

*American Private Military Contractors in
Kuwait*

From Hero to Worker

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By

Salma A. Ibrahim – S0023745

salma.a.ibrahim@hotmail.com.

Instructor: Dr. Pellegrino A. Luciano
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Introduction

Michael, my main informant, has always been a hard worker. He was born into a lower middle-class family of both Irish and French descent. At 17, Michael bought his first car, a Nissan Sentra, with his hard-earned money. He has been working ever since he was 12 and had saved up \$6000 mowing lawns after school. Michael is a hard worker, and it is a detail that is difficult to miss. When he worked as a private military contractor (PMC), his work ethic emanated through his promptness. He walked to his bus at 3:45 AM, each day of his six-day workweek. His face was always freshly shaven, his hair neat and in place, and his cover shirt would already be on his uniform – rules every American PMC in Kuwait must adhere to¹. Michael served in the U.S. Air Force for six years before he became a PMC in Kuwait, and it is evident from the way he presents himself. He always walks briskly and with purpose, always stands straight, his hair is always short, and he always does his job without complaining. He would often pride himself on the fact that he could keep his work life and personal life separate and that no matter how exhausting work was, he always returned home smiling. Over the span of 19 months, however, the lines blurred. Michael grew fatigued. He worked 15-hour-long shifts under the scorching desert heat, which tends to rise to 50 degrees Celsius during the summer days. He sometimes worked without shade and air-conditioning (the winters were no better as the private military contractors were never supplied heaters). His back had sores from the densely layered uniform rubbing against the sweat on his back, his face was sunburnt, and he had chronic back and shoulder aches. He lost weight and no longer returned home smiling.

It was challenging for Michael to see his friends. When he did, it was always through chance. He had lived with his coworkers for several weeks; all nineteen private military contractors were cramped into a single apartment in Mahboula, Kuwait. They all arrived in Kuwait together, trained together, and all attended the same graduation ceremony and became

private military contractors together. Nevertheless, their one day off never corresponded with one another and they could only see each other if they bumped into each other at work, if their weekend randomly changed, or if they applied for a vacation². When they did meet, they were eager to catch up. They would invite Michael and me to their infrequently-held gatherings. They loved to tell me stories of the women they met in Kuwait, and the times they stood up to their sergeants at work. Arab women and resistance to authority formed the basis of many conversations. One of them, an African American nerdy-looking PMC, especially loved brag to Michael that he managed to “get a Kuwaiti, too,” referring to the fact that Michael was dating a Kuwaiti woman. But mostly, the PMCs would often subtly reference their job dissatisfaction by making jokes, somehow keeping the mood light yet still acknowledging that they are being exploited and how they hate it.

When I first got to know these private military contractors, I often received vague descriptions of what their job entails. It was through bits and pieces of information that indicated that they protect the American bases in Kuwait. At barbecues and gatherings, I would always hear stories of new employees being fired and sent home. A few reasons for getting fired included losing ammunition, getting too many warnings for not wearing a cover shirt, having a shaving profile, and taking too many sick leaves³. The most severe case, however, revolved around a young and naïve private military contractor. Within less than a month of employment, he was negligently discharged because his gun went off. This young man was playing with it during his night shift at the watchtower. Luckily, it hit the floor and missed him when it ricocheted. The young man did not follow any of the security procedures of carrying weaponry and it was rumored he did not have a security clearance. These are serious allegations as this also reflects the company’s leniency towards who they hire. Private military contractors all received the same training during the military, they were reminded of their Levels of Force training and were expected to adhere to them. According to Michael,

there are several levels of force that ascend in intensity: verbal force, physical force, non-lethal physical force, and deadly force. If the attacker is at a certain level, they are trained to never go above that level. There are several reasons to use deadly force, such as protection of assets vital to national security, the protection of national critical infrastructure. In terms of defense, they are permitted to use deadly force in the defense of others, self-defense where they can only defend themselves in cases where they fear own life and serious bodily harm, and if a dangerous armed felon escapes. It was for this reason that Michael and his friends, who have all served in the military, were all horrified by the news. The PMCs were all subjected to training for the conditions of using weaponry. Levels of Force training included teaching the ethics of when to use force, how to escalate and deescalate a situation, and when to discharge a weapon. The young man whose gun went off in the watchtower neglected the procedures and used excessive level of force that could have seriously injured or killed him. To the veterans, this man must have no training whatsoever and was most likely a punk trying to act cool.

This is what the company has become, they all said. Most of the PMCs have served in the military, and the *Contracting Co.* seeks their expertise in security. Three of the veterans who now work as private military contractors have attested that the job has become a joke. When these contractors were first employed, they all passed their shooting tests on the range. Only a few were sent home, however now, Michael and the other contractors stressed, a contractor can fail several times, and can still end up working for *Contracting Co.* Furthermore, *Contracting Co.* has been exploiting these contractors, and now the turnover rates have never been higher. The PMCs who have been here for almost a decade testified that they have never seen anything like it. *Contracting Co.* prides themselves on their cost-efficient methods (which they even state on their website), but they are constantly finding cheaper and more accessible ways to hire PMCs and manage equipment. Within the last year

alone, their pay reduced twice, and rumors surfaced of another possible pay cut in January. Also, there is no space for advancement, company management is poor, and the tasks are emotionally, mentally, and physically taxing. They are overworked without being acknowledged for their sacrifices and they were surprised to admit that they actually preferred defending the bases in Afghanistan, Japan, and Qatar. At least over there their training mattered and they had a cause and recognition.

For a community of people that work up to 90 hours a week, they are largely unseen. In Kuwaiti society, American private military contractors are periphery, and there is a lack of willingness to explore their community by the Kuwaitis themselves. When researching job exploitations, they are glossed over by academic communities as there currently are worse cases of job exploitation to worry about, especially those of more vulnerable backgrounds, creating a gap in literature. Their place of employment situates near the borders of Kuwait, out of sight. The work hours make it challenging to maintain a social and personal life, and the job itself is either hectic, physically strenuous, or painfully mind-numbing and repetitive. For these veterans, they are using the same militaristic expertise with no collective reward or recognition. In a sense, they have gone from hero to worker.

It was through meeting Michael and other PMCs that I was interested in writing this paper. Drawing from Catherine Lutz's "Empire is in the Details," I aim to ethnographically document the experiences of former American military personnel working for a government-contracted company in Kuwait. Lutz proposes a person-centered approach to analyzing empire through the people that make it to be able to provide a more contextualized understanding (Lutz 2006, 593-599). Through narrative and interview data, I analyze how the employees represent the U.S. military and the pressures they regularly face. I will also document how people cope with the social and geographical isolation that accompanies the work. American PMCs work extremely long hours doing paramilitary work as representatives

of U.S. military presence in the Middle East, yet in a for-profit company setting. Most of these employees have been in the military prior to their employment at *Contracting Co.*, where they provided similar military services. However, the privatization of militaristic services has drastically changed the way their efforts are interpreted. In the military, they had the prestige and honor of serving their nation. Now, they are wedged back into an unappreciative, bureaucratic system that exploits them as workers. They still had to leave their home country and are still providing the same militaristic services. However, the meaning of serving the nation is lost in the bureaucracy of *Contracting Co.* Thus, this project investigates work motivated by a patriotic sense of duty in a context where the extraction of value from labor is experienced. The goal is to assess the degree to which former military now experience exploitation and express alienation as workers. Does the shift from hero to worker create alienation?

Privatizing the Military – A Force Multiplier

James Pattison (2010) explains that since the end of the Cold War, there has been a growth of private military and security companies or (PMSCs). These companies “provide a myriad of services, including the training of troops and security services, the provision of transportation and logistics, and a number of roles more likely to involve direct combat, such as the protection of state officials” (1). After the Cold War, PMSCs have transformed the military by privatizing military force and outsourcing security as a commodity. He records that the U.S. Department of Defense employs 170,000 contractors and 25,000 of whom provide armed services. This transformation has created significant controversy by critics as the privatization and the commodification of militaristic services is simply another cost-effective maneuver to promote U.S. state interests (ibid, 1). It follows the neoliberal ideology of privatization and individualism, converting all resources or services into market opportunities. This, in effect, shifts the focus from the needs of the collective towards a

laissez faire market economy centered around motives of self-interest. Furthermore, the shift from public to private is argued to enable western colonialist projects, as well as act as proponents of U.S. imperialism through a newer ideology compared to the post-WWII United States. Current U.S. defense is tied to the late 20th century neoliberal radical shift towards privatization of government services and market liberalization that coincides with Pattison's timeline emergence of PMSCs (Harvey 2003).

Pattison reviews the role of PMSCs and argues against them because of their unethical and immoral agendas. He questions the ethics of employing PMSCs and opposes their employment at both the level of the employee and the employer. At the level of the employee, Pattison argues that privatization of military services obscures the principles of *jus ad bellum* (regulations of when states can wage war) and *jus in bello* (conduct and rules of war). Private contractors are at fault for because of their underlying motives. Private contractors are mostly encouraged by mercenary motives which interfere with their moral judgment, as mercenary motives typically include the inflicting harm on others for financial gain. Pattison believes that motives matter in the ability to fight just wars and that private contractors are usually encouraged (more so than soldiers) to be motivated by mercenary motives (ibid, 3-7).

At the level of the employer, Pattison argues that the use of PMSCs is problematic because the state has a responsibility to protect citizens from internal and external threats and therefore the employment of PMSC would go against the classical model of the social contract. The social contract is the contractual acknowledgement between the citizens and the state to abide by their respective duties. The individual accepts the role of the state as a sovereign rule, while the sovereign is vowed to protect its state. Therefore, the employment of a third party undermines the legitimacy of the state as they no longer are the sole providers of national defense. Pattison postulates that "since the sovereign is no longer the provider of

national defense, individuals have less reason to agree to its authority and are arguably no longer bound to obey its rule” (8). In that sense, the state is abdicating its responsibility to protect the state and the people that constitute it. Additionally, it is not justifiable for states to employ them as they jeopardize communal identities. A communal bond is a feeling of unity and oneness among a group of people. It forms when citizens, willing to protect the state, become connected by shared pride, a common goal, and a feeling of togetherness. Communal bonds between citizens are even reinforced through celebrations and national days, that pose as a reminder of the customs and traditions of the army. This is disrupted when placed in a for-profit setting where the neoliberal ideologies of profit-seeking and individualism derive. Without communal bonds, the motives of the citizens are skewed, compromising the ability to fight just wars (ibid, 8-11). Pattison contends creating stricter *jus ad bellum* regulations on them as “they can undermine democratic accountability by circumventing parliamentary constraints on the use of force and reducing control on the battlefield” (ibid, 2; 11).

Lastly, Pattison argues that the handling of military services and provisions should not be entrusted to the private sector. Delegating militaristic services to the private sector assumes that militaristic services are goods to be maximized under the pretenses of humanitarian outreach while simultaneously assuming that the private sector is a more efficient provider of such services. Pattison maintains that it should not be regarded as a good that should be maximized. He quotes Andrew Alexandra, who explains that “when what is being produced is the capacity to inflict violence... greater productive efficiency is actually undesirable” (14). Furthermore, though proponents of PMSC state that the private sector offers more efficient and cost-effective services, Pattison maintains that this creates inequalities towards those who cannot afford this service and can create problems for international security as PMSCs have a “vested interest international instability” (15). Due to its privatized nature, PMSCs require some instability to maintain its employment, therefore

finding a balance between maintaining a good reputation, and there being a reason for states to hire them for security. Therefore, he argues that although the public sector is not perfect and is faulty in its own ways, it is less problematic than allowing the free-market economy to regulate the use of militaristic services. The commodification of militaristic services has negative effects on national and international security (ibid, 1; 14-16).

