

Blackwater's run for the border

Military-style complex near the U.S.-Mexico border.

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The notorious security contractor has plans for a military-style complex near the U.S.-Mexico border. Critics worry the firm's "mercenary soldiers" could join the U.S. Border Patrol.

Oct. 23, 2007 | There are signs that Blackwater USA, the private security firm that came under intense scrutiny after [its employees killed 17 civilians in Iraq](#) in September, is positioning itself for direct involvement in U.S. border security. The company is poised to construct a major new training facility in California, just eight miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. While contracts for U.S. war efforts overseas may no longer be a growth industry for the company, Blackwater executives have lobbied the U.S. government since at least 2005 to help train and even deploy manpower for patrolling America's borders.

Blackwater is planning to build an 824-acre military-style training complex in Potrero, Calif., a rural hamlet 45 miles east of San Diego. The company's proposal, which was approved last December by the Potrero Community Planning Group and has drawn protest from within the Potrero community, will turn a former chicken ranch into "Blackwater West," the company's second-largest facility in the country. It will include a multitude of weapons firing ranges, a tactical driving track, a helipad, a 33,000-square-foot urban simulation training area, an armory for storing guns and ammunition, and dorms and classrooms. And it will be located in the heart one of the most active regions in the United States for illegal border crossings.

While some residents of Potrero have welcomed the plan, others have raised fears about encroachment on protected lands and what they see as an intimidating force of mercenaries coming into their backyard. The specter of Blackwater West and the rising interest in privatizing border security have also alarmed Democratic Rep. Bob Filner, whose congressional district includes Potrero. Filner says he believes it's a good possibility that Blackwater is positioning itself for border security contracts and is opposed to the new complex. "You have to be very wary of mercenary soldiers in a democracy, which is more fragile than people think," Rep. Filner told Salon. "You don't want armies around who will sell out to the highest bidder. We already have vigilantes on the border, the Minutemen, and this would just add to [the problem]," Filner said, referring to the [Minuteman Project](#), a conservative group that has organized civilian posses to assist the U.S. Border Patrol in the past. Filner is backing legislation to block establishment of what he calls "mercenary training centers" anywhere in the U.S. outside of military bases. "The border is a sensitive area," he said, "and if Blackwater operates the way they do in Iraq — shoot first and ask questions later — my constituents are at risk."

A spokesman for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection denied there are any specific plans to work directly with Blackwater. And Blackwater officials say the complex would be used

only for training active-duty military and law enforcement officials, work for which the company has contracted with the U.S. government.

But statements and lobbying activity by Blackwater officials, and the location for the new complex, strongly suggest plans to get involved in border security, with potential contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Moreover, Blackwater enjoys support from powerful Republican congressmen who advocate hard-line border policies, including calls for deploying private agents to beef up the ranks of the U.S. Border Patrol. Lawmakers supporting Blackwater include California Rep. and presidential candidate [Duncan Hunter](#) — who met last year with company officials seeking his advice on the proposal for Blackwater West — and Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, who is sponsoring a bill to allow private contractors such as Blackwater to help secure U.S. borders.

When questioned at a public hearing with the Potrero planning group on Sept. 13 about Blackwater West, Brian Bonfiglio, a Blackwater spokesman, said, “I don’t think there’s anyone in this room who wouldn’t like to see the border tightened up.” Blackwater currently had no contracts to help with border security, Bonfiglio said, but he emphasized that “we would entertain any approach from our government to help secure either border, absolutely.” Bonfiglio was responding to questions from Raymond Lutz, a local organizer who opposes the new complex. (Lutz recorded the exchange and posted [video of it](#) on Oct. 12 at [CitizensOversight.org](#).) Lutz also asked Bonfiglio if Blackwater West would be used as a base for deployment of Border Patrol agents. “Actually, we’ve offered it up as a substation to Border Patrol and U.S. Customs right now,” Bonfiglio replied. “We’d love to see them there.”

Ramon Rivera, a spokesman for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Washington, denied Bonfiglio’s claim that the agency is entertaining an offer to use Blackwater West as a substation. “I think that’s just Blackwater trying to sell themselves,” Rivera said.

In fact, Blackwater has been selling itself for direct involvement in border security at least since May 2005, when the company’s then president, Gary Jackson, testified before a House subcommittee. Jackson’s testimony focused on Blackwater’s helping to train U.S. Border Patrol agents and included discussion of contracts theoretically worth \$80 million to \$200 million, for thousands of personnel. Asked by one lawmaker if his company saw a market opportunity in border security, Jackson replied: “I can put as many men together as you need, trained and on the borders.”

The company has turned to powerful allies on Capitol Hill for support, including Hunter, the ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee and a longtime proponent of tougher border security. Joe Kasper, a spokesman for Hunter, confirmed to Salon that Blackwater officials sought guidance from Hunter on getting Blackwater West approved for Potrero. Hunter met with Blackwater officials in May 2006, at which time Hunter recommended the firm contact Dianne Jacob, the county supervisor responsible for Potrero and one of five supervisors who would vote on countywide approval for Blackwater West. Blackwater officials then met with Jacob in May, and in June the company submitted its proposal to the county, where it now must go through an approval process.

