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Public Control of Private Military

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By

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## Contents

Abstract 1

Introduction 2

Chapter 1: Underlying Issues 9

Chapter 2: The Ancient Greeks *ca.* 700-400 B.C.E 24

Chapter 3: *Condottieri* in Italy *ca.* 1250-1500 43

Chapter 4: Privateers *ca.* 1400-1813 65

Chapter 5: West Africa *ca.* 1960-1999 85

Chapter 6: Iraq and Beyond *ca.* 2003- 107

Conclusion 127

Bibliography 133
Abstract

Private military force must have a fully informed regulatory and legislative oversight if it is to be a useful and controllable tool for states’ management of their political affairs. Today, this requires citizens to be fully aware of and engaged in their state’s military arrangements. Contemporary concerns that animate debates surrounding the prodigious employment of private military contractors by certain modern liberal democracies largely reflect the lessons of history. Private force has not been a consistently contentious issue throughout much of Western history and a periodic assessment of their exploits can productively instruct citizens in their current use. History suggests that control of private military force is maximised by an informed coalition of cooperative and engaged participants that includes public citizens, their principals, and the private agents. Given incentive and oversight, they can be shown to have advantage in achieving certain security and defence objectives. Lack of competent citizen-control mechanisms often results in disorder as public and private motivations and objectives compete. Scrutiny of selected private-military histories can assist in informing what will constitute effective control over private military force in a contemporary paradigm. Refusal to recognise the exemplars offers the potential to see past mistakes repeated, to the peril of existing citizen rights and duties. As the proliferation of private military actors is unlikely to recede, given their persistent attendance alongside various human endeavours, identifying and leveraging the successes and failures of control from historical examples is prudent in order to further inform contemporary citizen’s democratic decisions about their state’s military affairs.