

Norms versus Rationality: Why Democracies Use Private Military Companies in Civil Wars

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1 Introduction¹

Private security and military services – so-called Private Military Companies (PMC) – were widely ignored as important actors in international politics. However, PMCs are of increasing interest both in light of the debate about new wars and, especially, in light of recent media reports on the role of such companies in the current war in Iraq (see Singer 2003a; Kümmel 2005). While a variety of actors, such as governments, transnational corporations, UN agencies, and NGOs hire PMCs to provide security in situations where states lack the capacity or willingness to do so, this article explores why democratic governments introduce private military companies as a foreign policy tool in civil conflicts. Drawing on constructivist and rationalist arguments, this article maintains that the contradictory effect of liberal norms and cost-benefit calculations can lead to the use of PMCs. When Western democracies are faced with internal wars in other countries, liberal norms foster support for intervention in humanitarian crises, while cost-benefit calculations often make these states reluctant to intervene in regions of little geo-strategic importance. This dilemma can lead to the use of PMCs in responding to the humanitarian impulse “to do something,” while also reducing the financial, military and political risk of intervening. This argument is illustrated by considering the introduction of the American private security firm MPRI in Bosnia and the British company Sandline International in Sierra Leone.

2 The Argument

The significant increase of humanitarian interventions after the end of the Cold War indicates the emergence of a new norm that frequently supersedes the traditional rules of non-intervention and the non-use of force (Wheeler 2000; Finnemore 2003). Military interventions in Northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and elsewhere did not primarily serve geo-strategic or economic goals, but were intended to stop massive violations of human rights and democratic standards. National and transnational societal actors did not only

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play a crucial role in generating and implementing such norms, now widely held to be universally valid (Keck/Sikkink 1998; Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999). On several occasions they also generated enough pressure to enforce such standards militarily in cases in which they were systematically violated (Haseclever 2001; Kaldor 2001).

However, this first (constructivist) mechanism – human rights and democratic standards that support intervention in case of non-respect – is often contradicted by a second (rationalist) mechanism, e.g., the cost-benefit calculations of liberal societies. Immanuel Kant ([1795]1984) already put forward this thesis, and it became a key argument for explaining the Democratic Peace (see Russett/Oneal 2001). Kant argued that citizens are first and foremost interested in peacefully accumulating their wealth. Therefore, they are reluctant to pay the costs of war, in terms of both blood and treasure and assert this aversion to conflict through participation in liberal institutions. As a consequence, cost-benefit calculations regularly prevent intervention in civil wars, since these conflicts often involve high financial, military and political risks but have no benefit for the state intervening.

Thus, in situations of civil war, the effects of humanitarian norms, that foster support for an intervention, and cost-benefit calculations, that prevent intervention, create a dilemma for liberal societies (see Peceney 2000). This dilemma also affects democratic decision-makers since the failure to render assistance to suffering populations can generate just as high political costs as casualties when intervening. These conflicting dynamics can lead to “antinomies” (Müller 2002): both the constructivist and the rationalist mechanisms unfold for themselves consistently with the respective theory, but produce contradictory effects when they interact. One such possible “antinomic” result is the use of PMCs, on which democracies rely for essentially three reasons. First, hiring such companies allows the military to act on behalf of the victims while the risk of intervening is shifted to a small social group, e.g., a private company. Second, private companies are assumed to work for a relatively low price (see Howe 1998: 308). Third, hiring PMCs reduces the political costs of an intervention because, compared to the loss of their own soldiers’ lives, public opinion is far less sensitive to corporate casualties than to the loss of regular troops.²

2 The casualties of the US company DynCorp during anti-drug flights over Columbia did not provoke any noteworthy reaction in the United States (Singer 2003a: 207–209). The same holds true for corporate casualties in Iraq.

