

# Blackwater

*Kevin Cahill*

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When the Iraq war crimes tribunals start, as start they must, the earliest defendants in the dock will surely be the Blackwater company and its hired mercenaries. And, as a shield for their murderous acts, they will no doubt carry before them the infamous Order 17. This was the reckless immunity granted to the private armies in Iraq by the ill-starred US ‘administrator of Iraq’, Paul Bremer III, in June 2004, the month he fled the country. In effect, Bremer placed the mercenary armies recruited by the Allies, and said to total over 180,000 personnel, beyond the reach of both Iraqi and the domestic law of their home countries, mainly the United States. In his book, Jeremy Scahill chronicles the consequences of privatising a modern war: *Blackwater, The rise of the world’s most powerful mercenary army*.\*

In a book that is uniquely timely in its publication, Scahill, a journalist, charts the coming into existence and deployment in Iraq of a mercenary force from the United States, called Blackwater Inc. Timely, because shortly after the book’s appearance in both the United States and the United Kingdom, in mid 2007, a force of Blackwater personnel fired on a crowd in Baghdad, killing between 11 and 17 people and wounding 23 others, on 20 September 2007. An outraged Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al Maliki, not famous for his criticism of the Americans, said of the incident that; ‘We will not tolerate the killing of our citizens in cold blood’, having earlier described the companies report on the incident as ‘not accurate’. A Blackwater spokesperson, Anne E Tyrell, later told the *New York Times* that ‘Blackwater’s independent contractors acted lawfully and appropriately in response to a hostile attack in Baghdad on Sunday’. She described the people killed as ‘armed insurgents’. In an account of the incident by the Iraqi police, an account that is now being indirectly accepted as accurate by the US State

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Department, Blackwater's employer, the first three 'armed insurgents' killed were a man and his wife and their infant child. Maliki described the incident as 'the seventh of its kind "recently"'. The 'recently' got lost in translation because in the period covered by Scahill's book, from mid 2003 to the end of 2006, there were endless shooting incidents in which the Blackwater company and its staff were involved. Of these, one is appalling in its direct irresponsibility, and another appalling in its consequences.

The first incident, all too vividly described by Scahill, occurred at the holy city of Najaf on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2004. A group of Blackwater contractors, about eight in number, were guarding a local building occupied by Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority. They were on the roof where a US marine corporal was installing communications equipment. A small riot or demonstration began in the square in front of the building. The Blackwater contractors subsequently took control of the action, of which the following are excerpts from the various accounts compiled by Scahill.

'The shooting stops as the men assess the situation below them. "Hold what you got. Hold what you got right there" a voice commands. "Just scan your sectors. Scan your sectors. Who needs ammo?"

"Fuckin' niggers" says another voice as the men begin to reload their weapons'

All this was recorded on video and published on the web by a Blackwater contractor using a video camera in between killing Iraqis.

Later, the marine communications corporal, who was injured, is reported saying:

'I gazed over the streets with straining eyes, only to see hundreds of Iraqis lying all over the ground.' And he added, 'It was an unbelievable sight; even though there were so many lying dead, the Iraqis were still running towards the front gate. I opened fire once again. Emptying magazine after magazine, I watched the people dressed in white and black robes drop to the ground as my sights passed by them.'

And how did he feel about this mass slaughter?

'I had a weird feeling come over me' Young recalled. 'I had many emotions kick in at once. I felt a sense of purpose, happiness, and sorrow, which all hit me at once.'

The point Scahill makes about this action, in which an uncounted number of Iraqis were killed, was that the entire action was commanded, not by the United States or any other military, but by the Blackwater contractors in the building. The proof is the video one of them took and posted on the web.

The other event, which occurred a few days before, at the city of Falluja, was grimmer still. In March 2004, the US military were involved in a massacre at a school in the city on Hay Nazzal street. Following the massacre, the US military moved out but had encircled the city, and there had been running battles all over Falluja in the days leading up to the end of March. In circumstances that remain unclear, four poorly armed Blackwater contractors drove into the city in a Pajero jeep. They had not explained what they were doing to the US military with whom

they had spent the night. They had not explained what mission they were on. They had not long entered the city before they were ambushed and all four were killed. But it didn't end there. Here is how Scahill describes the next sighting that anyone had of the four dead contractors:

'The charred remains of the Blackwater contractors were still hanging from the Falluja bridge when news of the ambush began to spread across the globe. "They cant do that to Americans," said Captain Douglas Zembic, as he watched the scene on TV in a mess hall at a military base outside Falluja.'

But it wasn't the perpetrators of the murders who would pay for what had happened to 'Americans'. No one knew who the killers were. In the months and years that followed, the American military twice attacked Falluja, making no pretence that this was legitimate war. It was revenge for what had happened to the Blackwater contractors. About 90 per cent of the population of the city was displaced by the two American attacks. An unknown number of Iraqis, certainly not less than 2,000 to 4,000 men, women and many children, were killed as American bullets went through walls that were never intended to stop gunfire, and didn't. The two attacks on Falluja were classic mass punishments and were aggressive war against mainly unarmed, and unprotected civilians. They were war crimes at every level; in their motivation and their execution.

### **So who or what are Blackwater?**

Blackwater is a private military corporation, initially set up to cash in on the process of privatisation of the military that was launched by the disgraced US former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld on 10 September 2001. That day Rumsfeld described the Pentagon, in terms of its inept and centralised planning of the US military, as '... an adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America'.

According to Scahill, Rumsfeld called for a wholesale shift in the running of the Pentagon, supplanting the old Department of Defense bureaucracy with a new model, one based on the private sector. What Rumsfeld got was Blackwater. But what he got before that, in fact the day after his speech, was an Al Qaeda hijacked civil airliner slamming into the west wall of the Pentagon. Rumsfeld's mistaken idea of who the enemy actually was did not alter his determination to build civilian contractors into the US military.

In a cabinet almost entirely recruited from arms companies there was no opposition to bringing mercenaries into every area of military life, short of employing them directly in front line combat duties. Standing ready to accept the largess that paid for this policy was Erik Prince, a right wing religious neocon from Holland, in Michigan. He had set up Blackwater after he left the US Navy SEALs in 1998, in the Great Dismal Swamp area of North Carolina. It was meant to be a training and target shooting facility for training Navy SEALs and law enforcement agencies. But even as the initial 4,000 acres was being brought into use, Prince, a multimillionaire, was running a sophisticated and heavily funded

lobbying operation in Washington. It is hard to say to what extent Rumsfeld's policy of privatisation was influenced by the Prince lobby but, taken together with the Al Qaeda attack, it paid dividends for Prince. When the US attacked Iraq in March 2003, the attacking forces were accompanied by up to 100,000 civilian contractors, of whom the most heavily armed and highest paid were Prince's Blackwater mercenaries. The formal job of the Blackwater staff was to provide security for the occupation administration. Blackwater has lost 30 or 40 employees in Iraq. What has not been counted are the civilians killed by Blackwater, in the many encounters described by Scahill.

This is an immensely worthwhile and carefully compiled book. It is a tribute to the journalism for which America was once famous. It describes in great detail the links between the politicians in the Bush administration and the neocons and right wing religious fanatics in the business community, each feeding off the other and determined to change, by force of arms, the infrastructure of the Middle East. But Scahill also demonstrates clearly that, without the unfettered access this crowd got to US taxpayers' dollars, neither they nor their wars could exist. In the end it is an indictment of the failure of the American Congress and Senate to hold the administration to the truths of the constitution and, perhaps more important, to prevent the squandering of US treasure.



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