

## ARMED FORCES

## The Executive Mercenaries

With the recent brouhaha about what extreme circumstances might prompt U.S. intervention in the Middle East and the revelations about the nature of covert CIA meddling in Chile and elsewhere, the Senators might be forgiven for seeing spooks under every bed. Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey found the prospect "fraught with danger." Henry Jackson declared that the notion "completely baffled" him and demanded a Senate investigation.

What upset the pair, along with a good many others, was the disclosure by Associated Press Correspondent Peter Arnett that the Pentagon has hired a U.S. company to train Saudi Arabia's 26,000-man national guard. The company, the Vinnell Corp. of Al-

goes, undoubtedly be Saudi Arabia; so the U.S. invaders would be confronted with U.S.-trained defenders. The irony may titillate, but the fact is that an attack on Saudi Arabia is a very remote possibility; and in any case, Saudi Arabia's regular forces have already been trained by the U.S. military as, for that matter, have Iran's.

According to the Pentagon, the case is considerably simpler: the Vinnell Corp. contract is merely the first example of a cost-cutting Pentagon policy change laid down in 1972. Ever since World War II, the U.S. has been using regular military personnel to train the forces of countries round the world. But with shrinking U.S. force levels and the advent of the volunteer army, U.S. soldiers have become too scarce and expensive to use for such purposes. Thus three years ago, the Pentagon decided that in the future, wherever possible, it would hire civilian contractors to train friendly foreign armies in the Middle East who asked for such aid and could pay for it. The policy was an extension of the common practice of U.S. manufacturers of military hardware sold abroad; they send their civilian technicians to train the purchasing countries in the use and maintenance of their aircraft, vehicles and sophisticated weaponry.

It was also in 1972 that King Faisal's agents approached the U.S. asking for help in modernizing the national guard to augment Saudi Arabia's far better equipped regular army of 36,000. In March 1973, the Saudis and the Pentagon agreed to pursue a deal, and that month the State Department sent a memorandum of understanding to the Senate and House foreign affairs committees reporting the arrangement and advising Congress that civilian contractors would be used in part of the package.

In the summer of 1973, a 19-man U.S. military team went to Saudi Arabia to survey exactly what would be needed. After both sides agreed on a deal in October, the Pentagon invited bids on the various components that it felt civilian firms could handle. The U.S. Government felt it could more efficiently manage some parts of the \$335 million enterprise itself. Thus the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was given the \$62 million job of building modern barracks for the Saudi guard. But the Cadillac Gage Co. was given a civilian contract to build armored cars for Faisal's troops. No fewer than eight U.S. companies submitted

bids for the troop-training contract. It was won by Vinnell with a bid of \$76.9 million, of which the Pentagon as primary contractor, in keeping with standard practice, will keep 2%. Part of the Pentagon's fee will be earned by using a U.S. officer in Saudi Arabia to monitor and control the Vinnell activities in the field for the Saudis.

Vinnell Corp., though not exactly a household brand name, is scarcely a do-nothing James Bond Universal Export with a plaque on a door and all mystery within. The privately owned company, headquartered in a Los Angeles suburb, was incorporated in 1945, and has specialized in large-scale building and engineering projects in the U.S. and in more than 40 countries abroad. Vinnell served as the contractor for Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, paved highways in several Western states, and for a time was a large steel fabricator in Southern California. The company has also enjoyed a lucrative and thriving relationship with the U.S. military for the past 30 years. In addition to building emergency landing strips during the Korean War, the company has constructed an extensive array of airstrips in such Far Eastern locations as Okinawa, Taiwan, Thailand and South Viet Nam.

**New Undertaking.** It was not surprising that Vinnell took on the Middle East assignment. And the good will it has built up in the area has proved to be invaluable. For the past five years the company has reported net losses in every year but one, and last week it was learned that Vinnell will be forced to sell a sizable block of its stock. More than 25% of the \$469,000 worth of stock up for sale has been snapped up by an officer of a Beirut bank.

Currently an employer of some 2,500 people, the company, says President John Hamill, has "worked hard for this contract, sinking five years of effort in winning the confidence of the Persian Gulf countries." But training of troops in the use of a wide assortment of weapons, from rifles to anti-aircraft guns, as well as in small-unit tactics and advanced infantry training maneuvers is a new undertaking for Vinnell. To assemble the necessary expertise, a brisk company recruitment effort is under way among combat-skilled former soldiers. The veterans who will make up the training staff will enjoy, besides their regular military pensions, salaries ranging from \$1,500 to \$1,800 per month for an 18-month period, with a \$2,400 bonus if they serve out their full tour of duty.

The fear that Vinnell's men might become involved in a Middle East war or be drawn into an internal Saudi conflict seems highly exaggerated to recruits for the training jobs. Said one former U.S. Army officer after signing on: "We are not mercenaries because we are not pulling the triggers; we train people to pull triggers." Another officer laughed and added: "Maybe that makes us executive mercenaries."



hambra, Calif., has already begun recruiting among former U.S. military veterans the 1,000 men it will need to do the three-year job in King Faisal's oil-rich desert nation. The suspicious immediately dubbed the task force "mercenaries" and wondered if Vinnell was a CIA front, and double-helix theories multiplied about what might be the real plot afoot.

**Titillating Irony.** The most prevalent scenario imagined that worst possible case raised a while back by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: a new oil embargo that threatens the "strangulation of the industrial world" and causes the U.S. to invade the oil-producing countries to seize the wells. One of the countries would, so this theory