Rep. Filner says Potrero residents have complained to him that Hunter also brought pressure locally for Blackwater West. “People in the area told me he called the landowner [of the proposed site] to urge him to sell [to Blackwater]. I don’t know that he did, but it wouldn’t

surprise me,” says Filner. “That’s what people in the area are saying.” (Hunter has ties to Potrero, which used to be part of his congressional district; after a redestriking in 2001, Potrero became part of Filner’s district, which borders Hunter’s district.)

Spokesman Kasper denied that Hunter called the landowner, whose identity remains unclear. But Kasper also said that Hunter “supports Blackwater and other private security contractors in Iraq, and he supports the training facility in Potrero.”

One specific concern Potrero residents have raised with relation to Blackwater West is the high risk of wildfires in their part of the county — a danger on display the last two days as Potrero has been ravaged by fire along with other parts of Southern California. Blackwater has in fact pushed as a selling point that the complex would be a “defensible location” during wildfires. But opponents, including Jan Hedlun, the only member of the Potrero Planning Group opposed to Blackwater West, foresee danger rather than a safe haven. As Hedlun wrote in a recent [editorial](#) in the San Diego Union-Tribune, “residents state they would not flee to a box canyon with one access point and an armory filled with ammunition and/or explosives.”

Ever since illegal [immigration](#) became a top issue for the Bush administration and lawmakers on Capitol Hill, there have been growing calls for the U.S. to bring private security companies into border enforcement. In September 2006, the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington released a policy paper titled [“Better, Faster, and Cheaper Border Security,”](#) which urged Congress and the president to beef up forces as fast as possible. “In particular,” the report said, “private contractors could play an important role in recruiting and training Border Patrol agents and providing personnel to secure the border.” Late last month, one of the report’s authors hosted a symposium in Washington for an updated discussion on the topic, for which Rep. Rogers — a proponent of both Blackwater and DynCorp International, another private security contractor with personnel in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) — was the keynote speaker.

On June 19 of this year, during a House subcommittee meeting titled “Ensuring We Have Well-Trained Boots on the Ground at the Border,” Rep. Christopher Carney, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, acknowledged “it’s no secret that CPB [Customs and Border Protection] as a whole lacks the manpower to fulfill its crucial mission.” Robert B. Rosenkranz, president of the government services division of DynCorp, presented a plan for putting 1,000 DynCorp employees at the border in 13 months, at a cost of \$197 million.

In May 2006, the Bush administration had called for a sharp increase in manpower, at least with the existing federal force. President Bush then signed a bill into law on Oct. 4, 2006, to boost the number of U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents on the ground by nearly 50 percent, from approximately 12,300 to approximately 18,300, by the end of 2008.

But even such an ambitious increase would do little to stop the flow of illegal immigrants, says T.J. Bonner, president of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents most U.S. Border Patrol agents. Bonner, himself a field agent in east San Diego County, told the House subcommittee in June, “Realistically, there is no magic number of Border Patrol agents required to secure our borders and even if there were, it would certainly be much higher than the 18,000 proposed by the administration.”

Scott Borgerson, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who specializes in homeland security, says it makes sense that U.S. companies would try to position themselves to fill

gaps in national security with lucrative private-sector solutions. “If I was running a company doing private security, it’s definitely what I would do,” he says of Blackwater’s plan to locate near the border.

In an Oct. 15 article in the Wall Street Journal, Blackwater CEO Erik Prince said that the company now sees the market diminishing for the kind of security work its employees have done in Iraq. He said that going forward the company’s focus “is going to be more of a full spectrum,” ranging from delivering humanitarian aid to responding to natural disasters. But priorities for the Bush administration, including immigration and border security, could also figure into Blackwater’s plans — as Salon reported recently, the company’s skyrocketing revenues during Bush’s presidency are accompanied by [the firm’s close ties](#) with influential Republicans and top Bush officials.

Blackwater spokeswoman Anne Tyrrell said that the notion of Blackwater vying for lucrative border security contracts is “merely speculation,” and noted that the location for Blackwater West is close to San Diego’s military bases, a major training market for the company. “But hypothetically,” Tyrrell added, “if the government came to us and needed assistance with border security, we’d be honored.”

Borgerson says there is a role for private contractors in helping keep the United States safe. “But certain jobs belong to trained U.S. government officials — men and women in uniform who have a flag on their sleeves,” says Borgerson, who was a Coast Guard officer for 10 years. “You recite an oath that says you will defend — not Congress, not the president, not even the people — but the Constitution. You don’t sign that oath when you go to work for Blackwater.”

Bonner, of the U.S. Border Patrol, remains skeptical about Blackwater getting involved, and he says others in the upper ranks of the Border Patrol are opposed to private contractors working alongside them. He sees potential problems with both training and patrolling. The much higher pay likely offered to private agents, for example, would threaten an already difficult-to-retain federal force. “It will entice people to jump over to the other side,” he says, “especially if they don’t have a long-term career in mind.” Bonner also says it is crucial to have a single training curriculum, and a single chain of command, to help ensure effective and lawful operations. “This is a bad idea from so many perspectives,” he says of potentially privatizing the force.

The issue may be linked to broader problems the U.S. is currently facing with national security. “If we weren’t allocating a tremendous amount of our resources in Iraq, we wouldn’t have to outsource to companies like Blackwater,” Borgerson says. While securing the U.S. borders is an important priority, he adds, “I feel we shouldn’t outsource our sovereignty.”

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