David Vine (2017) adopts a similar stance to James Pattison as he, too, heavily criticizes the ways in which the U.S. government ensures the presence of overseas bases around the world. He maintains that the United States has had a long and obscured history of acquiring U.S. bases with the purpose of expanding both military and economic influence around the world. They situate their bases close to what they perceive as immediate threats for military readiness and at a close and convenient proximity to places with valuable resources (in the form of political gain and the procurement of resources) (Vine 2017, x-113). Vine describes bases as one of the most prominent symbols and defines bases as “Any place, facility, or installation used regularly for military purposes of any kind” (4). Having that said, he articulates his dismay of the U.S. government’s shortsightedness and its U.S.-centric lens. The U.S. government had previously procured land by illegally buying them, situating military bases on them, and merely kicking native residents out, such as the cases of the locals of Diego Garcia, the Inuits, the Chagossians, and the Bikinians (ibid, 1-148). They also created instability in Guam, South Korea, and Honduras, proving their presence more detrimental and counterproductive to their status of World Police (ibid, 64-95; ibid, 163-179). In the case of Guam, a U.S. territory, the U.S. has not treated its residents as such. For example, they are not independent of the United States and do not enjoy full democratic rights such as voting rights, as citizens of the United States would (ibid, 84-89). This, Vine states, “highlight[s] how, even in the twenty-first century, our base nation still relies on the

perpetuation of colonial relationships, albeit under new guides and with new vocabulary” (ibid, 84).

Furthermore, the U.S. has an arduous history of working with anti-democratic and murderous dictators. In the chapter “Befriending Dictators,” Vine demonstrates that although they are the World Police, they do not interfere with the politics of the country ruled by dictators. The United States provides these dictators with the freedom to run their autocratic state policies since these dictators allowed the U.S. bases to operate overseas. Vine states, “In their quest to secure base access around the globe, government officials have repeatedly collaborated with murderous, antidemocratic regimes and ignored widespread evidence of human rights abuses (ibid, 97). This has taken place in many base hosts; some notable examples Vine listed were Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Djibouti. In cases such as Bahrain, Thailand, and Egypt, the U.S. government has remained silent during their time of instabilities, yet intervening in democratic processes, rigging elections, and coercing nations towards democracy in Italy, Japan, and South Korea. Additionally, the U.S. government had collaborated with the mafias in Italy (such as the Camorra), ignored human rights abuses, downplayed and concealed crimes committed by GIs in host countries. They allowed exploitative commercial sex industries to thrive around military bases to increase the troop’s dependence on military salaries. Through their short-sightedness and cost-effective methods, they jeopardized the environment (ibid, 97-113).

It was a mixture of both lack of care and the shortsightedness of the U.S. government led to health implications for the natives and the troops alike. Vine recalls the burning pits in Afghanistan, which harmed the health of locals and soldiers. He also reported the elevated cancer risks in Campania, Italy due to the poorly disposed toxic waste. This increased the levels of radiation, arsenic, and other carcinogens into the water, air, and soil. According to Vine, the United States hired the Camorra to dispose of the waste because it is cheaper, which

made the situation much worse (ibid, 64-267). In Vine's chapter "In Bed with the Mob," he recounts the history of collusion between the Camorra and the United States. The Camorra (who call themselves *il sistema*) is the oldest Italian criminal organization that is suspected to date back to 1825 but has known to have existed between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. However, they are now one of the largest international syndicates with ties to international drug trafficking, construction, public contracts, and waste disposal, among other services. There are over 3,600 recorded cases of murders by the hands of the Camorra, but their power permeates social, political, and economic life, making them almost indestructible with immunity from the law. The United States have been known to collude with the Camorra (including the CIA), and rewarding the Camorra with political power for their cooperation in their mission to help the Allies take over Naples during World War II. Due to the mafia's efficiency, the United States cooperates with the Camorra. They have cooperated with the mafia in order to secure military bases by promising better economic stability, such as the case of Sicily's Sigonella naval base. There, the mafia influences the major janitorial, grounds keeping, and maintenance contractor sectors (ibid, 115-131). Vine quotes Antonio Mazzeo, Italian military analyst, who explains that "[the] proliferation of U.S. and NATO bases [has helped] strengthen the political and economic power of criminal organizations" (ibid, 131).

The health implications caused by the poorly disposed toxic waste stems from the fact that since the 1980s, the Camorra engaged in an illegal garbage removal industry. They made an annual profit \$20 billion. Their illegal methods of garbage and toxic waste were cheap and efficient to the United States, by burying garbage in dumps, ditches, and by burning them. The shortsightedness of these methods created severe problems and the Navy spent millions of dollars investigating these health implications such as asthma, birth defects, cancer rates and investigating the quality of water, air, and soil in Campania. Now, the sailors residing in

the Gricignano base are prohibited from using tap water, and local produce are carefully labeled (ibid, 132-133).

In “We’re Profiteers,” Vine discusses contracting companies, the history of contracting, and his views on them. Contracting was first introduced by the now-major contracting company Kellogg Brown & Root during the Vietnam War. Brown & Root helped build major military installations located in South Vietnam. Now, there are thousands of PMSCs, many of whom are major transnational construction firms, food service providers, oil corporations (such as Bahrain Petroleum company), and thousands of smaller firms. Contracting companies consolidated their presence in the Middle East during the Gulf War in 1991. Vine records that “one out of every hundred deployed personnel was a contractor” (218). During the second Gulf War, these contracting positions expanded; in Iraq alone, contractors constituted half of the deployed personnel. In Kuwait, companies received \$37.2 billion in contracts (ibid, 215-218).

The major contracting firms that provided necessary equipment for operating these bases obtained the largest contracts. Vine lists that “the companies winning the largest contracts were those providing one or more of five things: construction, operations and maintenance, food, fuel and security” (219). For example, Brown & Root, the largest contracting company, were received \$2 billion for their construction and maintenance services as well as their provisions of food services, waste removal, water production, and transportation services (ibid, 218-219). In terms of their resourcefulness, Vine reveals that the employment of these PMSCs help avoid government regulations. According to his conversation with Major Tim Elliot, these major contracting companies are employed to forget about the work of running and protecting the base, so they can instead focus on maximizing the effectiveness of other militaristic services (ibid, 215). The use of PMCS allowed the military to operate around several regulations. For example, it reduced the need

for the military to recruit new troops, it saved the government taxpayer money and recruiting foreign workers reduced the need to provide employee benefits such as healthcare, retirement and pension benefits, and avoid providing U.S. troop benefits. Moreover, through his calculations, Vine estimates that the Pentagon has disbursed an approximate of over \$385 billion of public spending to private contracting companies, more than \$115 billion of which was invested into the top 10 contracting companies such as Brown & Root, DynCorp, and BP (ibid, 215-218). Unfortunately, these companies have an exhaustive history of fraud and overbilling, abuse, financial irregularities and expenditures, and tax evasion. They also have a more morose history of serious human rights violations such as sex trafficking and violating national immigration laws such as smuggling laborers onto bases (ibid, 219-231).

Pattison and Vine both understandably condemn the proliferation of overseas bases around the world, and the incredible and questionable lengths the U.S. military, government, and the Pentagon go to safeguard these bases. They condemn these departments for neglecting the host nations – including the hiring of corrupt PMSCs to maintain the security and performance of the U.S. overseas bases that were established through the pretenses and promises of improving the host countries' economic and humanitarian environment; rather, these host countries have been forcibly removed from their homeland and have experienced various forms of human rights violations, as well as an overall worsening of standards of living. It is because of Pattison and Vine's acontextual lens that Catherine Lutz's approach is necessary to the anthropological approach. Their perspectives are acontextual particularly because they condemn the macro politics without dissecting the socio-political frameworks of those who constitute an empire. In "Empire is in the Details," Lutz asserts that anthropologists should avoid looking at an empire as a singular entity and to see the "imperial missioncentric approach" which tends to be heavily politicized and lacking detail (Lutz 2006, 598). Rather, she proposes that to study empires, we must analyze both sides to understand

the lives and relationships further. We need to understand what makes an empire, how it operates, and the soft power it emanates as it can “help question the many fissures, contradictions, historical particularities, and shifts in imperial processes” (Lutz 2006, 593).

I am adopting Lutz’s approach because of the relevance to this research paper. Although Pattison and Vine critique the broad politics and actions of the United States that lead to the proliferation of overseas bases, they fail to identify the class processes that allow for the bases to operate. They are correct to critique the broad politics and condemn the immoral and disreputable methods these organizations employ. However, they both fall short when assessing the lives of the individuals and their context. By examining the lives of people that man the bases, we can see how the exploitation of these working-class persons is fundamental to U.S. expansion of military presence abroad. They rightfully condemn the actions of the United States’ government, military, and the Pentagon but they do not adequately critique the cycle it perpetuates for the exploited working class that operate the machines. Both Pattison and Vine assess the aerial perspective without assessing the linear perspectives; they neglect the circumstances that push these individuals to become employees for an exploitative agency, such as their experiences of financial instability, depression, and post-traumatic stress. It also removes the element of drabness they experience from shifting from hero to worker.

Methodology

I was faced with several restrictions when conducting this research. Firstly, civilians are prohibited on base unless they possess a work identification card. Hence, I was not able to conduct on-site observation and participant observation. Secondly, the sensitive nature of their jobs created certain difficulties and limitations to how much I can ask and how much they can disclose. Therefore, I found that the methodology best suited for this research was through in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted off-site.

The in-depth interviews took place over a span of two months, and were held in coffee shops, restaurants, and in the interviewees apartments. I chose to conduct interviews with several American PMCs from *Contracting Co.* to understand where their feelings of alienation and job dissatisfaction are coming from, why they choose to stay, and how they try to cope. The questions were designed in a way that would not compromise their jobs yet remain true to exploring their personal experiences as expatriates and employees. The interviews were taken place while being considerate of their job hours as they are lengthy and some informants work night shifts. The interviews were carried out through different mediums, such as in person, through email, and phone calls. I asked questions that identified their reason for coming to Kuwait and why they choose to stay here despite feeling unhappy. I also tackled several topics such as job security, job dissatisfaction, Kuwaiti culture (and their perception of it), and coping. These topics allowed me to explore their experiences here as civilians and employees. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight American PMCs (seven of whom are veterans) who work in the American military bases in Kuwait. Those who had the time, energy, and were willing to take part were selected as subjects. These in-depth interviews ranged from 2-3 hours. My main informant, Michael, occasionally accompanied me to the interviews, since his presence made the interviewees comfortable.

Although I could not conduct participant observation on site, I have managed to conduct participant observation over the span of 18 months and observed the way Michael and his coworkers dealt with their jobs (until Michael moved back to the United States). This approach consisted of being more involved and attending their functions, visiting them in their company housings and conducting informal interviews, and actively listening to their conversations. It is through participant observation that I gained a more profound insight into their political views, the masculinity aspect of contracting. I also gained a more in-depth insight into the ways they rebel, what they learned about Kuwait during the in-processing

training, and the ways they are modeled into representatives of the United States. However, due to the sensitive nature of their jobs and that they were not allowed to disclose job specifics, I have provided all my subjects with pseudonyms and have also changed the name of the companies involved to ensure their safety.

Contracting Co.

All my subjects are employed by the same American PMSC, *Contracting Co*⁴. *Contracting Co.* is owned by a major security company called *Maevik Security Solutions*. *Contracting Co.* (and by extension *Maevik Security Solutions*) is employed by *LogisTech*, a major logistics and telecommunications company that has been operating for decades. It has at least several decades of experience working alongside the military. *LogisTech* has expanded its business, and now provides various services in Communication, Information Technology, and Logistic services. As their website states, they aim to ensure the satisfaction and success of their clientele. They promote ethical conduct, quality technological services, and most importantly customer satisfaction. Currently, tens of thousands of subcontractors are employed and are situated in approximately 20 countries. *Maevik Security Solutions'* website, however, employs a more subdued scheme of colors but with more security-related headings and subheadings. In their website, they promise to ensure security, and even list several branches of their company, *Contracting Co.* being one of them. They provide a myriad of security and conflict resolution services that range from simple training programs to a wide-scale environmental and humanitarian outreach. Their services listed tends to be more hands-on and direct.