3 PMCs as Foreign Policy Proxies

Although organized under private law, PMCs are, as a rule, closely linked to state institutions. For this reason, the popular argument that the privatization of violence undermines or even replaces the state's monopoly of force (see for example Eppler 2002: 12) does not hold true for private military companies. In contrast, as the examples of the US-firm MPRI and the British company, Sandline International, show, the use of PMCs instead serves as an innovative, albeit questionable foreign policy tool.³

Founded in 1987, the US Company Military Professional Resources Inc. is one of the best known firms in the private security market. With the exception of direct combat support, it offers a wide range of security and military services. MPRI is personally and institutionally closely linked to the US administration. The majority of MPRI's personnel is composed of former, often high-ranking, American military officials that maintain close contacts with the Defence and State Departments (Zarate 1998: 104). Similar to all other companies that deal with military goods and services outside the US, PMCs need licences from the State Department and must therefore meet the criteria set out in the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) portion of the Arms Export Control Act. The State Department examines to determine whether the criteria of these regulations are fulfilled and then issues a licence. However, Congress is not informed unless a contract exceeds 50 mio. USD (Avant 2002). All contracts below that threshold or contracts that are divided into several smaller parts escape congressional oversight. According to Deborah Avant (2002: 2) "the licensing process itself is somewhat idiosyncratic (...) and neither the companies nor independent observers are exactly clear about how the process works". In addition, once a licence is issued, no further controls are necessary or occur.

In the United Kingdom, the relationship between PMCs and state institutions is also very close, although far less formalized than in the US (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2002). In a Green Paper, however, the British government made proposals to regulate the country's private military industry but they were not implemented due to parliamentary resistance. According to David Shearer, even though no licensing systems exists, numerous British PMCs "are either carrying out foreign policy directly, or at the least working within acceptable boundaries" (Shearer 1998b: 36). Take the British firm, Sandline International, as an example. Founded in 1993, Sandline was one of the very few companies that offered direct combat support and provided helicopters and heavy weapons in addition to logistical

3 For the use of PMCs in countries outside the OECD world see Duffield (1998) and Hibou (1999).

support as well as military advice and training.⁴ Contracted by the British Foreign Office, Sandline supported militarily the restoration of the democratically elected president of Sierra Leone in 1998. For this operation, the company shipped a huge amount of weapons to western Africa, thereby violating the UN weapons embargo, and participated directly in combat against rebels. Because of this intertwining of the private military industry and state institutions, Didier Bigo's conception of "entreprises para-privée de coercion" (Bigo 2004) is far more appropriate than the virtually misleading term Private Military Companies.

4 PMCs in Bosnia and Sierra Leone

The introduction of PMCs by democratic governments is illustrated by two short case-studies. The first study shows how the US-administration relied on the American firm MPRI in Bosnia, while the second case focuses on the British Government's use of the British company, Sandline International, in Sierra Leone. If the argument is correct, then both cases should show that cost-benefit calculations generated opposition to military action as the result of the high financial, military and political risks of both conflicts and because they were not vital national interests. At the same time, however, massive violations of human rights and democratic standards should have triggered a normative pressure in favor of intervention. Finally, the contradictory effects of both mechanisms should have led to the use of PMCs.

4.1 *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina*

4.1.1 Strategic Importance and Risk-Structure

Observers agree that despite the potential danger of a regional conflagration, the outcome of the Bosnian war clearly did not concern vital interests of the United States (Paulsen 1995: 71; Calic 1996: 162; Bert 1997: 109; Gow 1997: 206). At the same time, the potential military risks of intervening in the conflict were perceived as being very high. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, as well as a number of other senior officials at the Pentagon argued against US military engagement and warned of an involvement in a long war with possibly heavy casualties (Burg/Shoup 1999: 200). Faced with the military risks of an operation, President George H. W. Bush opposed any US engagement in the Balkans: "I am not interested in seeing one single United States soldier pinned down in some kind of guerrilla envi-

