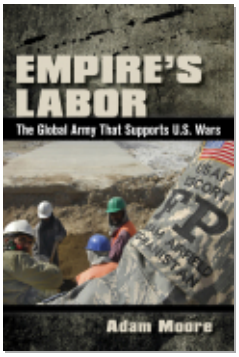
11. Empire's Labor



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EMPIRE'S LABOR

Empire involves more than pushpins on a map. It is made up of human activities—a network of situated practices that . . . sculpt geographies in their own image.

—Josh Begley

On October 4, 2017, four SOF personnel were killed in an ambush near Tongo Tongo, a remote village in western Niger. That the U.S. was carrying out military operations there—and subsequent revelations that roughly 800 personnel were located in the country at the time—came as a shock to most Americans, including members of Congress. In an interview with the NBC news show *Meet the Press* days after the attack, South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham, one of the more knowledgeable members of Congress concerning foreign policy, admitted, "We don't know exactly where we're at in the world, militarily, and what we're doing."[1]

For those who follow military contracting trends on the continent the large U.S. presence in Niger was less surprising. As noted in chapter 5, in early 2013 the Air Force established a drone base in the capital, Niamey. Three years later, according to contracting documents, the base had "a steady state of 200 to 250 personnel a day."[2] In 2014 the Pentagon moved its airlift contract for casualty evacuation, personnel recovery, and search and rescue support from Burkina Faso to Niamey, indicating a significant shift of SOF forces to Niger.[3] That same year the military announced that it planned to establish a second drone facility in Agadez, a desert city more than 700 kilometers northeast of Niamey. Satellite imagery indicates that the still-under-construction base will have a footprint that is larger than Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti by area. Finally, in 2015 (or possibly earlier) the U.S. established a secret SOF base next to the massive uranium mines in Arlit, near the Algerian border.[4] As the designated contractor for AFRICOM under the LOGCAP IV contract, Fluor has provided logistical support for each of these bases. In fact, one can roughly track the inexorable increase in the U.S.

military's presence in the country by monitoring the steady flow of positions advertised at the company's LOGCAP job opportunities website.[5] Less than two weeks after the deadly ambush, for instance, Fluor advertised several new positions at the SOF base in Arlit, including a plumber, a vector control specialist, and a food service supervisor.

This conclusion addresses the following question: How has the revolution in military logistics and contracting impacted the "American way of war"? Shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, military historian Max Boot wrote an influential article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* arguing that technological advances were ushering in a "new American way of war." Whereas before the U.S. relied on numerical superiority in weapons and men to wear down opponents, Iraq—and the war in Afghanistan—demonstrated a new paradigm of warfare, one in which "quick victory with minimal casualties" and minimal cost is achieved through "speed, maneuver, mobility, and surprise."[6] Fifteen years on, with trillions of dollars spent, thousands of U.S. personnel killed, tens of thousands more wounded, and hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, this prediction reads like a cruel joke. Instead of quick and painless victory, the "war on terror" grinds on, with little change in policy other than an expanding roster of countries in which the U.S. now carries out operations.

Indeed, if there is any defining characteristic to the American way of war in the present day it is the unboundedness of its spatial and temporal registers.[7] Spatially, this "everywhere war" is nearly unlimited in its ambition, extending even to space and cyberspace. One of the more striking aspects of this spatial unboundedness is the ubiquity of "war in countries we are not at war with."[8] The growing U.S. military presence in Niger, and deadly violence that has accompanied it, is an excellent example of this element of the everywhere war. The temporal counterpart to everywhere war has received even more attention over the past two decades, with America's continuous military operations since 9/11 variously characterized as "endless war," "infinite war," the "long war," and the "forever war."[9] Again, the dramatic increase in U.S. military presence in Niger in recent years, and Africa more generally, suggests that there is no end in sight to America's spatially and temporally unbounded wars. This too was acknowledged by Senator Graham in his interview with *Meet the Press* when he stated, "This is an endless war without boundaries and no limitation on time or geography."

If U.S. military ambition—and hence its imperial foreign policy—is now defined in large part by this peculiar combination of everywhere and forever war, what enables this state of affairs? Like Boot, most observers stress technological innovations. Technology is important, and undoubtedly part of the story. But technological wizardry alone is an insufficient basis for prosecuting boundless war. As I have argued in this book, the ability of the U.S. to project force, con-

tinuously and on a planet-wide scale, depends as well upon the immense logistical resources it can bring to bear. This includes both logistics spaces, including its global network of bases, and logistics labor, which is now drawn from around the world. Indeed, it is scarcely an exaggeration to argue that logistics "holds empire together across time and space."[10]

Moreover, technological changes—such as the ongoing "robotic revolution"—and increased reliance on foreign labor (and foreign military surrogates) over the past decade and a half, represent two sides of the same coin, which Martin Shaw has identified as "risk transfer war."[11] According to Shaw, this "new Western way of war" is centrally concerned with "managing relationships between political risks (to politicians) and life-risks (to combatants and civilians)" by transferring them onto foreign societies and bodies.[12] Above all this entails minimizing casualties to Western soldiers. The utility of drones and other robotic systems, such as Explosive Ordnance Disposal machines, in facilitating the transfer of risk by minimizing casualties on the battlefield is recognized.[13] Less so is the concomitant risk transfer role played by contracting, though as noted in the introduction contractors constitute roughly one-third of the casualties suffered by U.S. forces and its associated civilian workforce in CENTCOM since 9/11. In both cases the transfer of risk and casualties onto foreign bodies serves to dampen domestic opposition to the pursuit of boundless war. Here, Cynthia Enloe's observation that "the wheels of militarization" are "greased . . . by popular inattention" is instructive, as few things disrupt inattention to the U.S. military's boundless wars more than the deaths of American soldiers.[14] Put another way, the new American way of war is a product of changes in both technology and military contracting.[15]

