Nonfiction review: "Halliburton's Army"

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"There was never any profiteering," insisted Charles Dominy, a former three-star general with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and chief lobbyist for Halliburton. "There was never any gouging. Everybody says, 'Oh, you had this sweetheart deal, it was no bid.' There is zero -- zero -- cronyism associated with our work."

Baloney. As Pratap Chatterjee -- an intrepid, if occasionally overzealous, investigative reporter -- demonstrates in "Halliburton's Army: How a Well-Connected Texas Oil Company Revolutionized the Way America Makes War," the Houston-based corporation and its former subsidiary, Kellogg, Brown, & Root, made billions as the combat service support "tail" of the Pentagon. Halliburton supplied construction, security, food services and waste management in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Uzbekistan and New Orleans. A sinkhole of corporate malfeasance, trafficking in cost-plus contracts, kickbacks, monstrous markups and out-and-out fraud, Halliburton is a poster child for the price Americans have paid, in blood and treasure, for the privatization of military affairs.

Chatterjee throws the kitchen sink, stove, steak knives and soup spoons at Halliburton, including allegations that are unproved and, perhaps, unfounded. Why include unsubstantiated allegations that an executive of Triple Canopy, a subcontractor for Halliburton/KBR, fired seven or eight rounds into a taxi in Iraq because he "never shot anyone with my pistol before"? Or pass along a complaint, still in dispute, from a construction worker who claims he's entitled to workman's compensation for post-traumatic stress disorder? Or a claim that company employees absconded with 10 large metal tubs full of tacos, chicken wings and cheese sticks at a Super Bowl party designed for military personnel?
No need for that when Chatterjee's got an arsenal full of smoking guns. He reveals, for example, grotesque charges for towels, office furniture and recreational facilities. He demonstrates that after the Defense Department questioned a $700 million discrepancy between a $2.7 billion estimate in one contract for food and logistical services, and the company's own line-by-line breakdown of actual expenses, Halliburton slashed the budget, without explanation. A military audit of another contract found $813 million in "questioned costs" -- expenses that exceed "that which would be incurred by a prudent person" -- and another $382 million in "unsupported costs" -- expenses incurred without documentation or verification.

Fifty years ago, Dwight Eisenhower warned against an emerging "military-industrial complex." As the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld Pentagon outsourced services to private corporations and abandoned oversight, Ike must have been turning over in his grave. And casting an absentee ballot for Barack Obama.

**Details:** *HALLIBURTON'S ARMY*
Pratap Chatterjee, Nation Books
$26.95, 296 pages