

Amazon's Jeff Bezos Puts the Pentagon on His Monopoly Board

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While employees at Google and Microsoft are wary of collaborating with the military, Amazon revels in it.



Jeff Bezos, deep state lackey

Speaking at the Wired 25th anniversary last month, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos announced that his company will continue to accept Pentagon contracts. That includes a very controversial cloud-computing contract that Google and Microsoft have already backed out of due to vocal employee opposition to working with the U.S. military.

Amazon was long considered the front-runner for this contract, but Bezos's rationale for taking it goes well beyond its being low-hanging fruit. He's argued that the government's job is to "make the right decision, even when it's unpopular," and that large tech companies should support those decisions irrespective of politics.

The \$10 billion tied to the contract can't hurt either. Whatever his motivation for sucking it up and taking one for team tech, Bezos's public justification is a poor one, and it isn't hard to see why. The Pentagon has a long history of immoral and reckless behavior, actions that objectively aren't beneficial to the defense of the United States. Any company that blindly works with them does so at its own peril.

Employees at Google and Microsoft have already made a powerful case for why tech giants shouldn't collaborate with the Defense Department. They don't want to be responsible for developing technology that causes substantial harm, surveils others in violation of international norms, or contravenes human rights. The Pentagon can be counted on to do all three, and more.

Furthermore, the Pentagon's growing interest in artificial intelligence (A.I.), particularly as it relates to warfighting, sounds out of the preamble for a dystopian novel. Hence why Google employees forced their company not to renew a controversial Pentagon contract in June involving A.I. While Amazon will be signing on to cloud computing, not A.I., it's still more than a little concerning that Bezos was so adamant about the virtues of the DoD. (For what it's worth, Amazon already works with the CIA.)

But Amazon has an interest that extends far beyond this single deal. The real prize is to become the military's sole procurement source for off-the-shelf components. Disdainfully labeled Amazon.mil by critics, this initiative is a result of a congressional mandate that the Pentagon shift procurement to a single online marketplace.

The mandate is supposed to save the Pentagon money when buying run-of-the-mill items like bottled water. It would also give Amazon, the presumptive facilitator, a virtual monopoly on selling a vast array of items to a government department with nearly limitless money that's notorious for overpaying for things.

Amazon is one of very few online companies that could even claim to provide this sort of service. In eagerly contracting with the Pentagon elsewhere, Bezos is laying the groundwork for this much bigger relationship.

Yet being the Pentagon's friendly partner could come with potential costs. Bezos is setting Amazon up as an amoral alternative to the other major technology companies. When a Pentagon project breaks bad and the public starts asking how all this could have happened, the answer will be Amazon.

A recent test case for this was the NSA's surveillance of the American public. Intended to be done entirely in secret, when it was revealed that the major telecoms were complicit, even though they were effectively forced by secret court orders to cooperate, their reputations suffered a hit. Customers began asking whether their privacy was safe with AT&T or Verizon.

Amazon's complicity may still be under the radar, but it is all the riskier now that Bezos has publicly defended working with the Pentagon on matters others wanted nothing to do with. His quote about senior leadership making "the right decisions" could easily become the soundbite for a story about government excess going unchallenged by the private sector.

Bezos tries to paint this with a broad brush by contending that major companies must not walk away from the U.S. government over politics. Yet the consequences of Pentagon projects are potentially far-reaching, and large American companies cannot succor themselves with the rationale that they're only following orders.

Amazon is going down a risky path. They say that if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas, and Amazon has made a conscious decision to climb into bed with some of the Pentagon's most flea-bitten projects. If it wakes up in a mess, let's make sure no one claims they didn't see it coming.

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