This book is the definitive history of the 369th Regiment in World War I, an outstanding black infantry regiment comprised of 3,000 men led by a white command element. It is the most complete, scholarly, and fully documented account of this famous (and underpublicized) unit, unlikely to be superseded. The authors, both prominent historians, are renowned experts in their fields.

Sammons and Morrow tell the complete story of the 369th—a combat unit that grew out of the 15th New York National Guard Regiment—from the bigotry that black leaders initially had to overcome to create the unit and the Herculean efforts required to convince both New York city and state politicians hostile to the idea of an all-black unit to their valiant service in France and their ultimately humiliating return to the United States after having spent more time in the trenches that any other U.S. combat unit. The book also examines the postwar tribulations of the 369th and contains several epilogues that detail the unit’s combat losses, postwar histories of the key officers and men, and unfortunate lives of two of the unit’s most famous warriors: Henry Johnson, who, nearly 100 years after the war’s end, is under consideration to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, and Neadom Roberts.

Why the title Harlem’s Rattlers? That was what the men called themselves—not “Men of Bronze” or “Harlem’s HELLFIGHTERS,” terms often used incorrectly in other histories of the unit. The men of the 369th thought of the rattlesnake as a symbol of power (like the Gadsden flag used during the Revolutionary War that depicted a coiled snake atop the words “Don’t Tread on Me!”). This and many of the other myths associated with the 369th are rewritten by the authors, bringing truthfulness and clarity to a story that has long been riddled with inaccuracies.

The authors devote approximately one-fifth of the book to describing the domestic political issues within both the New York state and the federal governments, as well as the turbulent conflict within the black community, over the formation of an all-black combat unit. Once formed, training for the 15th New York National Guard Regiment was difficult for a number of reasons, most of them racial.

Black political and social leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois thought there was a positive correlation between serving as uniformed soldiers and possessing full citizenship. Why they believed they could improve the situation of black Americans through military service is difficult to understand. A dearth of both recognition and reward defined the service of black soldiers during the Civil War, in which nearly 40,000 died, the Indian Wars, in which they comprised a far greater proportion of the Army than they did the U.S. population in general, and the Spanish-American War, during which all four historic black regiments fought. These black leaders struggled continually to convince the War Department and U.S. Government to establish black infantry units and to permit blacks to serve in combat. Even men as sophisticated as Du Bois, however, underestimated the depth of bigotry in the country; there would be no rewards for the black soldiers for their service in World War I.

In fact, following the end of the conflict, political and social conditions for black civilians were worse than they had been prior to its outbreak.

Training for the 369th was to have been completed in Spartanburg, South Carolina, prior to the soldiers’ departure for the frontlines in France. Racist treatment of the soldiers by the city’s inhabitants, however, nearly provoked an armed attack on Spartanburg by the unit, forcing the War Department to send the 369th overseas without having been fully trained. Once in France, the American Expeditionary Force commanders did not want to attach the 369th to any U.S. division and instead assigned them to a French division. The performance of the 369th in combat was distinguished, and the men of the unit were highly praised by their French commanders for their determination, cohesion, high morale, and fighting capability. Despite this, when the U.S. Army Chief of Staff asked the Army War College in 1924 to make recommendations regarding future racial policy,
the authors of the study disregarded the heroism of the 369th and produced a
document that was blatant in its racism.

The chief was advised to maintain
racial segregation and to ensure that all-
black fighting units were commanded by
whites. The study concluded, incorrectly,
that blacks believed themselves to be
inferior to whites and that they were “by
nature” subservient, lacking “initiative
and resourcefulness” because, as stated
in the report, “[t]he cranial cavity of the
Negro is smaller than the white; his brain
weights 35 ounces contrasted with 45 for
the white.” Most damning, however, was
the illogical argument that “[i]n physical
courage . . . the American Negro falls well
back of the white man and possibly be-
hind all other races.” This statement flew
in the face of the numerous black soldiers
who had served with honor in the Civil
War, Indians Wars, and Spanish-American
War and were awarded congressional
medals of honor in recognition of their
courage and valor. (No medals of honor
were awarded during the 20th century for
World War I.) The report was prepared
by the entire student body and faculty at
the Army War College in 1924 and 1925
with nine additional iterations appearing
prior to the start of World War II; the
same racist notions were included in each
report. The United States in general—
and the U.S. Army in particular—paid
a steep price for allowing the country’s
deeply entrenched racism to define—and
limit—the use of a courageous, deter-
mined, and highly capable fighting force
in World War II.

Harlem’s Rattlers is a soundly re-
searched and documented history that
all Americans—and especially military
officers—should read. JFQ

—Dr. Alan L. Gropman is Professor Emeritus in
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The Modern Mercenary:
Private Armies and What
They Mean for World Order

By Sean McFate
Oxford University Press, 2014
235 pp. $29.95
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Reviewed by T.X. Hammes

At their peak, contractors com-
prised more than 50 percent
of U.S. personnel in Iraq and
Afghanistan. Furthermore, despite
complaints about contractor perfor-
mance, the Pentagon has stated that
contractors will make up half of any
future U.S. force deployments. Why?
Because they work. This reality requires
defense professionals to seek a deeper
understanding of what contractors
do and the implications for future
conflict—making Sean McFate’s The
Modern Mercenary a very timely book.
In it, he not only carefully examines
contractors, but also describes the
changing international environment in
which they will operate.

McFate does not claim his book
covers all aspects of contracting. Rather,
he focuses on the most controversial ele-
ment: private military companies or, in
his words, “the private sector equivalent
of combat arms.” As he notes, the most
disturbing aspect of the Pentagon’s
increasing reliance on contractors is “the
decision to outsource lethal force.” He
places these companies in two categories.
Those that directly apply military force
are “mercenaries,” while those that train
others to do so are “enterprisers.” These
categories represent two distinct mar-
kets. Mercenaries exist as a free market
in which each individual sells his or her
services directly to the buyer, offering
the means of war to anyone who can
afford it. Enterprisers represent a medi-
ated market in which the company is an
arbiter between the individual and the
buyer. Essentially, the company recruits
and organizes personnel to fulfill specific
mission/contract requirements as defined
by the buyer. For good business reasons,
enterprisers are more discriminating in
both the clients and tasks they accept.
Unfortunately, if business demands, en-
terprisers can easily slip to the mercenary
side of the scale.

McFate does not see mercenaries
and enterprisers in the same light. Using
Somalia as a case study, he argues that
free market mercenaries are likely to
counter to increased instability and will
not improve a state’s chances of success.
In contrast, enterprisers offer a state an
opportunity for success. He uses Liberia
as a case study where, as a DynCorp
employee, he participated in raising and
training the new Liberian army. However,
his argument for enterprisers is weak-
ened by the lack of success in Iraq and
Afghanistan despite the presence of doz-
eens, if not hundreds, of enterprisers.

In one of the most interesting aspects
of this intriguing work, McFate applies
the concept of neo-medievalism—the
belief that the world is becoming
increasingly non–state-centric and mul-
tipolar—to describe the emerging global
security environment. While states will
remain major players, overlapping au-
thorities and allegiances will have major
impacts on how and why wars are fought
and who fights them.

In this environment, McFate states,
“the private military industry has a bright
future. This multi-billion-dollar industry