

# NOTEBOOK

## Lionhearts

By Lewis H. Lapham

*In the last analysis, terrorism is an idea generated by capitalism to justify better defense measures to safeguard capitalism.*

—Rainer Werner Fassbinder

**A**lthough the reports from Baghdad this summer might seem to suggest that all is not well with Operation Iraqi Freedom—the city a blood-smearred ruin, the American Army hiding in holes—the impression is misleading. Understand the war on terror as free-market capitalist enterprise rather than as some sort of public or government service, and in the nightly newscasts we see before us victory, not defeat.

As is usual and to be expected, the witless liberal media get the story wrong, mistaking innovative business practice for waste and fraud, grotesquely characterizing superior sales technique as a crime against humanity. The biased commentary misconstrues both the purpose and the high quality of the work in progress. Measure the achievement by the standards that define a commercial success—maximizing the cost to the consumers of the product, minimizing the risk to the investors—and we discover in the White House and the Pentagon, also in the Congress and the Department of Homeland Security, not the crowd of incompetent fools depicted in the pages of the *New York Times* but a company of visionary entrepreneurs, worthy of comparison with the men who built the country's railroads and liberated the Western

prairie from the undemocratic buffalo. Heed the message served with every Republican banquet speech—that the private interest precedes the public interest, that money is good for rich people, bad for poor people—and who can say that the war in Iraq has proved to be anything other than the transformation of a godforsaken desert into a defense contractor's Garden of Eden?

The winning numbers posted in the profit margins light the paths to glory. During the five years since the striking down of the World Trade Center towers, the United States Congress has appropriated well over \$300 billion for the Bush Administration's never-ending war against all the world's evildoers. Now flowing eastward out of Washington at the rate of \$1.5 billion a week, much of the money takes the form of no-bid contracts, cost-plus and often immune from audit—at least \$12.3 billion to Halliburton; \$5.3 billion for Parsons Corporation; \$3.7 billion for Fluor Corporation; \$3.1 billion for Washington Group International; \$2.8 billion for Bechtel Corporation. The contracts specify the repair and reconstruction of Iraq's depleted infrastructure—roads, power plants, hospitals, oil fields, pipelines, schools, mosques, and sewer systems—but because so many of the project sites have been deemed unsafe for visitors, the invoices translate into art objects, intricately and lovingly decorated with surcharges for undelivered concrete and nonexistent electricity.

So also the goods and services with which private security companies supplement the American military effort in Iraq. The Pentagon furnishes 130,000 troops, many of them National Guard Reservists, poorly paid, inadequately equipped, and held against their will for extended tours of duty; the private companies field an additional 50,000 personnel, some of them earning upward of \$150,000 a year for driving trucks, cleaning latrines, flying helicopters, pitching tents. Unhampered by U.S. Army regulations or by Iraqi law, the military guest workers are most conspicuously employed as bodyguards for the cadres of American middle management requiring, in the words of one of the advertising brochures, "discreet travel companions" or a "heavily armored high profile convoy escort." For a discreet companion armed with an assault rifle and a record of prior service under the Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet, Blackwater USA charges \$600 a day, plus a 36 percent markup for expenses—travel, weapons, insurance, hotel room, ammunition.

For the friends of the free market operating in Iraq it doesn't matter who gets killed or why; every day is payday, and if from time to time events take a turn for the worse—another twenty or thirty Arabs annihilated in a mosque, a BBC cameraman lost on the road to the airport—back home in America with the flags and the executive-compensation packages, the stock

prices for our reliably patriotic corporations rise with the smoke from the car bombs exploding in Ramadi and Fallujah—Lockheed Martin up from \$52 to \$75 between July 2003 and July 2006; over the span of the same three years, Boeing up from \$33 to \$77; ExxonMobil up from \$36 to \$65; Chevron up from \$36 to \$66; Halliburton up from \$22 to \$74; Fluor up from \$34 to \$87.

