

# THE SILENCE OF THE CITY

WHERE THE TALK STOPS AND SILENCE IS HEARD

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## A CITIZEN'S UNREST

### **CRAMER VS. TOPCAT VS. PIRATES** REJECTED MARCH 2006

"I have a hobbyist interest in private military firms," Kathryn Cramer was saying the other day. Cramer, an award-winning science fiction author and anthologist, lives with her husband, David, and her two young children in a brown split-level house in the north Westchester town of Pleasantville. Cramer is an owlish woman with round glasses and dirty-blond hair, parted down the middle. She's been a blogger since 2003, ever since her friends told her to stop hijacking their blogs and get her own, and, between posts about her son's homemade valentines and backyard trees downed in the latest winter storm, she probes the secretive world of mercenary armies from her dining room table. Recently, she was responsible for scuttling a fifty-million-dollar arms deal between a Topcat, a Manhattan-based security company, and the Somali government.

"When I saw the Topcat deal, a number of things looked wrong about it," Cramer said, the other day, in her dining room, which is cluttered with fish tanks, computer monitors, and cartons of books about robotic knights and time travel. ("I call it my mommy command center," she said.)

Last year, the day after Thanksgiving, she came across a BBC report announcing that, for fifty-million dollars, Topcat would deliver speedboats and organize security forces to help Somalia combat offshore pirates. (Three weeks prior to the deal, gunmen fired a rocket at a luxury cruise ship, one of 35 pirate attacks along Somalia's coast last year) "I used to work for a literary agent three blocks from the address they have on their Web site," Cramer said, "and it seemed kind of odd to me that a marine security company would have an address in the Garment District--I mean, they'd need some place to put their boats."

Ten minutes on Google confirmed Cramer's hunch. Topcat, she found, shared its 545 Eighth Avenue suite with a menagerie of decidedly non-maritime companies, including Animal Fair, a "lifestyle magazine for animal lovers," the Web sites HotDynamite.com and MyHealingPrayer.com, and an online video store that Cramer decided was too risqué to name. As she later joked on her blog: "If I shared that office, I'd go to sea to fight pirates, too!"

That night Cramer posted her findings. "The thing about my Web site," she said with a bit of pride, "is if I write about 'Topcat,' in three days I'll be one of the top Google hits for it. I'm also the top Google link for 'Kathryn.' Maybe it's because

I've blogged for three years," she said, "or because of the books I write. Somehow, the Google juice likes me."

Her popularity increased two days later when Topcat's research and development chief, Peter Casini, appeared on FOX News to promote his company's new contract. "When they put this thing on FOX," remembered Cramer, "I had lots and lots of traffic." Her blog held down the second, third, and fourth ranked page for Google searches on "Topcat," just behind the company's own home page, and the visitors to her site shot above the 1,500 she averages on most days.

While the BBC and Reuters reported Casini's blustery pledge to take on the pirates, Cramer kept digging. She learned that Topcat had promised to build a boat factory outside Charleston, S.C., in April 2004, but then walked away six months later, leaving bitter local officials, eviction notices, and unpaid bills. Through New Jersey court records, she tied Casini to several bankrupt boat businesses stretching back to 1995. And then Cramer discovered that Topcat had apparently boosted its macho credentials by exaggerating ties to Bernie McCabe, a Special Forces veteran who helped run Sandline International, a defunct private military firm linked to insurgent wars in Asia and Africa. To Cramer, Topcat looked like a failed company trying to profit from pirate paranoia. "I hope Somalia hasn't cut any actual checks yet," she told her readers.

Within days, Topcat executives and their supporters began to hit back through e-mails and comments. "They started in pretty much right away, as soon as they found me, with the 'a person could get hurt' kind of rhetoric," Cramer said. "They were playing amateur mafia." Luckily, Cramer had some experience with confrontational blogging. "I had a blog war with Little Green Footballs, which is a right-wing blog. They gave me a lot of Internet combat training."

While Topcat's supporters attacked, other readers encouraged her muckraking. "Some of those guys in my comments section, I can't tell you who they are, but there's some very heavy PMC"--private military corporation-- "dudes in there," Cramer said. One e-mailer even suggested that Casini had a sideline business selling fake Tiffany lamps on eBay, a claim she couldn't verify.

In the end, the U.S. government torpedoed the deal, denying Topcat an export license because it violated the thirteen-year old arms embargo against Somalia. "I'm told that my blog was waved under the nose of the State Department official who ordered the cease-and-desist order against them," Cramer said.

Doug Brooks, president of a PMC member group, didn't mind. "Kathryn is doing a real service by exposing these weasels," he said.

A few days later, Cramer's blog shifted to more domestic concerns: introducing her kids to Victoria's Secret. "My daughter discovers an entire store full of things that are pink," she wrote. "Meanwhile my son tries to flee in terror. 'Let's get out of here! Can we please leave?' he says over and over."

– JASON STEVENSON