4 Sandline ceased operations in April 2004, but its home page is still accessible www.sandline.com/site; retrieved 6 December 2005.

ronment” (Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1992: 532). With only a few exceptions, members of Congress also refused to intervene in the Bosnian conflict, as did a majority of Americans, demonstrated in polls from 1992 (Sobel 1996: Table 6.7). In addition to the military risks, the financial costs of a military operation were also expected to be high. According to British experts, a military engagement with only 60,000 troops would generate annual costs of up to 2.5 bio. Pounds (Calic 1996: 161). Faced with a significant budget deficit by that time, these costs made a US intervention even more improbable.

While the cost-benefit calculation was clearly an obstacle to an intervention the Bush administration and subsequent Clinton administration were increasingly pressured to engage in Bosnia. Faced with media reports regarding ethnic cleansing and the existence of Serbian concentration camps, the American public, particularly American Jewish and Muslim organizations but also numerous Members of Congress, called for assistance for the outgunned Bosnian Muslims (Paulsen 1995: 87). Furthermore, many senators and congressmen began to push for lifting the UN arms embargo that had been imposed over Yugoslavia in 1991 because the embargo was not affecting the better-armed Serbs but hindered the severely outgunned Muslims’ ability to defend themselves.

The pressure on the Clinton Administration to act gained further momentum in the spring of 1993 when the Vance-Owen Plan failed and hunger and epidemic diseases broke out in the beleaguered towns of Eastern Bosnia (Sloan 1998: 27). The US government indeed tried to respond to such humanitarian demands by dropping food supplies and monitoring the no-flight zones (Operation Deny Flight) that were established to protect humanitarian convoys. Despite these widely symbolic measures, however, the pressure “to do something” continued to rise. By that time, even members of the US government, such as UN Ambassador Albright, Vice-President Gore and the National Security Adviser Lake, pushed for a more active role for the United States in regard to Bosnia and openly argued for air strikes against Serbian targets (Burg/Shoup 1999: 223).

Despite such appeals in favor of a more active American policy towards Bosnia, opponents to a US intervention in the Balkans were still a majority. With reference to the US debacles in Vietnam and Lebanon, a majority of the US Congress opposed any military engagement in the Balkans. Pentagon officials also doubted the chances of success of a military operation and highlighted the difficulties of an air campaign, e.g., the risk to the pilots, civilian casualties, and the lack of efficiency of air strikes in the hills and forest of Bosnia (Paulsen 1995: 122). Finally, polls showed that although a majority of

Americans supported lifting the arms embargo, they opposed any intervention with ground troops (Sobel 1996: Table 6.9).

In summary, the Clinton administration was faced with contradictory signals. The massive violation of human rights in Bosnia generated an impulse to act on behalf of the victims; at the same time the potential financial and military risks of an intervention in a conflict that did not concern vital interests made the administration reluctant to use force. In order to ameliorate this tension between contradictory liberal norms and cost-benefit calculations, the US government proposed in May 1993 a strategy that became known as 'Lift and Strike'. Without taking many risks, air strikes would demonstrate that the US was not willing to tolerate continued Serbian aggression while selectively lifting the arms embargo would enable the outgunned Muslims to defend themselves, making any US intervention with ground troops unnecessary (Peceny 2000: 8). Yet Lift and Strike failed due to the opposition of the United States' European Allies, who feared that an escalation of the conflict would threaten the security of their UNPROFOR contingents on the ground.

4.1.2 Iranian Arms and the Use of MPRI

The Europeans rejected the Lift and Strike strategy, but were unable themselves to bring about an end to the conflict by diplomatic means. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Bosnia continued to worsen and culminated in the assaults by Bosnian Serb troops on the UN "safe areas" Sarajevo and Gorazde. Again, the pressure to act intensified and the Clinton administration attempted parallel international diplomatic efforts consisting of two components. First, the US aimed at building up Croatia as a regional countervailing power to Serbia. The second goal was to end the fighting between Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims that had broken out in the spring of 1993 and establish a Croat-Muslim alliance within Bosnia to counter the Bosnian Serbs (Burg/Shoup 1999: 327). Both the support of Croatia and the creation of a Croat-Muslim alliance in Bosnia were central to the further course of the war.

