

Blackwater and me: A love story it ain't

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Commentary

I know something about Blackwater USA. This opinion is both intellectually driven as well as moderately emotional. You see, during my own yearlong tour in Iraq, the bad boys of Blackwater twice came closer to killing me than did any of the insurgents or Al Qaeda types. That sort of thing sticks with you. One story will suffice to make my point.

The first time it happened was in the spring of 2005. For various reasons, none of which bear repeating, I was moving through downtown Baghdad in an unmarked civilian sedan. I was with two other men, but they had the native look, while I was in my uniform, hunched in the back seat and partially covered by a blanket, hoping that the curtains on the window were enough to conceal my incongruous presence, not to mention my weapons. It was not the normal manner in which an Army infantry major moved around the city, but it was what the situation called for, so there I was. We were in normal Baghdad traffic, with the flow such as it was, in the hubbub of confusion that is generated when you suddenly introduce more than 1 million extra vehicles in the course of two years into a city that previously had only a few hundred thousand vehicles, and no real licensing authority.

As we approached one semi-infamous intersection along the main route used by Blackwater between the International Zone (a.k.a. the Green Zone) and the Ministry of Interior, one of Blackwater's convoys roared through. Apparently, Blackwater's agents did not like the look of us, the main body of cars in front of them. Their response was, to say the least, contrary to the best interests of the United States effort in Iraq. Barreling through in their huge, black armored Suburbans and Expeditions, they drove other cars onto the sidewalk even as they popped off rounds from at least one weapon, though I cannot say if the shots were aimed at us or fired into the sky as a warning. I do know one thing: It enraged me ... and Blackwater is, at least nominally, on our side.

But imagining that incident from an Iraqi perspective made it clear to me that though Blackwater USA draws its paycheck from Uncle Sam, it's not working in Uncle Sam's best interests. If I was this angry, I can only imagine the reactions of the tens of thousands of Iraqis who encounter Blackwater personnel on a regular basis.

Iraq operates on the basis of an honor culture. Honor is, arguably, more important than Islam. Being dishonored, in word or deed, or even by implication, is enough to set the average Iraqi man to plotting his revenge. This is a culture in which political assassinations (usually based on honor issues) are not an abstraction but an everyday occurrence. Every time one of those Blackwater convoys drives an Iraqi civilian off the road because the most important thing in the world is the protection of their "principal," they make a new enemy

for the United States. Every time they ram another car to clear the way (and, yes, I've seen them do that), so that they could maintain their own speed and thereby minimize their exposure to "improvised explosive devices," they make another enemy. Every time they kill innocent civilians, or wound them, they make whole families of new enemies.

This understanding of the backlash effect from dishonoring an Iraqi is included in a past military counterinsurgency manual, "Instructions for American Servicemen in Iraq during World War II," recently re-published by the University of Chicago Press. But the reality is that Blackwater USA, from top to bottom, just does not care.

What employees of the private security firm care about, and I have heard this from the Blackwaters with whom I interacted in Iraq, is their paycheck. They care about their huge compensation packages, and about getting home alive to spend them. Blackwater USA has already taken in more than \$1 billion from the public coffers.

All in all, that's not a bad take for Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater and a Naval Academy dropout who served less time under the colors of the nation, in uniform, than my most recent pair of boots.

Robert Bateman is a historian and U.S. Army infantry officer. He served in Iraq in 2005 and 2006. His most recent book is "No Gun Ri: A Military History of the Korean War Incident."

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