



The Bad Boys of Business: Blackwater

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*It may have killed a few civilians,
but it sure beats the draft.*



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"Blackwater is getting a bad rap," said President Barack Obama -- who was provided with protection by Blackwater while in Afghanistan -- in July 2008.

War is not a pleasant business.

People get hurt. People die. But it's all part of the program once you sign on the dotted line and become the exclusive property of the US military for the term of your hitch.

The draft ended in 1973. However, wars didn't. Naturally, without mandatory armed service, it became more and more difficult to maintain effective troop levels. So, love them or hate them, private military contractors like Blackwater (now renamed Xe, pronounced "Zee"), stepped in to plug the gaps.

US Navy veteran David Isenberg is a military affairs analyst with the Cato Institute. As he wrote, "despite the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld championed, [war] is a highly people-powered endeavor. And most people have decided that their children, much like Dick Cheney during the Vietnam War, have 'better things to do.' "

With Americans having "better things to do" than go into battle, Blackwater's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan stoked quite a bit of controversy -- as would be expected of any private force entering a hot zone.

"Warzones are hostile, unpredictable places," says Stacy DeLuke, a Blackwater spokesperson. "Bad things happen, even with the best intentions. We, as a company, are saddened by any loss of human life."

On September 16, 2007, Blackwater employees shot and killed 17 Iraqi civilians in Nisour Square, Baghdad while escorting a group of US State Department vehicles to an official rendezvous.

Almost immediately, the outcry began. What seemed to have been forgotten was that these men weren't scooping cones at Haagen Dazs shops before their deployments. Blackwater hires former US Navy SEAL Team members, former members of the Australian Special Air Service, Canadian Special Forces, United Kingdom Special Boat Service, US Army Special Forces, US Army Rangers, and the like.

"These are not 18-year olds right out of high school," Blackwater's DeLuke says. "These are seasoned veterans who've had extensive military experience, some have even been lifetime military who love what they do, love their country, and more importantly, believe in it. They want to come back [to military life] and we provide them a venue in which to make that happen."



On April 1, 2009, the Associated Press reported that forensic tests proved inconclusive and that none of the bullets fired came from rifles used by Blackwater guards.

Again, Cato's Isenberg:

“If people don’t want to use private contractors, the choices are simple. Either scale back US geopolitical commitments or enlarge the military, something that will entail more gargantuan expenditures and even, some argue, a return to the draft down the road.

“Personally, I prefer the former. But most people prefer substituting contractors for draftees. As former Marine colonel Jack Holly said, ‘We’re never going to war without the private security industry again in a non-draft environment.’ ”

Isenberg goes on to explain the issue in more depth: “Looked at historically private military contractors are as American as apple pie. In fact, without private contractors there would not have been an America. Or, to paraphrase Genesis: In the beginning, God created private contractors.”

I know, I know -- your first response is likely something inappropriate for a family audience. My answer? Read on.

“An Italian by the name of Christophorus (Christopher) Columbus was essentially working as a private contractor for the king and queen of Spain when he made his famous voyage in 1492 and subsequent ones that started the process of Spanish colonization, which foreshadowed general European settlement of the 'New World.' ”

Never thought about it that way before.

“And Captain John Smith was hired by the Virginia Co. to provide security and conduct military operations for the English settlers at Jamestown. He led the 1606 expedition to Virginia and was elected head of Jamestown colony.”

Ditto.

“During the American Revolution more than 2,000 privately owned warships were commissioned by Congress to attack the enemy and seize transports and sell their cargoes for money during the American Revolution. Sailors made more in a month than they might otherwise earn in a year. Does that sound familiar?”

Actually, yes. It does.

“And, on the ground, it was a private businessman who, before the start of the Revolution, offered to build a thousand-man army at his own expense, if the Continental Congress, of which he was a member, failed to fund a standing military. That was a far more financially risky endeavor than anything a private security firm like Blackwater has ever attempted. That entrepreneur was George Washington.”

George Washington. Heard of him. You?



Isenberg equates “opposing the use of contractors in Iraq” to “opposing the setting of the sun in the west. You couldn’t do it, even if you wanted to.”

He makes the point that there are now more DOD contractors than regular active forces overseas. In his words: “If there were US forces -- military or otherwise -- to spare for those roles, they would have been provided.”

Agreed. They happened to have not been provided because they simply don't exist.

US Department of State Legal Adviser John B. Bellinger III said, “Greater reliance on contract personnel requires vigorous oversight and accountability mechanisms. The United States fully supports the application of professional standards to the operations of military and private security companies.”



Does Isenberg have any criticisms of contracting out military work to civilians? Yes. And it's probably not what you're expecting.

“If I have one criticism to make it is this. Generally when we think and talk about contractors our perspective is far too narrow. It is easy to talk smack about Blackwater, Triple Canopy, DynCorp, SOC-SMG, Control Risks Group, Erinys, and all the other private security and military contractors working for the Defense Department or the State Department and other agencies but the truth is that the prevalence of private contractors is far greater than that.

“The military is just one component of the national security establishment and contractors are in all the others, whether you are talking about the intelligence community, information operations, diplomacy, foreign aid, humanitarian assistance.”

He's right. Blackwater/Xe is now also in the business of protecting commercial ships from pirate attacks; manufacturing custom rifles, spy blimps, and light attack aircraft; handling cargo; and even training pro athletes in the art of personal protection.

Cato slightly too far to the right for your taste? Here's what James Gibney of *The Atlantic* has to say on the issue:

“In November 1999, the United Nations Security Council authorized sending peacekeepers to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since then, despite the growth of the UN force to more than 18,000 personnel, at a cost of more than \$1 billion a year, violence and turmoil have killed millions more Congolese. Of course, some things haven't helped, like the Pakistani peacekeepers who rearmed, in return for gold, the militia they were supposed to be disarming; or the Indian troops who reportedly traded arms for ivory from the rebels and bought dope from them in the bargain.”



Wouldn't highly-trained, well-paid former elite military forces be in a better position to actually make a positive difference in countries flailing for stability?

Yes.

Gibney says:

"There is a different, more robust approach to making peace in nasty places: deploy private military companies. Put them on retainer, and they'll go where they're paid to go -- unlike every one of the 19 countries that had pledged troops on a standby basis for UN peacekeeping and then refused, in 1994, to send them to Rwanda."

Nineteen countries pledged troops and 19 countries ultimately refused to send them as promised. Private industry to the rescue.

Hold the phone -- the United Nations doesn't condone "mercenaries." Gibney makes a counterpoint so cogent, I wouldn't dream of attempting to paraphrase:



"A system where the top 10 payers of peacekeeping dues (rich countries like the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, etc.) rely on the top 10 troop contributors (poor countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Nepal, Ghana, etc.) to do their dirty work sounds pretty mercenary to me."

Me too. You?

Just recently, in what sounds more like a plot point from a rejected Hollywood B-movie script, Jeremy Scahill of *The Nation* wrote that, in affidavits filed in federal court by two former employees going by the handles "John Doe 1" and "John Doe 2" alleged that Blackwater founder Erik Prince and his staff "murdered or had murdered one or more persons who have provided information, or who were planning to provide information, to the federal authorities about the ongoing criminal conduct".

Of course, there are also people who believe the moon landing was staged in the Nevada desert.

And Prince has not been charged with any crimes.

Somebody pass the popcorn.

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