

Remember contractors, too

By Steven Schooner

More than you think have sacrificed in Iraq and Afghanistan

DESPITE the light that Memorial Day will shine, briefly, on the US death tolls in Iraq and Afghanistan, don't expect an accurate accounting of the real human cost of our military actions abroad. The numbers you'll see - mostly likely just under 5,000 fatalities - won't tell the whole story.

As of June 2008 (the most recent reliable numbers available publicly), more than 1,350 civilian contractor personnel had died in Iraq and Afghanistan supporting our efforts. About 29,000 contractors had been injured, more than 8,300 seriously.

But don't expect President Obama to remember or thank the contractor personnel who died supporting our troops or diplomatic missions. Instead, expect to see contractor personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to be portrayed as expendable profiteers, adventure seekers or marginalised members of society who are not entitled to the same respect or value given to members of the military.

That portrayal, of course, is neither accurate nor fair. Most contractors perform tasks that a generation ago would have been done by uniformed service members. A significant number of these contractors are former members of the military who believe they're answering the same call they would have answered had the crisis arisen

while they were on active duty.

Many of the victims are Iraqis and other foreign nationals working under US government contracts. But whether or not they are US citizens, the central fact remains: If our military was less dependent on contractors, these fatalities probably would have been of uniformed service members.

An honest, accurate tally is important because the public - and, for that matter,

reliance on private security.

An accurate tally is critical to any discussion of the costs and benefits of our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. War proponents benefit from the massive contractor presence because it permits them to suggest that our military presence is smaller than what is actually required. And to the extent that the public cares about military fatalities, the human cost of our efforts in Iraq appears much smaller

In 2006 and 2007, the contractor death rate climbed dramatically. After much smaller numbers during the first three years of the Iraq war, at least 301 civilian contractors died in 2006. At least 353 civilian contractors died in Iraq in 2007, while 901 US military personnel died there. In other words, in 2007, contractors accounted for more than one in four deaths associated with the US occupation

Congress - does not grasp the level of the military's reliance on contractors in the battle area, nor the extent of these contractors' sacrifices. Simply put, the contemporary, heavily outsourced US military cannot effectively fight or sustain itself without a significant, if not unprecedented, presence of embedded contractors. In Iraq, our contractor-to-troop ratio has exceeded 1 to 1. The State Department admitted last summer that it could not remain in Iraq without heavy

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ed with the US occupation.

If anything, the number of contractor deaths is understated. Last year, for the first time, Congress began to require the Pentagon, the State Department and the Agency for International Development to keep track of how many contractors are working in Iraq and Afghanistan and how many have been killed and wounded. The Defence Department recently conceded that it is trying but is not yet up to the task.

The Labour Department generates but does not publish data quarterly on contractor deaths, but only because insurance claims are filed with its Division of Longshore and Harbor Workers Compensation. (American contractors are required to provide Defence Base Act insurance, which falls under that programme.) If a contractor's family or employer does not seek insurance compensation, that death isn't counted. There's no doubt that the allied death toll is significantly higher than reported and that contractors bear a far greater burden in this regard than the public appreciates.

In a representative democracy, public awareness of the human cost of our engagements abroad is critical. If we're going to tally the human cost of our efforts, the public deserves a full accounting. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST

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