In fact, the US managed to end the fighting between Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims and establish Croat-Muslim federation on 1 March 1994 (Washington Agreement). Yet, due to the arms embargo in place, the US could not militarily support the newly built alliance – at least not openly. In secret, however, the US dropped huge amounts of Iranian arms during nighttime flights over Bosnia.

While reports on this clandestine arming of the Federation provoked intense irritation on the part of the European Allies, US support for Croatia was much more discreet (see, e.g., Washington Post, 28 July 1995: A32). At this stage, MPRI entered the picture. Only a few days after signing the Washing-

ton Agreement, the Pentagon referred the Croatian Defence Ministry to MPRI (Singer 2003a: 124–128). Both sides signed a contract and MPRI obtained the State Department’s license in December. In January 1995 the company sent a team of 14 military advisors led by the retired US General John Sewall to Croatia that was tasked with training and equipping the Croatian armed forces (Shearer 1998b: 58). The overall US-goal of using MPRI was to strengthen the Croatia military in order to obtain a balanced regional distribution of power between Croatia and Serbia.⁵ In the eyes of the US-administration, a military equilibrium in the region was the key to bringing the warring factions to the negotiation table and achieving a sustainable peace agreement.

4.1.3 ‘Deliberate Force’ and the End of the War in Bosnia

The outbreak of the fiercest fighting of the war in fall of 1994, and especially in the spring and summer of 1995, had catastrophic consequences for the civilian population in Bosnia. In the safe areas of Bihac, Gorazde, Srebrenica and Zepa, people starved to death and in July General Mladic’s troops overran Srebrenica, killing and displacing thousands of Muslims. Now, the US had to take over the leading role in ending the conflict. In addition to the aggravation of the humanitarian situation in Bosnia, two reasons were central to a more determined US policy towards Bosnia. First, presidential elections were approaching. After the Republicans’ landslide victory in the November 1994 congressional elections, the White House considered “the Bosnia issue as a political time bomb that could go off in the 1996 campaign” and feared that “the Administration’s entire foreign policy record will ultimately be judged on the outcome of the Bosnia crisis” (New York Times, 19 August 1995: A1). Approval ratings for Clinton’s Bosnian policy were only at 33% in June 1995 (Sobel 2001: 217). Second, in the summer of 1995, Congress approved resolutions in favor of unilaterally lifting the embargo and thus de facto arming the Bosnian Muslims. The Europeans, however, made very clear that lifting the embargo would immediately trigger the withdrawal of their UNPROFOR troops (Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1995: 10/10–10/25). The evacuation of UNPROFOR forces, in turn, would have necessitated the deployment of US ground troops, as President Clinton had already promised his European NATO partners in 1994. Consequently, the US government had basically two options: To send a massive contingent of US

5 MPRI denies the provision of military training to the Croatian army and the violation of the UN arms embargo. According to spokesman Soyster, MPRI’s task was to transform the Croatian military from an “eastern style military to a western one with democratic values and methods” (Washington Post, 11 August 1995). However, given the Croats’ spectacular military successes as the war continued, many observers believed the contrary (for an overview see Singer 2003a: 126).

ground troops to Bosnia to support an evacuation of UNPROFOR or to militarily impose an end to the conflict (Calic 1996: 247). Faced with this choice, the US-administration decided in favor of the latter.

