

HISTORY OF CONTRACTING IN AMERICAN MILITARY FORCES

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Contingency contracting officers often work with local merchants and organizations during operations overseas. (U.S. Army photo.)

Contracting is “the cheapest, most certain, and consequently the best mode of obtaining those articles which are necessary for the subsistence, covering, clothing, and moving of an army.” So said Robert Morris, American Revolution financier, Founding Father, and superintendent of finance for the Continental Congress, in describing the integral relationship between the American Army and contracting. The Continental Congress lacked money and credit in 1781 and could not support the American Soldiers nor fund the movement of George Washington’s Army from New York to Virginia. Morris used personal funds and credit to provide the logistical support for the largest troop movement of the war. To garner the best return on his money,

Morris introduced sealed, competitive bidding contracts to obtain and transport the supplies and services needed by Washington’s Army.

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From the Revolution through the end of the 19th century, the Army depended on contactors to provide supplies and services when needed. During the Black Hawk War in 1832, the Army contracted businessmen in Illinois and the Wisconsin territory to provide and deliver supplies. During the Civil War, the

government contracted for weapons, uniforms, ammunition, and the supplies necessary to equip newly raised troops. Individual commands contracted for subsistence and transportation on campaign. In preparation for the Chattanooga Campaign, MG William T. Sherman ordered COL Robert MacFeely, Commissary and Subsistence Officer for the Army of Tennessee, “I want preparations made at once to supply 25,000 men with rations at Florence and beyond.” During Reconstruction, Army officers found themselves drafting and enforcing contracts between newly freed slaves and former plantation owners. In the Spanish-American War, the Army contracted nearly every seaworthy ship in Tampa, FL, to carry troops to Cuba.

The massive mobilization for World War I began a new era of contracting. The Army found it no longer could assume that goods and services would be readily available without coordinating with American industry. In December 1941, procurement deliveries of all kinds, exclusive of aircraft, came to 8.36 billion. Through anticipation and coordination between the Army and private industry, contracts placed before America declared war facilitated a quicker mobilization for the Army. These efforts culminated with the creation of the Army Service Forces (ASF) in 1943. The ASF sought to coordinate all Army procurement needs, facilitate contracting, and oversee contracting officers.

The Army dissolved the ASF in 1946. The resulting void of coordinated contracting hampered the Army's mobilization for the Korean War. As a result, the defenders of the Pusan Perimeter subsisted on stockpiled World War II rations that had been declared spoiled. Hasty improvisation

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and emergency suspension of normal procedures mobilized the Army in 1950. Eventually, the situation in Korea improved, and the Army bolstered logistics and support units. While many of the manufactured supplies reached Korea through the port of Pusan, contracted labor moved those supplies to all of the United Nations Forces in Korea. Contracted services in Korea and Japan refurbished and rebuilt vehicles and modified U.S.-issue uniforms to smaller sizes needed for allied soldiers.

The Army relied heavily on contractors in Vietnam. They provided supplies, services, and construction of facilities and infrastructure. After the United States withdrew and the

Army evolved to an all-volunteer force, the dependence on contracts grew. A smaller force of volunteers meant fewer personnel to fill support roles. At the same time, the increasing technological complexity of military equipment necessitated specialized support and maintenance. The Army filled these needs with contractors.

In 1985, the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP) was established to provide the Army with a contingency contracting capability. First used in Somalia starting in 1992, LOGCAP evolved into a multi-million-dollar program providing life support, logistics, and infrastructure for the Army in combat and contingency operations.

The Army's use of contractors today is fundamentally the same as for Washington's Army in 1781. Contracting is arguably still "the cheapest, most certain, and consequently the best mode of obtaining those articles which are necessary for the subsistence, covering, clothing, and moving of an army."

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Meals are perhaps the oldest contracted service for the U.S. military. Here, meals are provided to Women Ordnance Workers in 1943. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History.)