The private military contracting project, where all the PMCs from *Contracting Co.* are employed in, is included in series of webpages within *LogisTech's* website. *LogisTech's* website seems to target an audience as it reflects a macho, hyper-masculine identity. Its brand color, font, and word choices appear to target a young, patriotic, male audience. It looks as if

it is promoting a first-person shooter video game. The brand color adopts a militaristic theme; the maps of their locations zoom in, and the pictures they use tend to be action-packed. They used images of the same flying jet that tilted to the side, with a contrail behind it, and other pictures were filled with men working with intense focus. Their brand motto “TRUE TO YOUR CAUSE” and “REACH YOUR POTENTIAL” both hold a very patriotic connotation that is directed towards youths with a purpose. It seems to have advertised efficiently as seven of the interviewees are veterans.

When considering the private military contracting webpages, it is evident that they adopt the same militaristic theme. However, the contents of the pages are more relevant and detailed. Their webpage includes a description of the company’s aim and well as an interactive map. The map is focused on the Middle East, with pinned locations of their operations. Another webpage encompasses sought job opportunities such as Firefighting and EMT services, Infrastructure Maintenance, and Logistics and Technology. These job positions are more specific to the services run in Kuwait, such as security, facility maintenance, environmental maintenance, shipping services, and various public works. The images on this page include a hands-on theme, filled with pictures of dedicated and focused persons. Bizarrely, the images include various South Asian men⁵. In several of the pictures, an Easterner is seen sorting bottles, while another image depicted Easterners answering to a very obviously Caucasian American man giving them orders.

Under the heading “The Middle East,” is an incomprehensive description of Kuwait. The webpage included a map that included the locations of various programs, creating a monolithic description of the Middle East. The site describes the Middle Eastern climate as “extremely hot, ranging to 120 degrees Fahrenheit.” The description of the Middle East allows the reader to interpret the area as a strange, unfamiliar, and unsafe. It holds an element of action while simultaneously lacking cultural sensitivity. There was no interest in the

cultural differences between the Middle Eastern countries, except that it is a strange, hot place where people do real, rewarding work in a dangerous place. It portrayed a sense of detachment as it is not intended to familiarize the reader with the countries. All Michael remembered from their website description on Kuwait was that “it just said hostile and austere environments, but I’ve been to the Middle East before. I didn’t care. I knew it was safe.”

The Realities of Contracting Co.

The realities of contracting for *Contracting Co.* are much different than advertised. Both Baker and Michael described the company as “immoral.” From both my participant observation and my in-depth interviews, I was informed that *Contracting Co.* tends to seek the cheapest ways to fix equipment to be more “cost-effective.”⁶ Moreover, Michael and two other contractors (Baker and Rodriguez) pointed out that it seems to be easier for *Contracting Co.* to employ contractors rather than servicemen. Michael recounted the first time he was positioned at the watchtower. He explained that in the military, two men were stationed in every watchtower as it was per military regulations. However, through privatizing military services, not only is it cheaper, but they do not need to abide by militaristic standards of safety and safeguarding. *Contracting Co.* stations one man per watchtower. Additionally, the equipment at their worksites is usually worn out and run down. The air conditioning regularly breaks down, they are not provided heaters in the winters, and the equipment is out of date. Three contractors reported having to work at the watchtower without electricity at some point during their employment. The pouches that carry the ammunition have holes in them – then why, the contractors stressed, should they be blamed for losing ammunition if their equipment is faulty?⁷

Work is excruciating. Seven of the PMCs I have interviewed stated that their work can either be too strenuous or too dull⁸. On the day shift, work tends to be hectic, busy, and

frequently too hot or too humid. On the night shift, the consensus is that the job tends to be “mindless,” “dull,” and “repetitive.” One PMC compared working as a private military contractor to being a mall cop. Another PMC, Baker, stated that they are being exploited worse than people who work in sweatshops because “At least when they work in sweatshops, they’re actually producing something,” he stated; “We’re just sitting on our asses and theoretically being the front line of defense. It’s Kuwait. Nothing is gonna happen here”.

When I asked all the PMCs if they felt like they were serving their country, five of the eight PMCs answered both yes and no. The fact that they are protecting the base gives them a sense that they are serving their country but that they feel distant from the cause. These veterans (Jessen-Diaz, Michael, Bailey, Rodriguez, and Carter) expressed that they felt more useful deployed in Afghanistan and that they feel like they are serving their country here insofar as they are “serving those who are serving the military.” It does not feel the same to them or as patriotic as it did. With contracting, they are just here to work and collect paychecks.

Contrastingly, Schmidt, Michael’s former flatmate, stated he never felt more valuable. Schmidt was born and raised in Virginia and was one of the nineteen men who lived with Michael when they first flew into Kuwait, and they eventually moved into the same company housing. They lived together for about a year before Michael moved out. Schmidt can only be described as a paradox. Schmidt is gigantically statured at 6ft 3in, yet childlike at heart. He loves hugs and wears his heart on his sleeve, but also loves guns, sex, and violence (even his personal Wi-Fi hotspot has an obscene name that objectifies women and indicates his love for guns). During my two years of knowing him, I could tell that he has conflicting views on what he wants life to be, and what it actually is. He is a happy-go-lucky guy, who loves Dr. Pepper, bacon, comics, and his PlayStation 4. He is a larger than life character who develops attachments to people fairly easily, and he seemed to be disappointed that this job has not given him the feeling of comradeship he sought.

I had known of Schmidt before I met him – his coworkers at night shift often gossiped about his unorthodox nature. The active duty veterans always poked fun at how he was “a Navy reserve that was only called to duty once a week,” “a big baby,” and that he is “not used to hard work.” He is quirky and clumsy, a quality that contradicts the meticulous nature of his job. Although he came to Kuwait to save money, when he went back to Virginia for a month, he spent most of his savings on rifles and expensive alcohol. In his time here, Schmidt had been suspended multiple times. Since I have known him, he had been suspended for crashing a car on base (they are only supposed to drive 40km/h), and for losing a single round (which he eventually found in his magazine pouch).

At 6:30 PM, on Friday, October 6, 2017, I visited Schmidt to ask him a few questions about his experiences. To enter the company housing, I had to turn in my civil identification card to receive a visitor’s badge and have Schmidt sign me in. When I entered the elevator to go up the 13th floor, I saw a poster stating, “NO trafficking in persons on United States installations” with the Worker Bill of Rights stated underneath. Another sign adjacent to it stated that “Debt bondage, involuntary servitude, slavery, procuring sex acts” were not prohibited.

When I asked questions pertaining to his job experiences, he stated that he finally felt like a valued employee and that he finally felt like his skills were being put to good use. He stated that he never felt very useful as a Navy reserve, and with this job, he wakes up every day telling himself “Today, I’m going to save some lives.” This job had given him a sense of purpose that he never found when he lived in the United States. It also gave him a sense of community. His co-workers, he feels, have become his brothers, and he often goes to work presenting freshly baked bacon or brownies to his sergeants and coworkers.

All the private military contractors, including Schmidt, stated that their job dissatisfaction stems the fact that the company does not care about their employees and that

management is poor and frequently nonexistent. Comments such as “We are just numbers to them,” and “We are expendable,” were stated during these interviews. They are not paid for the full hours they spend on base, and they would often be punished for calling in sick. Four of the employees had found themselves in harsher posts when they called in sick. Michael, often suffering from chronic back and shoulder aches as well as migraines, found that he was often assigned to harsher posts out in the sun whenever he called in sick. All eight PMCs acknowledged the unspoken rule, and it was acknowledged during my participant observation as well. When asking Baker if he felt punished for calling in sick, he said, “No, because I feel punished every day” and laughed. When I interviewed Michael, he described the punishment he received for trying to log the precise hours he worked overtime:

When I had to work a 17-hour shift, they wanted to put 7 hours overtime for me, even though it was more than that. Even though it's only a few dollars difference, but it's more to do with the principles. I had to work all that time, and then I have to go back in the morning, and they don't want to pay me the full amount? I said something – I tried to take it to the highest level I could, but they said “No, you're putting in 7 hours. End of story.” Then after that, I was at a shitty post for the next 3 to 4 weeks. So, I didn't get the money I deserved even though I helped them out and worked all that time, and slept for a couple of hours and went right back... they couldn't help me out and treated me like shit for the next month.

Michael and Baker stated they felt no job security whatsoever. The company would usually find ways to fire their employees rather than solve underlying issues. For example, Michael explained that a private military contractor who suffers a heat stroke would be sent home (after being treated) and that it happens “at least once a week on day shift, passing out or needing medical attention. Especially for the newer guys.” This baffled me as that would be their first response was to send the employee home, rather than address the fact that this was due to prolonged physical exposure and create a safer working environment for these employees. “Maybe you shouldn't have this guy under the sun for 12 hours with no shade

and actually rotate us,” he added sarcastically. Additionally, they are also known to fire employees just because they are large in bodies. One of the ways they did this was through shaving profiles. He explained that once they allowed shaving profiles, they were quick to fire people due to its misuse:

The project manager, the big boss, said: “I know how these things work. If you don’t need one and you get one, I’ll be coming for your ass.” He just said that. A lot of people didn’t get one, but four did, and they didn’t really need it. And you can tell they didn’t need it cause first of all they’re white – black people usually can get one easily ‘cause they get shaving bumps pretty bad... but the four that got it just got it because they wanted to grow a beard, within a month they all got fired. They found ways. One guy called out and posted a picture online – they found it, and he was fired immediately. One guy, just for being late once, they fired him. You never get fired for being late just once. And once, I was at a gate that leads to all the towers. There were two guys with me with shaving profiles, and the project manager pulls up and was talking to me. The project manager says, “I have to find these two knuckleheads with these bullshit shaving profiles. I told them not to fuck with me. I’m coming for their ass!” Those guys were fired within a week or two for some made up reason.

Carter, an African American PMC, has been contracting for almost nine years after serving in the Air Force for 22 years. On November 15, we met at the Cheesecake Factory in Mahboula, Kuwait so he can eat before his basketball game. He is the only African American I have conducted an in-depth interview with. Carter is a dramatic old man – he used the restaurant floor as his stage when talking about his experiences. He loves running, playing basketball, and his best friend is his mother. When discussing his experiences, he did not complain. He does acknowledge that there exists a degree of exploitation, racism, and micromanagement, but as an African American PMC that occasionally experiences racism at work, he stressed that to keep your job, “You gotta keep your head down.”

Another reality that surprised these employees were the levels of micromanaging they experienced. The micromanaging of PMCs appears to be Contracting Co.’s method of shaping them to act as representatives of the United States. They are compelled to adhere by dress standards, stay out of altercations, and abide by the law despite technically being

civilians. Every PMC I have met during my participant observation and through in-depth interviews has acknowledged and disapproved the ways they are micromanaged by *Contracting Co.* It seemed confusing to me that they would be micromanaged and treated like soldiers when they are civilians⁹. When conducting participant observation, I noticed that most of the contractors live in company housing. These PMCs are assigned to an apartment based on its size. In the case of Michael and Schmidt, their apartment was spacious enough to house the two of them. Although they are civilians, all their televisions are subscribed to the Armed Forces Television Network (AFN), in which I would occasionally see advertisements for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders aimed towards the veteran community. Furthermore, they are occasionally subject to unannounced routine checks for drugs, alcohol, prostitutes, and trafficked persons. They must sign in every single visitor in, and they are not allowed to keep a visitor in for more than 24 hours. Parties are forbidden.