Yet, the change towards a more assertive Bosnia policy was largely made possible by the clandestine shipping of arms and the deployment of MPRI, which had considerably improved the balance of power both in favor of the Croat-Muslim federation vis-à-vis the Bosnian Serbs within Bosnia and in favor of Croatia vis-à-vis Serbia in the former Yugoslavia. Concerted military operations by Croatian military and Croat-Muslims troops resulted in territorial gains and produced a strategically favorable position such that Croatian forces could attack the neighboring Krajina, which had been occupied by the Serbs since 1991 (Calic 1996: 243).

Despite US objections to a Croatian attack in Krajina, the Clinton administration finally decided not to interfere, since it was assumed that the re-conquest of Krajina would considerably weaken the Bosnian Serbs' strategic position and thus increase their willingness to end the fighting (Daalder 2000: 122). On 4 August 1995 the Croatian army started a large-scale offensive (Operation Storm, which was commanded by the recently arrested General Ante Gotovina), with a military dimension and performance that surprised many experts. In only four days, approximately 130,000 Croatian troops re-conquered almost all of the Serbian-held portions of Krajian territory (Shearer 1998b: 58; Burg/Shoup 1999: 339). According to many observers, the attacks by the formerly poorly equipped and Soviet-style Croatian Army resembled, after a few months of training by MPRI, a "U.S.-style attack" (Zarate 1998: 107). The offensive consisted of simultaneous air raids, artillery and rapid infantry movements. Besides training, the company is said to have been directly involved in the preparation of Operation Storm, as MPRI's CEO and former US General Carl Vuono met several times with high-ranking Croat officers who planned the attacks in the days prior to the offensive (Burg/Shoup 1999: 339; Singer 2003a: 127). From a military point of view, the Krajina offensive was a spectacular success by the Croatian army, which allowed for further important territorial gains in the course of subsequent joint Croatian-Bosnian operations in Bosnia. The massive NATO bombings of Serbian targets, beginning on 29 August 1995, supported these offensives. In marked contrast to the air campaigns over the desert of Iraq in 1991, massive bombings on their own had no chance of success in Bosnia's hills and forests. Yet, no Western government – let alone the Clinton administration – was willing to send a massive contingent of ground troops in the Balkans. Hence, MPRI trained and equipped "Croatian troops provided the heretofore missing ground forces necessary to ensure the success of a U.S. air campaign" (Burg/Shoup 1999: 327). The conquest of the Krajina and other

Serbian-held territories through the Croatian and Bosnian military resulted in a fundamental redistribution of the Bosnian territory to the detriment of the Bosnian Serbs and paved the way towards the Dayton peace accord. However, Operation Storm also led to the exodus of more than 170,000 Serbian inhabitants of the Krajina. This was by far the largest incident of ethnic cleansing during the Balkan wars (see, e.g., Calic 1996: 243).

4.2 *The War in Sierra Leone*

4.2.1 Strategic Importance and Risk Structure

The Abidjan Peace Agreement of November 1996 put an end to 20 years of brutal civil war in Sierra Leone and allowed for elections to be held in the spring of 1997.⁶ Only a few weeks later, however, the winner of the elections, President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, was toppled in coup and a junta composed of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) took over power in Freetown. While President Kabbah went into exile in neighboring Guinea, more than 30,000 citizens of Sierra Leone died during the subsequent AFRC/RUF's reign of terror.

As in the case of Bosnia, cost-benefit calculations were clearly an obstacle to intervening in Sierra Leone. Despite the country's mineral resources and some investment of British firms in the former colony, the war in Sierra Leone did not concern British economic or geo-strategic interests (Abrahamsen/Williams 2001: 252; Musah 2000: 102; Williams 2001: 154). At the same time, more than 1,000 casualties of mainly Nigerian ECOMOG contingents that had been sent to Sierra Leone after the coup showed that the military risks of an intervention were extremely high (Commons Hansard, 17 June 1997: column 254).⁷ For this reason, not only did UN General Secretary Annan refuse to send a UN force to Sierra Leone (The Times, 5 June 1997: 17) but also the British government, which diplomatically and financially supported the exiled Sierra Leonean government, denied Kabbah's personal request for military assistance (Foreign Affairs Select Committee 1999: para. 11).