In a country that recognizes no objective more worthwhile than the one incorporated in the phrase “to make a killing,” I don’t know why so many people insist on withholding their applause. Were it not for the vapid hypocrisy that muddles the national political debate with idle moralizing—about the withdrawal of American troops or the disappearance of Iraqi children—the Republican politicians auditioning hairstylists for their November election campaigns could afford to tell the truth, to remind the voters that our greatness as a nation stems from what Upton Sinclair knew to be “those pecuniary standards of culture which estimate the excellence of a man by the amount of other people’s happiness he can possess and destroy.” Unfortunately, we live in a society that no longer remembers Sinclair’s name, forgets that since the days of the ancient Romans it has been on their way to war that men have found the road to wealth.

**T**he loss of historical perspective follows from the debasement of our better universities, the once vigorously imperialist curricula softened into sentimental platitude by two generations of English professors telling their students that the arms trade is neither a gentleman’s profession nor a wise career choice. The lesson is both politically and economically incorrect. The medieval age of chivalry rejoiced in the exploits of brilliantly costumed horsemen faring forth to lay waste the countryside, murder the peasantry, strip precious ornaments from the bodies of the celebrity dead, hold as captives kings and popes from whom they could extort the ransom of a fortune or a crown. The undertaking was a private venture, not a public service. The noble knight supplied

his own weapons, bore his own expenses (grooms, horses, squires, armor, etc.), took his own risks, paid his own pipers. When King Richard the Lionheart joined the Third Crusade at Acre in 1191 and there failed to find the treasure promised by God, he insisted that the infidels had swallowed their jewels and gold coins in order to deny him the reward owing to his royal majesty and Christian virtue. His companions, less discreet than the ones currently for rent in Basra and Tikrit, cut open the stomachs of 3,000 Muslims in the search for truth, which, in the event, proved as determined, if eventually as disappointing, as the Bush Administration’s quest for the thermonuclear genie in Saddam Hussein’s magic lamp.

Unlike our latter-day writers of romantic movie scripts, the fourteenth-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer was under no illusion as to the whereabouts or meaning of the Holy Grail, and among the figures present in his *Canterbury Tales*, he draws the portrait of a perfect, gentle knight more inclined to rob a church or sodomize a nun than to retrieve the bones of a departed saint. The poet knew whereof he spoke. During the Hundred Years’ War, Chaucer served in France with the English armies famous for their brutality, and of whom it was said that they went forth to war with the eager anticipation of guests invited to a wedding or a feast. The memory of the work done in the blood-soaked fields of Agincourt and Poitiers, the lords temporal dismembering one another with sword and axe, still lingers in the language of instruction learned at America’s better business schools—asset stripping, war chest, target audience, corporate raider, downsized labor force.

The upgrading of the weapons technology in the late Middle Ages (heavier cannons, the English longbow) brought with it the appearance of private armies that in their forms of organization set the template of the modern corporation. The British historian Frances Stonor Saunders points up the similarities in a recent book, *The Devil’s Broker*, in which she quotes a letter, from a fourteenth-

century captain of mercenary soldiers to the papal legate in Italy, that if rendered as a procession of stately bureaucratic acronyms might as well have been sent by the president of Blackwater USA to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Our manner of life in Italy is well known—it is to rob, plunder and murder those who resist. Our revenues depend on ransoms levied in those provinces that we invade. Those who value their lives can buy peace and quiet by heavy tribute. Therefore, if the Lord Legate wishes to dwell at unity with us then let him do like the rest of the world—that is to say, pay! pay!

The words “merchant” and “mercenary” ultimately derive from the same root, and in Renaissance Italy Saunders finds the combined interests of the two allied professions giving rise to the entrepreneurial revolution that enriched the world with capital markets for the manufacture of fear and the sale of death. Chartered as joint stock companies known as societies of adventure or acquisition, the mercenary armies offered their services to the highest bidder (to the Duke of Milan for a raid on Siena, to a Pope at Avignon or Rome for the siege of Pisa); everybody made contracts—the soldiers with their captain (guaranteeing term of service, wage, portion of the loot); the captain with his client prince or cardinal (specifying payment in Florentine or Hungarian florins)—and in the long train of executive assistants traveling with the corporate picnic in the Tuscan countryside, none were more highly prized than the clerks who kept the accounts, named the price for a man’s horse or a woman’s life, supervised the cash flows, and attended to the distribution of silver goblets, fine linens, and Venetian ducats.