Some of these private military contractors have moved out of these company housings. Carter despised the concept of being micromanaged both on and off base. He has refused to live in company housing and has been on stipend for over eight years. He joked that as a man in his mid-50s, he felt like a child, and had moved out of these housings as soon as he realized how controlling they were being. Rodriguez, a veteran in his 50s, contends that they are micromanaging the PMCs because they need to be sanitized:

Because we're not sanitized. We're amongst the people. We speak to whomever it is we choose to speak to – go wherever we want to go. I know this to be true because it happened to me. What I can tell you is that the difference between us and the military is that they're sanitized. They're not amongst the people – not polluted. We are the people you can get information from because we're out there.

The way the PMCs live appears to reflect Erving Goffman's concept of total institutions. According to Goffman, a total institution is "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable

period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961, 1). A total institution is a bureaucratic institution that has encompassing tendencies. Members of the total institution (inmates) eat, sleep, and play, and work in such settings. Goffman argues that these total institutions function under a single authority, and is structured in a manner that mortifies those that live in it, as it is unsustainable and reduces the person from an independent being to that of a depersonalized item in a batch. It takes most of their time and disrupts peaceful domestic existence.

Goffman lists five types of institutions with encompassing tendencies. These are institutions that exist look after those who cannot care for themselves, institutions that house persons who are unable to take care of themselves and pose a risk to others, institutions that take in the antisocial and delinquents, and those that provide retreats and training stations for religious purposes (Goffman 1961, 4-5). The lives of the PMCs, however, resemble the fourth type of total institutions, which intends to “[establish] the better to pursue some work-like task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks, ships, boarding schools” and that of the like (ibid, 5). He asserts that these are not definitive, but they all have similar encompassing tendencies and characteristics.

Goffman postulates that the members within a total institution exist in a prison-like environment, regulated by the staff and populated by the inmates. The inmates are employees within the total institution that are monitored and have restricted contact with the outer world. The staff, on the other hand, supervise the inmates. The staff maintain control over the inmates in an attempt to monitor and regulate them, where even visitations are controlled (Lemert and Branaman 1997, 55; Goffman 1961, xiii-12). The inmates, managed and regulated in batches, are subjected to an involuntary membership where their day-to-day activities are highly scheduled and regimented. They exist in batches within these institutions because it is easier for the staff to regulate and monitor the inmates. Control is vital in these

establishments as the staff need control to regulate punishments or rewards, and to do this, inmates must be constantly surveilled. Although the PMCs are security, which fit the narrative of Goffman's understanding of staff, it is really the sergeants that are the staff in this case. The sergeants have the control over the PMCs as they make sure they look presentable and monitor them during their working hours. The project manager himself is also staff as he administrates punishments, authorizes inspections, and directly fires staff.

Due to their restricted access to the outside world and the characteristics of the total institutions, the inmates eventually undergo a process of intrapersonal mortification where they are stripped of their identity and role as individuals in society. Goffman explains several ways in which they are mortified. Firstly, because the institution does not resemble a culture, they do not experience neither acculturation nor assimilation. Rather, they experience a role dispossession where they are separated from their role as community members and citizens. Their lives are totally engrossed in their work and their work-environment, and they sometimes lose their rights as citizens also. They also undergo procedures of "trimming" or "programming", in which inmates are stripped from their sense of personhood. They are reduced to numbers in a batch to ease bureaucratic processes, and may undergo "obedience tests" in which inmates, like animals, are broken-in. Inmates may even have their possessions seized or replaced, and are restricted of autonomy and pleasures. They also experience a personal defacement as they are stripped of their usual appearance, and subject to contaminative exposures (Goffman 1961, 12-35; Lemert and Branaman 1997, 55-56).

This is seen in the lives of the private military contractors. The PMCs reside in a prison-like institution where their days are regulated by Contracting Co., especially since the majority of their time is spent within the confines of the base. They are monitored both inside and outside their place of employment. In their own 'home', they are subjected to regular inspections and experience more restrictions than regular civilians do, such as controlling

visitations and prohibiting parties. Although they do not sleep in the site of the “institution,” the company housing is still within the jurisdiction of *Contracting Co.*, creating the same encompassing impression of a total institution where all activities are regulated under a single authority. These private military contractors also experience mortification as individuals and as members of society. Firstly, the PMCs experience interpersonal degradation as they are removed from their home land, placed in an alien country, and have very little time to interact with society. The PMCs also moved to Kuwait with few of their own possessions. Michael stated that they were instructed to act as if they are in deployment, and to come bringing two t-shirts, two pants, and necessities. In that regard, they do experience a form of role dispossession since they are no longer recognized, active members in their own community, which ultimately leads to intrapersonal degradation. Furthermore, although not as severe as Goffman illustrates, the PMCs also experience some degree of intrapersonal mortification. They recognize that they are reduced to objects. Comments such as “We are just numbers to them,” “They don’t care about us,” and “We are expendable,” were repeatedly articulated during the in-depth interviews. Three different PMCs (Arnold, Michael, and Baker) have expressed similar sentiments that they felt replaceable. The nature of its job itself, which happens to either be too strenuous or too boring, is also directly related to Goffman’s characteristics of total institutions. Goffman states that “whether there is too much work or too little, the individual who was work-oriented on the outside tends to become demoralized by the work system” of the total institution (Goffman 1961, 11).

From Hero to Worker

Through interviewing my informants, I noticed an element of escapism. Somehow, they are escaping something substantial. Whether it was financial instability and hardship, depression, post-traumatic stress, a failed marriage (or marriages), or the worsening political situation in the United States, they all willingly choose to be in Kuwait because their

alternative scenario is less favorable. Five of eight of the PMCS have expressed the sentiment that they are content with working all these hours, in Kuwait, and on a base in the middle of nowhere because they would rather be here than there. Even though they get paid for 11.5 hours instead of their actual 14-15 hours a day, they stated that as long as they're getting their money and not struggling back home, they're okay. Besides, it helps them focus on anything other than the reality of their situation.

To three of my subjects, escapism naturally proved to be more harmful than beneficial. It was easier at first to justify working as a PMC for the military bases because of the pay, the accommodation Contracting *Co.* provides, and that they all can easily save money due to the lack of taxation policies in Kuwait. Nevertheless, because of the work hours, the number of pay cuts, the company's lack of employee care, and the health implications that arise from working too much, it has left him questioning whether it was all worth it.

There are different degrees of these sentiments, of course. For example, to Rodriguez, he experienced financial instability as a working-class individual living in New York, several divorces, and worst of all, post-traumatic stress in which he conceals in dark humor. Rodriguez enjoys this job insofar as it has been the first time he has managed to save money. It is not a matter of convenience to him, but of survival.

On September 25, I interviewed Rodriguez, a good friend of Michael's. Rodriguez and Michael sat next to each other on the plane from Frankfurt to Kuwait and have been close friends since. He invited Michael and me in and gave me a quick tour of his home¹⁰. His place seemed small and compact. It did not look like a home of someone who was staying here for long, let alone could fit him, his wife, and his cat. There were still unopened boxes, but the plants made it look more homelike.

Although doubtful at first, Rodriguez quickly returned to his theatrical self. He often spoke in different voices and talked to himself as different people for comedic purposes. Born and raised in New York with Puerto Rican descent, his accent is even more audible when enthusiastic. Despite Rodriguez's ample amounts of jokes and theatrics, he came across as a conscious, sober, traumatized, paranoid individual. When I asked him why he chose this apartment which is compact, on the rooftop, and not easily accessible, he replied with "that's exactly it." Rodriguez explained that he liked its positioning and that it had a few escape routes – sometimes, he said, the military never really leaves you.

Rodriguez has had a troubled past, though he spoke of it nonchalantly. He had been deployed around the world and had spent quite a while in Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, and Afghanistan. Rodriguez clarified how he has begun to feel like he does not believe in the same values the United States stands for now. He is confident that the U.S. is about to face its downfall, and that when it does, it is going to collapse from within. He does not wish to return home because of the worsening political situation, and he does not intend to go back home anytime soon. Rodriguez was impassioned when speaking of his disapproval:

The foundations that the United States is built on is what I believe in... It's gotten to the point where... it's a world power. I don't agree that the United States should be the world police. You have a lot of poverty, racial divides, political agendas that don't help the community... and being the world police takes a lot of funding and don't seek the betterment of the people. If the United States would put in the amount of money that they're putting in worldwide to maintain that world police status into the U.S. to try to fix things, the U.S. would be at a higher morale than it is now. They're cutting off the middle class, and there only going to have the poor and the rich. I'm not a communist, I'm not a socialist, but I think that they're taking it to a point where I believe they're bullying the world now and the world knows that.

When interviewing him, he seemed to speak of traumatic events indifferently. He washed the dishes while casually mentioning the devastation he had seen in Kuwait and

Libya and continuously made dark jokes throughout the interview. However, when he spoke of comradeship and friends, he cried. He had distanced himself from his past, but it is his past that makes this job a good one. Rodriguez announced that finally is saving money, and he is not in the States. Living in Kuwait, however, is complicated. He enjoys being here because he is not ready to go back to the United States. He does not approve of their political agendas anymore. But when we spoke of his opinions about the citizens here, he does not care for them, although he is surprised by the younger generation of Kuwaitis. He believes they are ungrateful and have no idea of the devastation he had witnessed in the Gulf War:

When I came to Kuwait in '91, I lost my best friend out here, and I lost about eleven guys. In the course of that time, I saw so many dead bodies [washes dishes]. These were either Kuwaitis or Kuwaiti soldiers, or they were babies, women, children, you know? No country deserves to be raped in every aspect of the word. Whether its land, your women, your resources... No country deserves that. So, when Saddam Hussain came here and he did what he did, and I saw what was happening... that wasn't the only country that was actually suffering. Liberia was another country that we had gone to, and they were doing the same thing. In that country, they raped the women, they killed the men, and they killed the children.

As for Schmidt, it was essential that he leaves his marriage and home country. When I asked him why he came here, his response was superficial. At first, he told me that he came to Kuwait after breaking up with a girl. The interview then became intense. He acted happy, but he often suggested that he was lonely. He told me several times during the interview that it was lonely after Michael had left and I stopped visiting (I would regularly visit Michael), and that he did not know how to meet people here. Half an hour into the interview, Schmidt had gotten up and showed me his collection of alcohol bottles, and had begun drinking. Two hours later, well after he could not walk straight, he drunkenly revealed that his wife of less than a year cheated on him and made an incredibly graphic sex tape. He filed for a divorce and found himself in Kuwait twelve days later. His best friend eventually married her. His

experiences with women still haunt him, he told me. He feels overwhelmed with loneliness. Schmidt does not feel ready to go back to the United States, and the only reason he enjoys being here is that he is not over there. It was then that I realized he was getting very drunk and I felt too uncomfortable to stay - it felt wrong hearing all of this.

It was evident that he was becoming miserable. Within the last eight months, Schmidt became moody and less talkative. His apartment was slowly filling up with cough medicines, various types of sleeping medication, and he has engaged in reckless behavior by drinking heaps of alcohol almost every night. He does not bother to properly conceal the alcohol bottles from the inspectors, stashing them carelessly in his guerilla container in his bedroom, which they could unlock at any time. I have not seen him or heard of him going to bed sober for a very long while. Additionally, not long ago, Schmidt became infamously known for causing a tantrum because he did not get relieved to get his daily Dr. Pepper. He threatened his sergeants with his resignation. This is unusual behavior as typically he is patient and kind.

Schmidt acknowledges he is escaping his problems and admits that the long work hours help him think less. Nevertheless, he currently finds himself in a position where he is questioning whether this job is worth it. Night shift can be uneventful and dull, and it is evident that he is looking for other ways to distract him, hence the increasing tendency to self-medicate.