Thus, while cost-benefit calculations were a hindrance to a military engagement, the suffering of the Sierra Leoneans and the massive violation of democratic standards created pressures to intervene on behalf of the victims. However, they were less vigorous than those related to the Bosnian conflict and emanated rather from the UK government.

6 For an overview of the conflict see Reno (1998); Musah (2000); Abrahamsen/Williams: (2001); Williams (2001).

7 For records of British parliamentary debates see <http://www.parliament.uk/hansard/hansard.cfm>; retrieved 6 December 2005.

When violence broke out in Sierra Leone, New Labor had been in office for only a few weeks. After 20 years in opposition, the new British government announced an ambitious “ethical” foreign policy (Dunne/Wheeler 2001). In his now famous ‘mission statement’, Foreign Minister Cook declared: “Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves. The Labour Government will put human rights at the heart of our foreign policy.” (Cook, 12 May 1997) Given this announcement, the massive abuse of human rights in Sierra Leone and the toppling of the democratically elected president created the first challenge for New Labor’s ethical foreign policy. Besides the UK government, the normative impulse to help the people in the former colony also came from the media, the public and the parliament. For example, in order to report on the spectacular evacuation of British citizens, a number of British newspapers sent their correspondents to Freetown, documenting in detail and in part in a lurid manner the atrocities against the civilian population in Sierra Leone. As in Bosnia, the humanitarian situation worsened dramatically in the course of the conflict, since the rebels systematically prevented the delivery of aid (UN Press Release SC/6408, 6 August 1997). When food and medical stocks were running short, some observers already warned of another Somalia (The Times, 11 June 1997: 19). Influential British NGOs as well as both Houses of the Parliament called for additional assistance for Sierra Leone (Commons Hansard, 12 March 1998: column 832–848). Yet, no demands for a British military engagement can be found.

4.2.2 The 1997 Coup and the Role of Sandline International

In reaction to the coup in May 1997, mainly Nigerian ECOMOG troops were sent to Sierra Leone. The Labor administration initially hoped that ECOMOG would rapidly put an end to the conflict and allow for Kabbah’s return to power. The fighting with the AFRC/RUF rebels resulted, however, in a military debacle for the Nigerians. Yet, in this situation, UK military support for the Nigerians was politically untenable as Nigeria was also “a regime [that] itself [was] a massive abuser of civil human rights and subject to international sanctions” (Foreign Affairs Select Committee 1999: para. 12). Thus, besides the fact that Kabbah’s rapid restoration to power became highly unlikely and that the humanitarian crisis further escalated, the announcement of an “ethical foreign policy” put additional pressure on the British government to act. On the other hand, the military risks of an intervention were still very important. Faced with this dilemma, a private military company, Sandline International, served as a resort for the Foreign Office. Abdel Fatau Musah argues that “the British government’s motive in Sierra Leone was to

demonstrate its new foreign policy in practice by restoring a democratic government to power (...) but at minimal costs in terms of taxpayers money” (Musah 2000: 99ff.). In this view, as in Bosnia, contradictory effects of liberal norms and cost-benefit calculations led to the use of Sandline International.

