trimmers could, for example, take whistleblowers inside KBR and the Pentagon seriously when they report malfeasance and waste.

But could Obama dismiss KBR's army, even if he wanted to? Will Obama really be willing to ask American volunteer soldiers to give up the bacon, romaine lettuce, and roast turkey that they have come to expect in a war zone? And even if he could do so, those are only the luxuries. Keep in mind that, on US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, every single item, from beans to bullets, is shipped using contractors like PWC of Kuwait and Maersk of Denmark. In the last two decades, the US military has even divested itself of the hardware and people that would allow it to move tanks around the world, relying instead on contractors to do such work.

The White House website states that "Obama and Biden support plans to increase the size of the Army by 65,000 soldiers and the Marine Corps by 27,000 Marines. Increasing our end strength will help units retrain and re-equip properly between deployments and decrease the strain on military families." As part of the same policy statement, the site claims the new administration will reform contracting by creating "transparency for military contractors," as well as restoring "honesty, openness, and commonsense to contracting and

procurement" by "rebuilding our contract officer corps."

Nowhere, however, does that website suggest that the new administration will work toward ending, or even radically cutting back, the use of contractors on the battlefield, or that those 92,000 new soldiers and Marines are going to fill logistics battalions that have been decimated in the last two decades. What we already know of the military policies of the new administration suggests instead that President Obama wants to expand US military might. So don't be surprised if the new LOGCAP contract, a \$150 billion 10-year program that began on September 20, 2008, remains in place, with some minor tinkering around the edges to provide value for taxpayer money. KBR's army, it seems, will remain on the march.

**Pratap Chatterjee** is the author of **Halliburton's Army: How A Well-Connected Texas Oil Company Revolutionized the Way America Makes War**. He is the managing editor of **CorpWatch**. A TomDispatch audio interview in which Chatterjee discusses KBR World can be heard by clicking [here](#).

Copyright 2009 Pratap Chatterjee

TomDispatch

---



Print



Printer Friendly Version

---



Send to friends



Top