It is necessary, then, to push back against accounts that argue that technological innovations are heralding a new form of warfare in which machines reduce the need for military bodies and labor.[16] Emblematic of this view is Ian Shaw's "predator empire" thesis. According to Shaw the spread of drone operations signals that "American empire is transforming from a labor-intensive to a machine- or capital-intensive system." Consequently, "the new face of the U.S. military's empire has far fewer human faces."[17] On the surface drones appear emblematic of innovations toward small-footprint, technologically sophisticated and machine-intensive military operations that enable the U.S. to extend its reach across the globe. However, as my discussion in chapter 4 concerning the extensive logistics sites and labors that supported a tiny drone outpost in Ethiopia from 2011 to 2015 suggests, it is a mistake to succumb to this machinic seduction. Instead, a more accurate observation is that "distributed and labor intensive" drone operations "do not so much do away with the human but rather obscure the ways in which human labor and social relations are configured."[18]

There are further problems with the argument that technological advances are lessening the importance of military labor. First, the drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan that Shaw highlights reflected, in large part, a strategic shift by the Obama administration away from war in the pursuit of regime change, occupation, and counterinsurgency to a focus on counterterrorism. This shift was clearly articulated in the 2015 *National Security Strategy* report which states: "We shifted away from a model of fighting costly, large-scale ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in which the United States—particularly our military—bore an enormous burden. Instead, we are now pursuing a more sustainable approach that prioritizes targeted counterterrorism operations, collective action with responsible partners. . . . Working with the Congress, we will train and equip local partners and provide operational support to gain ground against terrorist groups."[19] Counterterrorism lends itself much better to smaller military footprints, especially when combined—as noted in the report—with a liberal reliance on military labor contributed by local allies and proxies, such as the thousands of Chadian, Malian, Cameroonian, and Nigerien forces that are providing the bulk of troops for counterterrorism campaigns in the Sahel region of Africa. This point is echoed by Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, the former commander of SOCAFRICA, who observed in 2016 that effective counterterrorism operations on the continent are not possible "without enablers, robust logistics, intelligence and airlift, *host nation forces* and international partners" (italics mine).[20] The primary mission for many U.S. SOF operators in Africa, in fact, is training host country military forces. These foreign "human faces" should not be discounted when accounting for the military labor of U.S. empire. Moreover, strategic priorities change. If the U.S. initiates another war in the name of regime change—as has been advocated by some foreign policy hawks with regard to Iran or North Korea—it will once again be accompanied by large-scale military deployments.[21]

Second, the U.S. military remains highly dependent on labor, but this dependence is obscured by reliance on foreign workers, whose presence, as this book argues, is typically overlooked. Shaw, for instance, cites the reduction of U.S. troops in Afghanistan to a "skeletal force" of nearly 11,000 by the end of 2014 as representative of the reduction in labor accompanying counterterrorism operations.[22] These troops, however, were accompanied by more than 39,000 military contractors in the country at that time. The vast majority of these were TCN and Afghani laborers providing logistics support.[23] Moreover, the nearly 4:1 ratio of contractors to troops in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 was substantially greater than any previous period in U.S. history. Nor was this a temporary anomaly. A year later more than 30,000 contractors were still supporting a U.S. force just short of 9,000 uniformed personnel.[24] Furthermore, these numbers do not represent a full accounting of the labor involved in continuing military operations in Afghan-

istan. Missing from the data are thousands of truck drivers, stevedores, and warehouse employees in Pakistan and various Central Asian countries that move supplies to bases in Afghanistan, contracted airlift transporting workers and troops in and out of the country, and back office staff of military contractors and subcontractors working in office parks in Dubai. Indeed, what is most striking with regard to military operations since 9/11 is not a reduction in labor that sustains them, but its changing composition, from uniformed and American to civilian and foreign. In short, military labor still animates U.S. empire, but where it comes from, and how it is obtained, has changed significantly over the past two decades.

The parallel here with earlier European empires' dependence on military labor performed by colonial subjects to sustain their imperial projects is evident. Consider the following observation: "A durable imperial system can afford to make only moderate military demands on the 'home' population. The British empire would never have been so popular for so long with the British public if every single soldier who policed that empire had to be recruited in Britain. Thus the Indian army helped to make the empire politically palatable in Britain by reducing the demand for British soldiers and taxes."[25] This point holds true today. Contracting reduces the demands of America's pursuit of boundless war with regard to deployed personnel and casualties, thus reducing political risk. But whereas European empires primarily relied upon the labor of colonized peoples, the sources of the U.S. military's present-day workforce are more diverse. In addition to enrolling former colonial subjects like Filipinos, workers are drawn from sites of previous interventions, including the peacebuilding missions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and transnational capitalist labor mobility circuits, such as the massive labor import regime established by Gulf petro-states.

Tracing these heterogeneous military labor pathways, the histories that have produced them, and the various political, economic, and social entanglements that radiate back out along them, reveals critical—but less-known—contours of the U.S. military empire. It also bears witness to the fact that this empire is inextricably linked with the lives of the global army of labor whose thankless toil it depends on.