The initial contact between President Kabbah and Sandline International was made by Peter Penfold, the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone (see Douglas 1999: 189ff.; Musah 2000: 98ff.). Both sides signed a contract that, while a UN arms embargo was in place, provided for training and military support of forces that were loyal to the Kabbah government. More precisely, Sandline had to train and equip the Kamajors, an ethnic group at the southern and eastern part of the country, and to support the planning and coordinating of the military campaign against the AFRC/RUF. Therefore, the company should provide for transport, intelligence gathering, arms and other military equipment including helicopters. According to the Sierra Leonean Information Minister, Julius Spencer, Kabbah agreed to pay the company 10 mio. USD and, in addition to that, to award diamond concessions in the country (New York Times, 13 May 1998: A3). In December 1997 and January 1998 Peter Penfold met several times with Sandline’s CEO and former British Lieutenant Colonel Tim Spicer. On 28 January 1998 Spicer handed to the British High Commissioner the military operations document (Project Python) that besides the delivery of arms also provided for “a direct action role” for the company (Foreign Affairs Select Committee 1999: 30). At the beginning of 1998, ECOMOG, Kamajors and some 200 Sandline staff launched joint ground and air attacks against the rebels. Within only a few days, AFRC/RUF resistance broke down and President Kabbah returned to Freetown, where he was enthusiastically welcomed by thousands of the capital’s inhabitants.

Despite the restoration of the democratically elected President to power, reports concerning the role of Sandline International, particularly on the illegal delivery of arms to West Africa, provoked a severe government crisis in Britain. This so-called Arms-to-Africa scandal centered on the question of whether the UN arms embargo was violated with the knowledge of the UK government. Two fact-finding committees were established that concluded that senior Foreign Office officials had been informed of Sandline’s activities (Foreign Affairs Select Committee 1999: Conclusions and Recommendations; Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 29 July 1998: 3). Yet, evidence suggests that members of the government also approved the use of the company. For example, Sandline’s lawyers came up with a letter that reveals details of meetings with UK officials. It concludes that “the involvement of Sandline International in support of President Kabbah had at all times had the approval

of Her Majesty's Government".⁸ What is more, the British Navy had put the frigate HMS Cornwall at Sandline's disposal for maintenance of the company's helicopters during the air campaign against AFRC/RUF (e.g., *The Telegraph*, 9 May 1998). Thus, like most other scholars, Annette Büttner concludes that the arms shipments were a violation of the UN arms embargo and took place "with the knowledge, approval and support of ECOMOG and the British Government" (Büttner 2003: 11, my translation).

4.2.3 The British Military Intervention and the End of the War in Sierra Leone

However, neither Sandline's support in restoring President Kabbah to power, nor the 1999 Lomé Peace Accord negotiated with important British help, nor the subsequent deployment of UN peacekeepers (UNAMSIL) could stabilize the situation in Sierra Leone. Worse, in April 2000 renewed fighting broke out that included the involvement of UN troops. The rebels killed several peacekeepers and took some 400 hostages. Thus, as in Somalia, Rwanda and Angola, the UN-mission in Sierra Leone was on the brink of failing. Moreover, in the spring of 2000, the rebels again moved forward to Freetown. Faced with reports on an imminent rebel takeover of the capital, the Blair government decided to use force. Operation Palliser started on 7 May 2000. Initially, its mandate was limited to evacuation tasks, but was then widened to support UNAMSIL and to train the Sierra Leonean Army. Many observers were surprised by the British intervention. For example, the British newspaper *The Observer* asked: "Are the troops there to protect some vital British interest? The once-rich diamond areas are now commercially ruined by freelance diggers. We no longer need the naval base."⁹ Sadly, Sierra Leoneans have nothing to induce Britain to send troops there except their imperilled humanity." (*The Observer*, 14 May 2000) Members of the Conservative Party shared the view that the conflict in Sierra Leone "does not affect our national interest one little bit" (Commons Hansard, 11 May 2000: column 1013). Indeed, the military risks of an engagement were still very high. This became even clearer when British paratroopers became involved in the fighting and killed four rebels. Then, on 25 August 2000 of that year, a group of rebels captured eleven British soldiers during a patrol, and one UK soldier was killed in the following rescue mission (Williams 2001: 154). In the wake of these incidents, media reports repeatedly compared Britain's engagement in Sierra Leone to the US failure in Somalia and warned of "mission creep" (*The Times*, 10 May 2000: 10).

8 The letter of Sandline's lawyers can be accessed online <http://www.sierra-leone.org/sandline1.html>; retrieved 6 December 2005.