Made sacred by the Catholic Church and codified by Niccolò Machiavelli rediscovering the military history of ancient Rome, the notion of government-sponsored terrorism as lucrative private enterprise strengthened the advance of Western civilization for the next 400 years. The rulers of the nation-states emerging in Europe dur-

ing the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries employed professional armies to extend their land holdings, replenish their finances, add luster to their bloodlines. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed the business of colonial empire to regulate the trade in Asian spices, American fur, and African slaves. The cost of the increasingly expensive weapons made it impossible for individual entrepreneurs to compete with the larger corporate interests, but even when enlisted under the banners of an English king or a French dynast (among them Napoleon, who informed Austria's Prince Metternich, "You can't stop me. I spend 30,000 men a month"), an enterprising mercenary still could look forward to a fair return on his investments—a share of the prize money, the beginnings of an art collection, a chance to rape good-looking women.

**O**ur American forefathers understood the rules of the game. The first settlers of the New England wilderness constituted themselves as a society of acquisition as well as a community of God. A seventeenth-century governor of New York bankrolled Captain William Kidd's Caribbean expeditions in exchange for a share of the pirate's takings under primitive laws of eminent domain; the old spirit of adventure manned the American privateers plundering British merchant ships during the Revolutionary War, fortified the real-estate speculation otherwise known as the Mexican War, ensured the elimination of the Indians on the trans-Mississippi frontier, backed the 1898 raid on Cuba, drummed up Wall Street's enthusiasm for America's participation in President Wilson's war to end all wars.

The twentieth century's two world wars obscured the primacy of the profit motive as the only *casus belli* deserving the consideration of true patriots. Over the course of the thirty-one years between 1914 and 1945, so many people were killed to no apparently remunerative purpose that the world's spiritual advisers and political theorists were put to the task of coining expensive idealisms to

explain the lack of an owner's commercial interest on the part of the innumerable decedents. Voices of conscience on five continents contributed an impressive range of consumer choices—fascism, liberalism, nationalism, communism, capitalism, racism, Nazism, socialism, Serbian irredentism, etc.—but so great was the confusion in the minds of men living under the shadow of nuclear extinction that it needed another thirty-five years, thirty-five years and the coming to the White House of the blessed Ronald Reagan, before the Americans could find their way home to the meaning of warfare as it was understood in the age of chivalry.

How better to describe our reunion with the wisdom of the Renaissance than as the triumph of American conservatism, the happy return to the smile of immortal selfishness that shines forth in the face of President George W. Bush. The smile is well and truly earned. His administration has so improved the business of making war—broadening the market for the product, relocating the costs and exporting the collateral damage, coming up with innovations both technological and aesthetic—that none of the principal beneficiaries need go to the trouble of learning how to lift a sword or ride a horse. The dying is done by the hired help, by our now privatized and outsourced army, or by entire regiments of auxiliary civilians deployed as targets for the staging of Pentagon air shows. None of the combatants demand a share of the spoils, which accrue on clean well-lighted computer screens far from the fear and smell of death. More politically sophisticated than the condottieri of the Italian Renaissance, our own military industrial elites not only extract tribute from foreign legates in distant provinces but also hold to ransom the citizenry of their own country, accepting payment in the form of taxpayer contributions to the Holy Grail otherwise known as the federal military budget. Lionhearts one and all, as bold as Chaucer's knight, as generous as Napoleon, deserving of an equestrian statue and a portrait in the Louvre. ■

## Neil Hanson UNKNOWN SOLDIERS

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