Jessen-Diaz, on the other hand, came to Kuwait eager get out of both the United States and his position in Law Enforcement. Jessen-Diaz is the only PMC I have interviewed that is not a veteran. A 27-year-old thrill seeker from Arizona, Jessen-Diaz is born to a family of Peruvian and Danish descent. His parents emigrated to the United States with nothing in their pockets. His dad lost both his parents at the age of seven, and after their death, his parents' farm was confiscated and was forced to come to the United States to find work. Jessen-Diaz is proud when he speaks of his parents; although his father can be abusive and

strict, his parents both built themselves up from nothing and were financially stable enough to allow him to explore his identity. They were over-exploited and worked much harder to cushion Jessen-Diaz from the exploitation they themselves experienced. He spent a year in college studying Architecture, then Business, and then dropped out and entered Law Enforcement. He loves his dirt bike and has professionally participated in competitions. He has the life they never got to have.

On the 8th of November, Jessen-Diaz and I met at a Caribou Coffee in Mahboula as it was close to his apartment and gym. He is young, but he has an outlook on the world that corresponds to someone who has lived and seen too much. His experiences in Law Enforcement has provided him with a sense of reality that had made him callous and facetious; he has seen suicides, murders, and worked to take down Mexican drug dealers, pedophiles, and delinquents. At 25, he had become severely depressed after witnessing the corpse of a 2-month-old girl who was beaten to death by her psychopath father. Furthermore, the realities of America had disillusioned him, and he had grown bitter to the political situation arising in his home country. Being a hard proponent of facts and a nonpartisan, he is baffled by the left-wing propaganda and their tendency to blow everything out of proportion and the right-wing promoting an “Idiot and an asshole for a president.” It was then that he decided to become to Kuwait and become a PMC; he needed to get out.

Jessen-Diaz, being a hard worker and from a background that enjoys a little more financial stability, expresses that “if you don’t like it, you can always leave,” condemning those who complain that they deserve better than to be exploited. However, several other PMCs did not have the luxury of having the option. When graduating high school, Michael joined the Air Force for six years. College was never an option for him – his parents came from a lower middle-class background with three boys, and his parents never entertained the thought of higher education. Nevertheless, he had enjoyed being in the military and making

friends. Michael expressed that the army was a way for him to travel around the world and experience different cultures, such as Qatar and Afghanistan. The military was his life. Since the Air Force was overmanned at the time, Michael and other older Air Force troops could not reenlist after their initial six-year enlistment ended.

Michael found it hard to adjust to civilian life. He described it as one of the worst lows in his life. In the military, he had a schedule and a purpose. Civilian life had none of that. A year later, Michael found a PMC position in Afghanistan, but he had twisted his ankle during the physical tests which cost him the position. He was devastated. Wary of getting his hopes up, he applied for a private military contracting position in Kuwait.

Similarly, Michael's financial situation reflected that of Bailey's. Bailey certainly did not have the luxury to leave contracting either. When interviewing him at Caribou Coffee on Friday, October 13, he expressed his desperation to become more financially stable. Bailey is 27 years old, born and raised in North Carolina. Married at 18, he currently has three kids who he could not be more proud of. His eldest son is eight, his middle son is five, and his youngest has just turned two years old. Nevertheless, he is currently in the middle of a divorce and needs to come up with the money to support his children, pay off his ex-wife's house, as well as buy a house for himself. For Bailey, it is not as simple as leaving if dissatisfied – this job makes good money and is situated in a country that is tax-free.

Through these narratives, it is imperative to stress the element of escapism that exists in the lives of these private military contractors. Whether it derived from personal, financial, or traumatic experiences, these individuals have attempted to create a physical distance to emotionally distance themselves from the unpleasant experience. Unlike occupational stressors, these lived experiences propel these men to man the bases. All my interviewees have stressed that they prefer working in these unfavorable conditions because the alternative is also unfavorable. It is the lesser of two evils that provide comfort and distraction.

Detachment and Alienation on All Fronts

In addition to escapism, there also exists a detachment and alienation on all fronts. One of the most tangible examples is the location of their employment. Their workplace created a geographical isolation as it is proximate to Kuwait's borders and removed from society. The site of the base compels them to wake up at either 3:30 AM or 3:30 PM, depending on their shifts. It is not only the distance that created a geographical isolation, but it is also the amount of time they spend there. The long hours away cements the sense of detachment from society as they spend a considerable portion of their day disconnected from society. The average PMC spends an average of 15 hours a day on base, and the effort they put into the job consumes most of their day, and ultimately, most of their week.

This sense of alienation and detachment hemorrhages into every aspect of their lives. Due to the nature of their jobs, they mostly do not have time for a 'normal' life. Their job creates not only a physical and geographic isolation but also a social one. The PMCs I interviewed articulated that maintaining a personal life is challenging and that it takes substantial effort, especially now that they feel burned-out. Naturally, the private military contractors prefer to get at least 7 hours of rest, which is compromised when they have other commitments. They can have up to 2 hours to themselves if they want to have at least 7 hours of sleep. During their free time, almost all the private military contractors I have spoken to (both formally and informally), stated that they preferred low impact activities to wind down, such as watching television, playing on their Xbox or PlayStation, or just staying in bed. On their one day off, they reported that they spend it trying to catch up with chores they did not have time to do during the week, such as cleaning, meal preparations, and getting their uniforms pressed for the next day. Michael, Baker, and Rodriguez, who all have significant others in Kuwait, stated that maintaining relationships took a toll on their sleep, their ability to do chores, and exercise. On their day off, they find themselves attempting to find a balance

between seeing their significant others and trying to catch up with unfinished chores. It is exceptionally irritating for them if they do not get their chores done during their day off because that would spill into the next week. This is relative to Goffman's features of total institutions as he asserts that one of the features of total institutions is that 'batch' living of regulated and monitored activities creates an unsustainable environment for meaningful domestic existence unsustainable (Goffman 1961, 11).

Baker, a 27-year-old veteran who has worked here for two years, stated via a phone call that he has witnessed himself begin to experience burnout, and he witnessed his coworkers begin to look "really haggard"; "we're just animated bags of flesh at this point," he casually points out. The phone call with Baker lasted two hours, which took place on Saturday, November 10, at 11:00 AM. Baker was born and raised in California, Los Angeles. Discontent with the labor surplus and the loud, bustling nature of the city, Baker joined the military. He had spent four years on deployment in Afghanistan and Japan. He defined himself as an oddity; he used to be consumed in the "L.A. lifestyle" until suddenly he felt the need to break away. After serving for four years, he left the military and became an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). Seeing the financial prospects contracting claimed to provide, he then applied for a position to Kuwait. Though he hints at a traumatic experience in Los Angeles that catalyzed the series of events, he did not feel comfortable to share, and I did not wish to persist.

When I asked Baker how much he liked his job, he rated it a 35%. He enjoys the pay the position provides. Nevertheless, he heavily criticized their poor management, their lack of job advancement, and that they tend to adopt a biased, "High-school-like clique where they promote who they see fit... it's not about how hard a worker you are here. It's about how much of a kiss-ass you are. We're basically working for a bunch of pussies." Baker is aware that the company has been losing a lot of employees the past few months, and he blames

them for it. He claimed that the company would often get low ratings on job sites, and expressed his disappointment in the company. Sadly, he believes that the company will not change their ways. He testifies that it is the hardworking employees that are quitting because they have had enough with the company's shady ways. "It's the scumbags that stick around" he explained, "and they outnumber the good people, and then they get better... everything else! Do you know how many scumbags have moved past us and gotten more cush-cush positions?" Three of my informants have shared similar sentiments, and they observe the trend: the veterans do their job diligently and without complaining, but they are rarely the ones that move forward.¹¹ Michael added that those who have been promoted lately have never been in the military and are unqualified, and that their underlying quality is being a "kiss-ass."

Additionally, the perception they have of Kuwaiti culture further entrenches the sense of alienation and detachment. They are instructed by *Contracting Co.*, firstly, to avoid speaking to locals about several topics, which had made some of them completely put off by speaking to the locals altogether. It had also made it incredibly difficult for me to talk to these private military contractors. It was only through Michael that I was able to enter the inner circle without being considered an outsider, rather, I was just Michael's friend. When speaking to these PMCs, I had understood that the cultural courses *Contracting Co.* had provided them through their in-processing training were faulty, exaggerated, and acontextual.

When PMCs first arrive in Kuwait, they must go through an in-processing training that prepares them for the job and provides them a crash course of Kuwaiti culture. However, these were heavily misconstrued. Schmidt was told that Kuwait is a dry country and that "Kuwaiti men dress differently." Schmidt maintains that men just like to dress like women here, instead of seeing it through Kuwait's rich cultural history. During the in-process training, the private military contractors were taught American history in Kuwait, such as

Operation Desert Storm. During my participant observation, I was repeatedly asked whether it is true the Kuwaitis fled their own country during the Gulf invasion. Because of the lack of appreciation the Kuwaitis have towards the Americans, the PMCs believe that the Kuwaitis are ungrateful for the help they provided them. I had been asked that if it was true that “if you look at a niqabi [a face-veil-wearing Muslim woman] in her eyes, you’ll get deported?” And two of the most frequently asked questions were: “Is it true if you hit someone closed fist its considered attempted murder?” and “Why is it that showing someone the soles of your feet considered an insult?”

Jessen-Diaz and Bailey, two of the newest employees, felt troubled by the idea that they were not allowed to help anyone in need. When I expressed my confusion to Jessen-Diaz, he clarified that they were taught not to interfere with anyone during altercations or anyone dying because they will say “*inshallah* [If God is willing].” Jessen-Diaz explained that helping would make them angry that they interfered with fate, and if they were willing to die, “We shouldn’t get in the way of that, but I don’t know how I’d feel if I just watched someone and didn’t help them.” I have only heard this from the recently employed PMCs. Moreover, Jessen-Diaz expressed discontent when speaking of his new place. He has not interacted with any Kuwaitis but adopted a bad impression of them when seeing how his apartment had a “slave room” for domestic workers. He had also witnessed the discrimination domestic workers in Kuwait experience.

It is important to note that the cultural training that was received is not to provide them with a cultural understanding of Kuwait. In fact, it seemed to create a further divide to keep them from getting into altercations and to monitor the private military contractors easily. The spread of distorted facts consequently establishes an unwillingness from the PMCs themselves to interact with Kuwaitis and an unwillingness to understand Kuwaiti culture. In effect, it deepens the sense of detachment and alienation. Furthermore, the exaggerated

notions of what is attempted murder here and the misconstrued and acontextual meaning of “*inshallah*” are prime examples of the false perceptions of Kuwaiti culture. Although this is not to say that some private military contractors refuse to get to know the culture, some do. However, it certainly makes it much more difficult to try to interact when they are instructed to avoid certain topics, discouraging interaction altogether. Jessen-Diaz and Bailey, both PMCs who have been here for at least six months, have still not spoken to a Kuwaiti, and Schmidt (who has been here for almost two years) only spoken to a Kuwaiti man once. Schmidt recalled getting into an altercation with the man. The Kuwaiti man had pushed past a Filipina woman waiting in line at the ATM. Schmidt had yanked him out of line and scolded him, reminding him that he is not above anyone else, is not above the law, and that his nationality and *wasta* “won’t mean shit when he gets out of here.”¹² Also, a large number of PMCs I have spoken to through interviews and participant observation had made their conclusions of Kuwaiti culture through the way they drive – it is horrifying for them. They were aware of this fact when they had done during the in-process training. They all attended an entire PowerPoint presentation about driving in Kuwait. They were shown images of traffic fatalities and were all informed that Kuwait has the highest rate of traffic fatalities in the world due to reckless driving. Additionally, the way in which they are encouraged to keep a distance from Kuwaiti culture is an ill-calculated, systematic approach that cements a divide between Kuwaiti and American culture. It is another method to constrain them as representatives of the United States.

