

Vanessa Marquette:

Yeah, so I started to track Wagner Group back when it started in 2014. There was a couple Russian mercenary groups. Before that there was the Avonic Corps. But Wagner g

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So what has changed for the Wagner Group and the war in Ukraine?

Sean McFate:

So the Wagner Group has... As the war in Ukraine has changed for Russia, also twisted up the Wagner Group in some very interesting ways. Before... As your listeners will remember, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 24th, 177j -0.3525 (re2A)T,()Tj 0.plmgrRTw (t)Tj 0dyad" ihec -0.011 Tc 0.0

And it caused huge consternation within the Kremlin because mercenaries and professional soldiers, k-3.343 y>

So I think that there's a lot of reasons why taxpayers should be concerned. One is their own future security, and second is the gargantuan amounts of money. Because, \$650 billion for one department, that's a lot more than Saudi Arabia's GDP. It's astounding if you think about it.

Vanessa Marquette:

Yeah. And that also makes me think of the military recruitment crisis we're going on right now. And it's certainly a national security issue. Thank you for explaining all of that.

Now I want to divert a little bit on modern warfare. Whenever you and I have spoken on this topic, you've posed the question, "Is conventional war still conventional?" Can you elaborate on that?

Sean McFate:

Yeah, so this is a (i) Tj 0 Tw 6 (s) ag 4 (e m) 0 8 9 0 4 5 (y) 0 3 3 Tw (e) 0 0 3 Tw ((e) T) 0 6 6 Tw 2 Tw 0 0 7 5 T

Remember I was saying how the Department of Defense is getting \$853 billion? Obscene. We're buying aircraft carriers for 13 billion a copy. We're buying five of them.

And are they even relevant in an era

Well, what I fear is that the Beltway, the Washington, DC, is learning all the wrong lessons. They look at tanks, fighting tanks in Ukraine, tube artillery, fighting tube artillery, and they think conventional war. Because they associate those weapon systems with World War II.

Now, you can use a tank in an unconventional way. So for example, in 2016, Russia used its air force in Syria to deliberately bomb civilian refugees and civilians in Syria. And the reason they did this is because they wanted to help create a flood of refugees that would flood into the European Union and create the Brexit.

Because Russia, the Soviet Union, has always been trying to break up the European Union and NATO. That's always been their goal. And they did it by using a conventional weapon like a bomb in an unconventional way, bombing civilians. It's horrific, but it worked.

And that's what they're doing today. They're using artillery to wantonly shell cities indiscriminately to kill people so that civilians go to their leadership in Kiev and say, "Look, we're tired of this. Go talk to Putin." And Putin wants to punish the people so that Zelenskyy, the president of Ukraine, crawls to Putin and seeks peace on Putin's terms, not Zelenskyy's terms.

So, the problem, though, is that our military establishment continues to look at artillery and tanks, and they don't have the strategic imagination to realize that, okay, you associate those things with World War II and conventional warfare, but they're not being used that way right now. And as a result, we're buying all this... One reason why the defense budget's so big is we're going all of our conventional weapons so Lockheed Martin and Raytheon can buy new stuff and make new stuff.

And so it's kind of been like an arms bazaar, but the things that we should be buying... And some of the things we kind of are, but I think Americans know it better than the defense establishment, in Washington. Are at least two things.

One is the amazing resiliency of the Ukrainian people to stand up to Putin. I mean, that's been covered to death. And they're not perfect, but wow, they really are... I mean, after the disappointments of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Vietnam, here's a people who are willing to fight for a people who are not.

And this happens throughout mercenary history. If you think back to The Thirty Years' War, Wallenstein, who was the greatest mercenary producer for the Holy Roman Empire, started to actually threaten the emperor, and then he got himself speared to death in his sleep at night.

So if Prigozhin is axed or like axed through the head, like Mexico City and Trotsky type, will Putin put somebody in place who can keep Wagner up and running? If not, Wagner dissipate? Will they start to trickle out? Or will they start to fight the Russian army? Or who knows what. I mean, these are free radicals. These are not national soldiers.

And anybody who thinks of Russia... Sorry, of the Wagner Group as an extension of the Russian military, is fundamentally ignorant about what's going on here. So, let's watch that space. And again, a clever strategist in the West or in Kiev can use sort of information to drive that wedge to create the illusion to Putin that Prigozhin wants a palace coup, wants to kill Putin with his Wagner Group so that maybe Putin takes out Prigozhin for us.

We can be sneaky. And I think we should be sneakier than spending all this money on useless war junk, let's be a little bit more strategic and a little bit more effective. And so, I would say, watch that space, watch the mercenaries. And if the mercenaries do leave the Wagner Group... Many of them will get hunted down and killed, but many of them will survive. Where will they show up? In the Middle East? In Africa?

I mean, think about that. All these tens of thousands of mercenaries will come out of this war seeking new contracts, and they're going to go to the most conflict-ridden continents in the world, and they will stir up more trouble. And we have a lot of military history, mercenary history that shows us just this.

So the larger implication here is that there's a war, but there's this larger trend of private force that threatens all of us and will change international relations as we know it by the middle of this century.

Vanessa Marquette:

Thank you so much, Vanessa, for talking with me today on this 'Cause Conversations podcast and for sharing all of your expertise. It's certainly captivating. And like you said, we're not the only ones who are

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