9 The UK used the naval base in Sierra Leone during the Falkland Islands War.

Thus, if financial costs and military risks were clearly a hindrance to an intervention in Sierra Leone why, then, did the British government decide to send British troops to West Africa? Again, as in the case of Bosnia, this was due to a humanitarian impulse and political costs that now both fostered support for military engagement. Even adversaries of intervention stressed the extreme misery of Sierra Leone's civilian population, exacerbated while rebels advanced on Freetown. In view of these immense atrocities, the Tory shadow-Foreign Secretary, Francis Maude, said in a parliamentary debate that "the whole House will be desperately concerned about the violence in Sierra Leone. No one could begin to excuse the conduct of a gang of thugs who have indulged in some of the most appalling acts of vicious brutality against civilians, including large numbers of young children." (Commons Hansard, 8 May 2000: column 520) In a TV broadcast, Prime Minister Blair described the conflict as of "appalling savagery inflicted upon the civilian population in which rape and slavery and mutilation are the everyday weapons. It's a campaign of butchery in which – as we've all seen on our television screens – young children have had their arms and their legs hacked off." (Blair, 19 May 2000) This normatively motivated pressure to act on behalf of the victims was further increased when Kofi Annan urged support for UNAMSIL, which appeared to be failing. Many observers referred to previous UN failures and argued that another debacle would put the future of peacekeeping in Africa as a whole at risk. Thus, at the Security Council, the UN Secretary General called for an expanded role for the international community in Sierra Leone and appealed to Britain in particular as its former colonial power (The Guardian, 10 May 2000). Finally, the fear of political costs is also believed to have supported the decision to (limitedly) intervene in West Africa. Having been increasingly criticized in the media and in Parliament for its bad foreign policy record in Sierra Leone and elsewhere, the Labor government searched for a visible foreign policy success in the light of general elections in June 2001.

5 Conclusion

In both cases, the secret delivery of arms and the use of PMCs were criticized as pure realpolitik. Former UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali even suggested that the US Bosnia policy was driven by "obscure Machiavellian calculations" (cited in Sobel 2001: 185). In contrast to this view, this article has argued that the use of PMCs should rather be considered to be an "antinomic effect" (Müller 2002) of the interaction between liberal norms and cost benefit calculations. Indeed, consistent with the respective constructivist and rationalist arguments, the massive violation of human rights and democratic

standards supported an intervention in both cases we examined. At the same time, however, cost-benefit calculations impaired this normative imperative to act since liberal societies and elected decision-makers were reluctant to intervene in risky and costly conflicts where no vital interest was at stake. Domestic political costs influenced the decision to use force, as both the US and the British governments decided to deploy regular troops only when elections approached.

Yet, while the argument presented here shows a high explanatory power its scope must be narrowed in two respects. First, this argument is most likely to apply only to civil war conflicts that have no strategic importance. In other cases, like Afghanistan or Iraq, PMCs are used for different reasons. Second, the argument is limited to the Anglo-Saxon world, since other democracies did not rely to this extent on PMCs. This variance within the democratic camp merits further research.

Finally, while some authors stress the potential beneficial role of PMCs in (privatized) peacekeeping or in ending civil war (see for example Howe 1998; Brooks 2000; O'Brien 2000b; Daniel 2002; Bures 2005), both cases clearly show that this foreign policy tool had significant negative effects. In Sierra Leone, Sandline International could stabilize the political situation only for a short time. It was the British intervention and the deployment of UNAMSIL that eventually ended the conflict. From a military point of view, the use of MPRI in the Balkans was far more successful, even if NATO bombings were required to put an end to the war in Bosnia. For the Serbian population of the Krajina, however, the introduction of MPRI had disastrous consequences. The MPRI-trained Croatian military carried out one of the most extensive cases of ethnic cleansing in Europe's post war history.