The alienation and detachment experienced by these contractors can be paralleled with Karl Marx’s concept of alienation. According to Marx, alienation occurs when the propertyless workers are exploited by the property owners, which he calls the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This exploitation is propelled by the capitalist mode of production through a private industrial society where there is an increase in demand and competition. Marx argues

that capitalism has allowed the rise of competition by private businesses, which demands more workers to provide more labor for competition. In turn, more labor is expected from the worker by the property-owners. Because the workers produce more labor, they become increasingly engrossed in their work as in order to attain a reasonable standard of living. This, Marx illustrates, is the exploitation that happens with the rise of capitalism. The workers have become a part of a bleak routine where they make products they could not purchase themselves, and were coerced to work longer hours, repeating the same tedious jobs for little pay. Their lives are reduced from social beings to simply workers without agency, control, or meaning (Marx 1845, 28-29).

A worker experiences four types of alienation when being exploited. In his article “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” Marx describes alienations a worker experiences through being exploited, and that the worker feels alienation from the product, the production, from other workers, and from the self. The first type of alienation is the alienation from the product he produces. In an industrialized society where the worker produces labor in factory-settings, the worker is reduced to a minimal skill and the result of the product does not belong to him but to the property owners (or the bourgeoisie) (Marx 1845, 29; Moberg 2013, 74). Due to the division of labor in factory settings, there is a distance from the final product. It is because of this distance that subsequently, the worker cannot identify with the final product that is created. His work is taken away as something that does not belong to him and reappears as an object alien. Marx explains, “The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him” (Marx 1845, 29). The worker will feel a connection or a sense of fulfillment to the finished product, and as the product becomes more powerful, the worker becomes more chained to his labor. This reduces the worker’s sense of

control and agency as his life is devoted more to the object than to the person's self. Marx analogizes this object-bondage situation to that of religion, where the more a person is devoted to god, the less he retains of himself. Like a man putting his faith in God, "The greater the product, the less is he himself" (Marx 1845, 29).

Moreover, due to the increase of competition, not only does it produce more labor, depriving workers of their sense of agency, but it coerces the worker to provide labor to attain the means to survive. It is a double-edged sword as not only are they alienated from the product regarding its production, but they are alienated from it in the market. This aggressive circle created by capitalism drives the worker into poverty. He becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, and the worker himself is then reduced to a commodity and a slave to his employer. The worker begins to depend on his work due to his diminishing purchasing power. Marx illustrates that "the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production" (Marx 1845, 26).

The second type of alienation is the experience of being alienated from the workers' own work. The worker experiences a sense of estrangement from the activity of production and the labor processes. As Marx analogizes, if the worker is alienated from the product, then the worker must experience an active alienation when producing the object. Due to the division of labor in the industrialized society, the tasks become tedious, monotonous, and repetitive. It mortifies the self and creates a disconnection from both the world and the product. The worker's labor becomes coerced, as the activity of production does not belong to him and does not bring him satisfaction and fulfillment. It belongs to the property-owners (Marx 1845, 30).

Estranged labor also occurs when workers experience a detachment from the outside world. Men are free, social beings (Marx uses the term species-being), and he contends that

the exploitation of class-systems creates an alienation from nature and other workers. When detached from nature and others, man does not reach his full potential as species-being, but in actuality, they are just being, existing. The mortification workers experience from the monotony and unfulfilling labor processes deprives men of conscious living and contributing to a collective community. Marx asserts that conscious living is what separates man from animal, and the alienation these workers experience reduces them an animal-like state of merely existing. Additionally, exploitation also results in the alienation of workers from other workers. Marx explains that “What applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man’s relation to the other man, and to the other man’s labor and object of labor” (Marx 1845, 32).

Marx’s concept of alienation can be observed through the lives of the PMCs in Kuwait. Similar to Marx’s theory, there is an ongoing class-exploitation they face on two fronts. The first type of exploitation they experience is through the Marxist definition of class-exploitation where the bourgeoisie takes advantage of the proletariat. In this instance, it is *Contracting Co.* that is taking advantage of the PMCs through exploitation through their employment. These employees work an estimated 90 hours a week for a private company to secure the bases. They work long hours, perform mind-numbing tasks in unsafe working environments, and are coerced into working more to avoid punishment. They are penalized for calling in sick, standing up for themselves, and now must work more to compensate for the pay cuts.

The bureaucracy of empire also benefits from their exploitation. The U.S. government, military, and the Pentagon all benefit from this class-exploitation to propel the proliferation and maintenance of overseas bases. The PMCs who have come to work in the U.S. bases in Kuwait have all come from lower to middle-class backgrounds. They have taken this job because of the poor economic prospects in their home country and because of

the financial stability they hope it provides. It is the escapism that allows them to rationalize their presence as private military contractors and justify staying longer. Although the job does provide better pay and prospects, they do not choose this job voluntarily. It is coerced. The PMCs whom I have conducted in-depth interviews (all eight of them) have all stated that working as a PMC in Kuwait is not where they planned to be. Michael, Rodriguez, and Johannesen explained that they saw themselves in the military and never thought to see themselves out of it. Other such as Jessen-Diaz, Bailey, Baker, and Schmidt state that they use this profession as a stepping stone to another better position, or that they need this job to improve their financial situations. Carter never wants to leave, as this job provides him with the financial stability and solitude he yearns for.

Although Marx acknowledges that laborers feel disconnected from the product regarding its finalization and affordability, is through the stories of the PMCs that indicate that they feel distanced from the object of their production primarily due to its intangibility. Security is immaterial, and it is the type of profession that is only acknowledged when workers are not doing their job. PMCs, such as Baker, struggle to find self-realization and reward because of the intangible product they provide. The mindless, repetitive, and dull tasks they perform for most of their week have no physical outcome. This was especially shown when Baker stated, "At least when they work in sweatshops, they're actually producing something." Furthermore, it is the shift from hero to worker that makes them more vulnerable to the feeling of alienation. As soldiers, their services were not entirely intangible. Though they did provide the same militaristic services, they had awards, recognition, titles, and a sense of purpose.

Furthermore, Marx's third and fourth theories of alienation are also reflected in the lives of the PMCs. These PMCs have experienced alienation from nature and other human beings. They lost the connection to nature through mortification of the self, which Baker

indicated when he described the employees (including himself) as haggard-looking and animated bags of flesh. They observe the lack of fulfillment and burnout in themselves and in others. The sense of alienation is even more embedded as they experience a geographic isolation due to the nature of their employment. They are alienated and detached on all fronts. The long shifts and monotonous routine limits these private military contractors' ability to maintain a social life and entrenches this feeling of physical alienation. It removes their ability to act as social-beings and depreciates their ability to contribute to society and achieve their human potential. It mortifies their ability to contribute to society as active members which break down communal bonds.

Coping

Baker enjoys pulling pranks on others at work – especially towards his higher-uppers. During our phone interview, Baker told me that because he believed that those who work for *Contracting Co.* all act like children, and so he treats them as such. Baker could not contain his laughter when told me he would often start rumors in the workplace, justifying that “if they want to act like they’re in high school, they might as well have the drama.” He would start petty rumors about the sergeants, the project manager, and events that would make the coworkers laugh and anger those in charge. In several occasions, the project manager himself yelled at all the men, roaring “This isn’t fucking high school!” Baker’s rumors were so inflammatory that the project manager resorted to emailing the entire company to dispel and deflate the various rumors that Baker started. When I asked him what his favorite rumor was, he recounted the time that he told his coworkers that *Contracting Co.* was planning on cutting everyone’s pay down to 13 dollars an hour. To those who knew Baker started the rumor, it was hilarious. But it infuriated everyone else. The PMCs organized a mass call-out which severely undermanned the base. Unfortunately, his prank deemed true. He gave a mirthless laugh as we pondered the possibility of *Contracting Co.* being inspired by the prank.

It is through Baker's anecdote that I appreciated how these PMCs find ways to cope. This is not to say that every single PMC on base has had an unfavorable experience. I have been told that there are those who truly enjoy their job. However, through my observations, I have noticed that almost all the PMCs feel otherwise. Their tedious work environment and the various forms of alienation and detachment they experienced have deemed difficult, traumatic, or unbearable. It is in their outlook that dictates how they manage to cope. Consequently, they all find their ways to manage through the week. Through both my participant observation and in-depth interviews, I have noticed that the PMCs find ways to wind down stabilize the physiological stress they experience. For example, those who worked the night shifts would usually state that they like to go to the gym and get active as their shift is slow, dull, and repetitive. For those who worked the day shift, they are often too exhausted to exercise, which annoyed them immensely. The job has interfered with the way they exercise and eat, and they have told me they have either gained or lost drastic amounts of weight, and that they have never felt unhealthier. During their day off, these men are often too tired to exercise, and would instead try to wind down by being alone, reading books, playing games on their Xbox or PlayStation – anything low impact.

Another method of coping is emotionally. I have noticed during the in-depth interviews that these private military contractors often go to lengths to maintain their sanity. One of the interviewees, Johannesen, was in the U.S. Marine Corps for eight years. After the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11, he was motivated to reenlist but instead joined the Washington State National Guard for nine years¹³. When we discussed his job dissatisfaction, I asked him how he manages to push through. He replied that he was taught to have a strong work ethic and never to complain, and his faith in God pushes him through tough times. He had always been religious, but he relies on faith whenever he faces difficulties.

I also observed that a lot of these PMCs use humor to cope. This is an unexpected theme that arose during my research. I noticed that many of these PMCs tried to make light of a bad situation using humor, such joking about their job dissatisfaction, and poking fun at themselves and others. When Michael had to work a 17-hour-shift, he had told me that all of them made it through the shift by joking around and poking fun at one another. Those with disturbing experiences (such as Jessen-Diaz, Rodriguez, Baker, Michael, and Schmidt) were more inclined to use humor to cope. Jessen-Diaz, Rodriguez, and Baker – PMCs who have had traumatizing experiences, especially employed a lot of dark humor. The interview I had with Rodriguez was extremely insightful as I noticed he would speak of traumatic experiences very nonchalantly, creating a distance from the memory of it all. Jessen-Diaz also used a lot of humor to describe the bodies he's seen during his time in Law Enforcement. He recalled the time he had to confiscate a gun from the hands of a man who had died and whose body was undergoing rigor mortis. Jessen-Diaz laughed and called him "a stubborn shit."

Although I am describing coping mechanisms of experiences prior to their employment at *Contracting Co.*, I have noticed coping mechanisms they employ to counteract the burnout they feel. Michael, for instance, needed to distance himself from work. He made it a rule to not talk about his job off base. I have noticed the same with Rodriguez, Jessen-Diaz, Baker, Bailey, and Carter. They seemed to have experience in how to deal with occupational stress and distancing. Schmidt, however, had difficulty coping with being micromanaged at work and did not attempt to distance himself from work. This seemed to stem from the fact that he was a Navy reserve in the military. Unlike the other veterans, he had not been through grueling experiences in the military, since the Navy reserves is considered an easy position. When things got overwhelming, it distressed him. In one instance, he told Michael and I that he almost punched the sergeant for micromanaging him.

Another instance, he angrily snapped at his sergeant and co-workers for not delivering his Dr. Pepper or letting him go to the commissary to get it himself. He threatened to resign on the spot.

