

As Louisiana faces new floods: Haunted by the nightmare of Katrina

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As Louisiana faces new floods, let's ensure that we never again permit politicians to send in mercenaries to 'restore order'



A destroyed shopping mall in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, during which the police department was found to have engaged in patterns of misconduct. Photograph: Dan Chung for the Guardian

The announcement that [John Ashcroft will become the new ethics adviser to the private security company formerly known as Blackwater](#) - now Xe - reflects the fact that our nation's moral compass has not been pointing due north in recent years. This April, a federal appeals court reopened the case against four Blackwater guards accused of killing 17 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in 2007, when the company was under the control of the controversial figure Erik Prince. [Prince has since set up a secret mercenary force for the UAE](#), whose primary objectives are to defend against terrorist attacks and to mercilessly squash internal revolts.

In the meantime, Blackwater and Able Danger, the military data-mining op, [have combined forces, yielding a lovechild company with a cunningly discreet name, Jellyfish](#). The company promises to provide private intelligence to corporations seeking inside information on the competition and how geopolitics stands to affect corporate investments. Envision a James Bond who reports to Bernie Madoff. Not to worry, says Keith Mahoney, the CEO of Jellyfish. The former Navy officer and senior executive of Blackwater's intelligence team reassures us: "Our organisation is not going to be controversial ... This isn't Blackwater - or even Xe."

I feel so much better now.

All this comes on the heels of the news that for the first time since 1973, the [Army Corps of Engineers opened a portion of the Morganza Spillway](#) this weekend to relieve pressure on the levees from a swollen [Mississippi](#) River. In 2009, a federal judge found the same Army Corps of Engineers guilty of negligence that led to catastrophic [flooding](#) during [Hurricane Katrina](#). As the [water began engulfing Cajun country again this weekend](#), memories of Hurricane Katrina resurfaced in the minds of [Louisiana](#) residents: water lapping onto roofs, bloated human cadavers floating among the carcasses of dead animals, snakes and alligators biting in toxic flood waters, widespread rapes and looting in the infested, filthy Superdome.

For many who lived through it, Katrina was not a natural disaster. It was a calamity fuelled by an incompetent government guilty of negligence, corruption, violence and racism, one in which the poorest people of the country suffered inexcusably and a city was rendered unrecognisable. It was devastation of epic proportions.

Should it surprise anyone, then, that here, too, on our own hallowed American soil, mercenaries from all over the world were employed to inflict torture, fear and unthinkably heinous crimes upon our own citizens?

These were our fellow Americans, who watched their children drown, and their possessions swept away, citizens who were living like animals, waiting in anticipation for their government to rescue them from their rooftops, to feed them and shelter them, or at least comfort them. And what did they get? Mercenaries who were employed by private security companies. These mercenaries were sent to the submerged city under the auspices of restoring order, but actually participated in one of the most disgraceful chapters in American history.

[“Camp Greyhound”](#), one of the most ignominious prisons in American record, was a detention facility set up in downtown New Orleans. A replica of [Guantánamo Bay](#), Camp Greyhound was known for its systematic brutality and against prisoners. [Dave Eggers details the horrors of this prison in his non-fiction bestseller Zeitoun](#), named after a Muslim American of Syrian origin who was imprisoned there. After enduring almost a month of physical abuse, isolation and mental anguish, stripped of his constitutional rights, Abdulrahman Zeitoun was released on \$75,000 bail for looting his own home. Zeitoun, an upstanding citizen of New Orleans, who rescued over 10 neighbours, one of whom was a Baptist pastor, was accused of being linked to al-Qaida, though no formal charges were ever laid on this score. Robbed of habeas corpus, he was caged in a 16-foot razor-wired fence, with nowhere to sit or sleep. Like most of the prisoners at Camp Greyhound, he was not allowed to see a lawyer, nor was he allowed a phone call. One particularly disturbing scene in the book describes how Zeitoun looked on as a mentally handicapped inmate was tied up and pepper-sprayed in the face until “he was cowering in a foetal position”.

In order to round up the “prisoners” and keep the makeshift jail running, at least five mercenary companies were enlisted. All were licensed by homeland security, including a firm named Instinctive Shooting International, which is self-described as being staffed by foreign veterans of special forces. Reporter [Jeremy Scahill, author of Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army, documented this](#) in the wake of post-Katrina mayhem. [According to an article in the New Statesman](#), a powerful businessman by the

name of [James Reiss, who coincidentally served in Mayor Ray Nagin’s administration, had mercenaries flown in](#). He was noted to openly talk of the “need to change the ‘demographics’ of NoLa [New Orleans, Louisiana] after the hurricane”.

Americans must ask themselves how foreign soldiers ended up on our land, committing violations of human and civil rights against our own citizens who were in need of dire help. Amid misleading and hyped reports of lawlessness and looting, New Orleans was effectively placed under martial law, by which government-sanctioned mercenaries “imposed order” on a black and brown populus, with impunity for their abuses. As Zeitoun’s experience attests, racist and wrongful imprisonment became the norm. This is but one example of happens when we condone the use of private security forces.

As the levees of the Mississippi River are opened at this landmark moment in US history, this time around, we Americans must monitor vigilantly on behalf of our neighbours in Louisiana to ensure that nothing like Camp Greyhound ever happens again, not on our watch. And more than ever, this is the time to reclaim our country – reclaim it from the people who were authorised to tap our phones by the Bush administration, reclaim it from those who authorised the torture at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, from those who were empowered to detain suspects at private prisons like Camp Greyhound. We must take back our country from fear-mongering politicians and the private security forces they award contracts to, so that they cannot trample again on the noble principles America stands for.

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