The way these PMCs employ humor as a coping mechanism relates strongly to the research conducted by Michael Sliter, Aron Kale, and Zhenyu Yuan. Their research paper analyzed 176 firefighters and the ways they are exposed to traumatic occupational stressors. Sliter et al. investigated the use of coping humor as a protective strategy to buffer the effect of traumatic stressors. Sliter et al. sought to analyze the relationship of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic stressors, in which PTSD includes the cognitive and behavioral symptoms of increased arousal, reliving the trauma, and avoidance and numbing. They evaluated the relationships of traumatic occupational stressors in relation to burnout (feeling of exhaustion and disengagement) and absenteeism (which they define as behaviorally avoiding work as a protective strategy). In their research paper, Sliter, Kale, and Yuan defined coping humor as a “trait propensity to utilize humor as a method for coping with stressful or demanding situations” (Sliter et al. 2014, 259). Because humor can facilitate social bonding, buffer stress effects, and help individuals approach situations in a more positive manner, they believed that humor could aid firefighters in dealing with traumatic stressors such as PTSD, absenteeism, and burnout.

Sliter, Kale, and Yuan found that traumatic stressors predicted “cognitive (PTSD symptoms), affective (burnout), and behavioral (absenteeism) outcomes in firefighters” (Sliter et al. 2014, 266). Additionally, they determined a positive correlation between PTSD and burnout with firefighters. Based on their results, and 43% recorded having partial PTSD diagnosis, 21% recorded having a 75% chance of experiencing PTSD, while 5% almost certainly fit the criteria. Additionally, firefighters examined had an average absence of 1.23 days, and the descriptive statistics deemed a positive correlation with burnout with the

occupational stressor. Furthermore, humor proved to indeed buffer the effects of traumatic stressors as their research indicated that those with low coping humor had stronger symptoms of PTSD and those who experienced stronger burnout had low coping humor. Lastly, they found no indication that coping humor succeeded easing the relationship between traumatic stressors and absenteeism (Sliter et al. 2014, 263-265).

Sliter, Kale, and Yuan's study can be extended and applied to the lives of PMCs. Although the research is relevant to individuals that were currently employed in positions such as firefighters, EMTs, police officers, and military personnel, civilian contracting is also categorized as an 'at risk job,' where they are constantly on guard and dealing with external threats. Likewise, their pasts have also had a significant level of trauma in which they still need to use humor to cope. Their former employment was the same 'at risk jobs' in which Sliter et al. encompass in their study. Also, they discussed the usage of dark humor in which they called "gallows humor." Gallows humor, according to the paper, is the employment of grim humor as a response to a dire situation. They state that gallows humor "arises from stressful, traumatic, or life-threatening situations ... It is a method for maintaining sanity in an "insane" situation" (Sliter et al. 2014, 267). Gallows humor was detected in Jessen-Diaz, Rodriguez, and Smith, who have all been through traumatic experiences in Law Enforcement, in war, and as an EMT respectively. Sliter et al.'s study incorporates the ways individuals try to distance themselves from an unwanted situation and to regain a sense of control. The attempt to salvage control helps them manage the absurdities of life that drive them insane. The physical, social, and geographical isolation the PMCs experience, have in fact placed them in a state of trying to rationalize the absurdism, trying to seek meaning, and wondering if they were meant to end up in the middle of a desert in Kuwait. Humor, thus, is the PMCs' way of coping with their past, existentialism, and absurdism.

In addition to their coping mechanisms, the PMCs also seem to make secondary adjustments in their lives. Secondary adjustments, according to Erving Goffman, are alterations made by an inmate that does not necessarily challenge authority. In fact, these adjustments are made to either obtain prohibited pleasures or obtain pleasures through prohibited means. In a sense, secondary adjustments act as the inmate code. It is a form of underground system of communication in which the inmate adheres by the anticipated role, but can also navigate through their own social system. It is through secondary adjustments that inmates regain a sense of individuality after a process of mortification. Goffman's concepts of secondary adjustments that illustrate the experience of these private military contractors and their attempt to make sense and gain control over an environment they have no control over (Goffman 1961, 54-56). I have noticed that the PMCs have several ways in which they regain their sense of agency. At work, I have been told by several PMCs, including Michael, that they tend to use their phones, iPads, and other devices when they are unsupervised. Furthermore, another example of secondary adjustments and true to its definition, rests in the PMCs underground connection of alcohol suppliers and connections. Although they are prohibited from consuming and possessing alcohol, the contractors obtain these forbidden pleasures through their contacts, and sometimes each other. Over the year, I have also observed several instances a few PMCs in the company of commercial sex workers, another method in which some contractors obtain forbidden pleasures as not only are they forbidden by the company, but it is also illegal in Kuwait to do so as well.

Loyalty Works Both Ways

In this research paper, I discuss the ways in which these PMCs are exploited and alienated. However, it is worth noting that these PMCs are not helpless and passive. They fight back. When rumors of the second pay cut surfaced between August and September 2016, several PMCs organized mass sick-outs. Around 20 men or so had called in sick, which

severely undermanned the base. When Michael lived in company housing, I would regularly see PMCs greet one another and ask if they were going to take part in the strike. The PMCs even organized sick-outs through their WhatsApp group chat. Schmidt was exceptionally excited when it came to sick-outs. He often would try to rally employees, and he seemed to enjoy the teamwork and comradeship that accompanied the rebellion. He had gotten into trouble a couple of times for being one of the only few to participate in the botched mass sick-out. I had noticed Michael would often have to work harder when the bases were undermanned. However, I noticed that the veterans refused to take part in the mass sick-outs. When I asked why, Rodriguez explained that “A lot of us know in the military that would be considered mutiny, and in times of war they can actually punish you with death.” Everyone else, the veterans agreed, was just acting childish and that they should all do their job without complaining.

The veterans that did not participate in the sick-outs protested differently. When interviewing the veterans, I noticed that the ways in which the veterans rebelled came across as more quiet and severe than the others. They did their job, but they refused to be loyal. In a sense, those who have been soldiers for a while were proud of being soldiers. They abided by all the rules and regulations, and in a way, they were proud to represent the military. They abided by the militaristic standards of dress and appearance and were always well groomed. However, after the second pay cut in September, they rebelled in more subdued ways. When interviewing the veterans (except for Schmidt), they informed me that they stopped ironing their shirts, began to grow their hair past the militaristic requirements, stopped getting their uniforms pressed, and began to sign dates non-military style. All the PMCs stated that they refused to do their work unless they were paid to do so. I noticed that Michael stopped grooming himself the way he always did. He grew his hair out a little more and stopped getting his uniform pressed. Michael also said that he and the others would study for

certificates and positions during their work hours to protest the way they have been treated. He also noticed that a lot of the times, PMCs brought their electronics to work (which is prohibited) and would apply for jobs while on the clock. On several occasions, Michael utilized the time unsupervised to apply for jobs and once even had a job interview over the phone. Rodriguez stopped writing the dates military style because he maintained that it makes him an individual. When speaking to Baker about how he rebelled, he said he stopped getting his uniform pressed every week, rationalizing it with; “Why would I when they cut my pay twice?” Similarly, Michael explained the ways in which several other veterans began to protest:

A huge part of our job is to do the right thing... even when no one is looking, even if we're not on the clock. But now, I can't even bother to do that anymore. We get on base, and we're usually armed by 4:30 [AM], but now when they complain and tell me my cover shirt is not on, I just tell them I don't get paid till 6 and walk away.

It is due to *Contracting Co.*'s tendency to look after itself that catalyzed this wave of disinterest. Loyalty works both ways, and the PMCs indicated that because the company does not care for them, they do not feel the need to meet the company's standards of excellence. They refused to push themselves to excel since they found it useless. Rather, it had become a matter of accomplishing the bare minimum and receiving their paychecks. Carter, who has been here for almost nine years stated he has never seen anything like it. Schmidt, Baker, and Michael all reported that they had seen a lot of their friends resign because of the pay cuts and the corporate bullying. They testified that at least twenty of the private military contractors from their 'batch' had left. The main reason for resigning was because they believed *Contracting Co.* unethically promoted people based on likability and not merit – which made these employees feel depreciated. In that regard, the military felt more rewarding. However, this company is one that takes care of itself before their own, so these

PMCs feel no obligation to stay here, and they do not have a sense of obligation as they did in the military. During the gatherings, I would hear instances of several employees having drawn explicit images in their out-processing surveys, and that many others have written obscene things towards the company and their management.

In that regard, the veterans' lack of loyalty is their greatest protest. When their position is to provide militaristic services, they are not obligated to reciprocate the same respect and loyalty that they once did towards the military. Instead, they treat the company as it is – a private company. They are not required to uphold the same militaristic standards, and these veterans are opposed to doing so, especially when they are targets of corporate bullying and exploitation. From what I have been told through the interviews and observations, *Contracting Co.* seems to expect the militaristic standards of loyalty and performance. They expect these private military contractors to have their cover shirts on and expect them to be in full gear an hour and a half before they get paid to do so. However, *Contracting Co.* made a mistake; they cannot buy their loyalty.

Discussion

It is through the accounts of these PMCs that we can adequately assess the complex nature of their lives as individuals, along with the various forms of alienation they experience as employees. Vine rightfully portrays the U.S. government, the U.S. military, and the Pentagon as a demonizing force that employs private military contractors as force multipliers. I believe that it is certainly correct to condemn the imperialist and colonial projects that the United States take part in. Pattison, too, condemns the privatization of militaristic services. According to Pattison, the employees who work for PMSCs are driven by mercenary motives which contaminates the ability to fight just wars. States that employ PMSCs abdicate their responsibility to protect the state and their citizens and consequently jeopardize communal bonds that allow citizens to fight for a just cause, thus removing the ethical guidelines for just

wars. Finally, Pattison argues that the commodification of militaristic services proves more harmful than good. The privatization of militaristic services adopts a neoliberal market-like ideology of self-interest and profit-seeking, where the motives of profit making bests the need to protect the collective community (Pattison 2015, 1-16).

I agree with some of Pattison's arguments on the ethics of employing PMSCs, such as on the level of the employer and the ethical implications of privatizing militaristic services as a commodity. I also agree with Pattison and Vine's stance on condemning the U.S. government for their imperialistic agendas. Although they are right to criticize the politics of war, Vine and Pattison condemn the broad politics of empire and adopt an acontextual approach without assessing how or why these bases are staffed. I believe that it is wrong to critique without assessing the underlying machinations of empire. I favor Lutz's disposition that an anthropologist should look deeper into the lives of those who make up the empire. We should assess and deconstruct the 'singular thingness' empire represents to further understand the nuances that exist in the makings of empire. Through Lutz's approach, we can evaluate that from the individualistic level, the base in Kuwait is protected by private military contractors due to personal driving factors such as depression, financial instability, trauma, and patriotic disillusionment. Collectively, it is due to their financial instability, economic background, and pasts that encourage them to remain these posts. When I asked these individuals why they remain, they all gave a similar response to Rodriguez's, who adequately summarized it to "Money talks." It is not out of sheer voluntary will, but the fact that they prefer to be here because the alternative scenario is much worse.

Additionally, it is through assessing the narratives of these private military contractors and their circumstances that we see the trend where corporations and bureaucracies exploit them as working-class individuals. My subjects all originate from working-class backgrounds and are classified as ethnic whites, African Americans, or of Hispanic and Latin American

backgrounds. Pattison and Vine saw the imperial projects as a driving force but failed to see that there is a dependency on working-class persons to operate and man these bases. Although they rightfully condemn the inhumane U.S.'s effort of proliferating and maintaining overseas bases, they also remove the human aspect from the people working in these positions and do not see that the military, the government, and the Pentagon have created a disadvantageous environment. Through the narratives of these individuals, and through my participant observations, it has become increasingly clear that the private military contractors who have come to work for *Contracting Co.* experienced economic and financial hardships as working-class individuals. They unfortunately find themselves in a "Catch 22", where although they leave their home country to provide their militaristic expertise to escape financial instability, they remain in an unfavorable position where they are exploited, alienated, and unappreciated as veterans. The nature of the job resembles that of Erving Goffman's total institution in which the private military contractors resemble inmates that exist in a prison-like institution. They are excessively monitored and surveilled through routine inspections in company housings and are regulated and treated like batches. Similar to a total institution, there is a breakdown of all barriers where activities are taken place within the place of work, and they have restricted access to the outer world.

Furthermore, they experience intense alienation through job exploitation. Although their economic background and personal history allowed them to tolerate such an unfavorable environment, it is their job that created a sense of alienation and detachment on all fronts. Comparable to Marx's theory, these PMCs experience alienation in terms of the product and production. They experience alienation from their product due to the division of labor and the intangibility of providing security. The dull, mundane tasks are both unrewarding and degrade the self. They do not remain in these work positions because they like it, rather, it is because they like the escapism and the financial stability it provides. The alienation and

detachment are consolidated through geographical isolation and the long hours they spend there, which detached from society and inhibit their ability to become active members of society. Moreover, the long hours and unfavorable work environment amplify the burnout they experience, which creates what Marx calls “mortification.” They are thus compelled to find ways to cope with the intense burnout and the taxing work hours by adjusting their levels of activity and finding ways to compromise domestic existence with their heavy schedule.

The burnout they experience is also intensified through the lack of prestige and honor that contrasts their experiences in the military. It was during the military that they were truly recognized for their efforts and truly felt the collective reward. As Pattison mentioned, there is a set of “customs and traditions of the professional army helps reinforce communal bonds between citizens as they celebrate war figures, hold parades, veteran days, and so on” (Pattison 2015, 10). Though this excerpt is meant to reveal the importance of communal bonds, it is also an example of the felt prestige and honor of those who served in the military. In the United States, those who served are deemed heroes and the military propaganda highlights their humanistic efforts and the sacrifices they make to protect their homeland. Due to the military propaganda, these men are celebrated as heroes who make sacrifices for the collective good. It may not be deliberate, but these veterans seem to have an expectation of honor and prestige in militaristic services despite which sector controls it. These now-PMCs, however, have come to face the satirical reality that it is through the status of working as a soldier that their services were actually appreciated for their efforts to control their nation. When speaking to the veterans, I noticed that most of the veterans shared the similar sentiment that their sacrifices are not recognized when working as private military contractors, a job where they perform almost the same tasks and provide the same militaristic services. Michael, Rodriguez, Bailey, Johannesen, and Baker have preferred to remain within the military than to work as PMCs and stated that they would rather be deployed in

Afghanistan where they felt like they had a sense of purpose. However, they have all either left the military or were not allowed to reenlist after their initial end of term service, and this position as a private military contractor was their second-best alternative. Unfortunately, except for Schmidt, all my informants have revealed that being an PMC feels unrewarding and their intangible nature of their services have left them feeling as though they are insignificant. Schmidt, however, finally feels like his years of training as a Navy reserve have finally been put to good use.

Through evaluating the lives of these veterans and PMCs that we begin to acknowledge the capitalist system that exploits those of lower socioeconomic classes. It does not merely end at the level of workers' exploitation. In fact, there is an aggressive cycle of dependency where the U.S. exploit the working class. However, this is not to say that the exploitation is blatant. Rather, it is through the disadvantageous environment created by these organizations that allows it to be a form of exploitation precisely because there is no inclination of change. The U.S. government, U.S. military, and the Pentagon need the working class to operate and safeguard overseas bases to maintain its status as empire. It is in this aspect that I believe Pattison fails to adequately understand the complexities on the level of the employees. From what my data has proven, although my subjects are motivated through financial means, they are not motivated to kill for financial gain. Pattison pigeon-holes the reasons why contractors gravitated to such positions. Furthermore, their mercenary motives defined by Pattison removes their "Use of Force" training as veterans and PMCs, the economic hardships that these individuals experience, and the disadvantageous environment created by the military and the U.S. government that feeds on class-exploitation and these veteran's experiences by not being able to reenlist. Therefore, it is evident that Lutz's theory was necessary to dissect the empire as an entity in of itself, and that despite the power of empire, it is run by exploitation and on the backs of class-exploited workers. Though the

thingness of empire creates an illusion of unbroken and unmatched power and strength, it is in reality, fissured. These working-class individuals are the unseen and overshadowed by the corrupt macro politics of imperialism and the neoliberal market economy.

There were some limitations and difficulties in this research. Participant observation was impossible to conduct due to my civilian status and the fact that I am an ‘outsider’, which inhibited my ability to observe PMCs on base and my ability to develop and strengthen rapport with these PMCs. Participant observation would have been helpful in assessing their interactions, their behavior, and the interactions with the few female PMCs on base. Another limitation is the lack of female interviewees, which could have added more insight to the lives of these women in a hyper-masculine environment. Furthermore, due to the time constraint, I would have liked to interview more PMCs to strengthen the data. Nevertheless, through the data of my interviews and participant observation, it is palpable that the shift of militaristic services from public to private company setting has destabilized these veterans. The commodification of their services has provided them with a sense of loss and subjected them to the absurdities of life, where they constantly feel devalued. Being introduced to a private company, they feel the shift from hero to worker as they are providing the same services without the recognition of being a serviceman and without the prestige that accompanies that status.

Conclusion

It is ultimately the privatization of military services that creates such an unsettlingly intense shift from hero to worker. The employment of such services, however, increasingly relies on the class-exploitation of working class-individuals, all who tend to gravitate towards these positions to escape distressing experiences and financial instability. Although these private military contractors choose to remain here in an attempt to create a physical distance from their actual problems, the worsening work conditions have left most of the private

military contractors experiencing extreme job dissatisfaction. Their job dissatisfaction stems from *Contracting Co.*'s tendency to overwork them and their inclination to protect itself first financially and in a 'cost-effective' manner, all the while adopting a neoliberal ideology of self-interest to maximize profit. The excessively monotonous and repetitive tasks the private military contractors perform creates a feeling of indifference and alienates them from the product, from the means of production, from the self, and from others. This reflects the Marxist theory of exploitation in a privatized setting. Their job dissatisfaction is intensified as they experience alienation and detachment through *Contracting Co.*'s false cultural representations of Kuwait, which is methodically misconstrued to scare the PMCs and create a sense of unwillingness to understand the culture.

They are not only workers in a Marxist sense, but also inmates in a total institution. The company itself embodies characteristics of total institutions through its encompassing tendencies, its inmate-staff dichotomy, its tendency to monitor the staff and employ a system of rewards and punishments. The PMCs are micromanaged and treated as batches of people who are reduced to numbers and are easily expendable. Because these PMCs work up to 90 hours a week with only one day off, it affects them in the long run as they feel burned-out, haggard, and disillusioned. They resort to coping methods such as faith and humor to endure the absurdities of life and the excessive burnout they feel, as well as secondary adjustments to procure prohibited pleasures. The private military contractors despise the company's tactics of micromanagement, corporate bullying, lack of management, and lack of job advancement which has bolstered their feelings of contempt towards *Contracting Co.* As a result, they refuse, as former servicemen, to be as loyal to *Contracting Co.* as they were when they were in the military.

Notes

¹ A cover shirt is a shirt they wear over their uniform to hide their names, the name of the company, and the United States of American flag.

² Most of the PMCs worked either the day shift or the night shift also, and their day off never corresponded or would sporadically change. Some PMCs would work for extra days just because their shift changed without prior warning.

³ A shaving profile is a medical note. It allows an employee to receive a waiver. This shaving profile allows them to shave less often to avoid skin irritations and burns.

⁴ For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, I provided pseudonyms for my interviewees and altered names and information of *Contracting Co*, *Maevik Security Solutions*, and *LogisTech*.

⁵ Although the man seemed South Asian, I have noticed that the term the Americans used to describe anyone from South Asia or Far-East Asia is homogenized into the term “Easterner.” Over the course of a year, I noticed that there exists an element of racism towards the non-Americans that also work in these bases. These people originate from mainly Nepal, but others are from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. A large percentage of the Americans mistreat them (including the African Americans). This reminds me the concept of double colonization. Some literatures discuss double colonization in post-colonial feminist discourse to address oppression of land and women. However, this is reminiscent of double colonization because those who experience systematic oppression (African Americans), also oppress the South Asian employees. The South Asian employees are the invisible ones, whose contributions are especially unrecognized and unnoticed, and are twice as oppressed than African Americans. Yet, they experience racism from them too (see Mortimer, 1996, in bibliography).

⁶ The PMCs who resigned criticized the ways *Contracting Co*. in which the company charged them money. For instance, the PMCs were charged \$150 for not giving in their boots when out-processing. They nit-picked and charged them for missing t-shirts, socks, and charged them with money if the apartment or equipment did not meet their standards.

⁷ A PMC had lost a round during his shift. It had fallen out of his pouch and was suspended for 5 days.

⁸ The remaining PMC, Rodriguez, was recently promoted and enjoys more shade, although he does not enjoy the lengthy work hours.

⁹ When speaking of this, Rodriguez believes that contracting will soon replace the military, and that is why the private military contractors are neither considered civilians nor part of the military. He said, “What they’re doing is that they’re trying to merge the two together. Pretty soon, the military is not going to be the military. It’s going to be guys like us”.

¹⁰ Rodriguez was skeptical of being interviewed, and therefore wanted Michael to accompany us.

¹¹ Themes of masculinity constantly emerged when conducting participant observation and interviews. Masculinity plays out in two different ways. Firstly, PMCs would occasionally demean others who do not do their job well, or to those who they do not like. For example, they have accused others of being “pussies,” “little bitches,” and “little girls.” This creates a hegemonic masculinity where it is considered manly to do their job diligently. The company, which they do not respect, has been labeled with similar terms. Secondly, I have noticed that there is a ‘game’ of obtaining women as trophies. Stories of women are shared, and those who had ‘rarer’ women were envied. Asian and Ethiopian women are “common”, and the Arab girls are rare trophies. Kuwaiti women were the ultimate trophy.

During my participant observation, Michael had uncomfortably received praise for “getting a Kuwaiti.” One instance, I visited Michael when he held a sale for household items (before he moved to the United States). A PMC who lived in the building next to Michael’s met me and assumed Michael and I were dating. He congratulated Michael and attempted to convince me (I am Egyptian) that “he has an Egyptian, too”. He left the building and brought his girlfriend over to try to get us to speak to each other in Egyptian – I do not speak the Egyptian dialect. During an interview with Schmidt, he was saying that he was sick of Asian chicks; “I want an Arabic chick” he groaned. He was sick of the same old “flat bodied” Asian women.

This heavily relates to Chapter 10 in David Vine’s *Base Nation*. In “Militarized Masculinity,” Vine postulates that there exists an American military culture of patriarchy and sexism. According to Vine, the military creates a hegemonic masculinity where drill sergeants exaggerate gender norms and shapes the identities of military men as men. This is a tactic used to dehumanize others. It is necessary for sergeants to create hierarchies and dehumanize others to make it easier to kill, therefore, it also becomes imperative to dehumanize women and see them as something “lesser”. Drill sergeants will strip men of everything they perceive feminine and being feminine, thus, anything that resembles femininity becomes an insult (Vine 2017, 181-191).

¹² *Wasta*, influence or connections, is a form of social capital in Kuwait (oftentimes a form of nepotism). It allows one to gain benefits or can help people who have *wasta* to maneuver around administrative paperwork, laws, and fines.

¹³ Johannesen clarified that although he planned on retiring “shit happens.” He was motivated to re-enlist after 9/11 but could not via the Marine Corps. “The Marines do not take “retreads” back on active duty and so you are limited to either joining a Marine reserve unit (which in my state there are no infantry reserve units) or a different branch of service.

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