

# Pull the plug on the mercenary war

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The Democratic leadership in Congress is once again gearing up for a great sell-out on the Iraq war.

While the wrangling over the \$124 billion Iraq supplemental spending bill is being headlined in the media as a “showdown” or “war” with the White House, it is hardly that.

In plain terms, despite the impassioned sentiments of the anti-war electorate that brought the Democrats to power last November, the Congressional leadership has made clear its intention to keep funding the Iraq occupation, even though Sen. Harry Reid has declared that “this war is lost.”

For months, the Democrats’ “withdrawal” plan has come under fire from opponents of the occupation who say it doesn’t stop the war, doesn’t de-fund it, and ensures that tens of thousands of US troops will remain in Iraq beyond President Bush’s second term. Such concerns were reinforced by Sen. Barack Obama’s recent declaration that the Democrats will not cut off funding for the war, regardless of the President’s policies. “Nobody,” he said, “wants to play chicken with our troops.”

As the New York Times reported, “Lawmakers said they expect that Congress and Mr. Bush would eventually agree on a spending measure without the specific timetable” for (partial) withdrawal, which the White House has said would “guarantee defeat.” In other words, the appearance of a fierce debate this week, Presidential veto and all, has largely been a show with a predictable outcome.

## **The Shadow War in Iraq**

While all of this is troubling, there is another disturbing fact which speaks volumes about the Democrats’ lack of insight into the nature of this unpopular war—and most Americans will know next to nothing about it. Even if the President didn’t veto their legislation, the Democrats’ plan does almost nothing to address the second-largest force in Iraq—and it’s not the British military. It’s the estimated 126,000 private military “contractors” who will stay put there as long as Congress continues funding the war.

The 145,000 active-duty US forces are nearly matched by occupation personnel that currently come from companies like Blackwater USA and the former Halliburton subsidiary KBR, which enjoy close personal and political ties with the Bush administration. Until Congress reins in these massive corporate forces and the whopping federal funding that goes into their coffers, partially withdrawing US troops may only set the stage for the increased use of private military companies (and their rent-a-guns) which stands to profit from any kind of privatized future “surge” in Iraq.

From the beginning, these contractors have been a major hidden story of the war, almost uncovered in the mainstream media and absolutely central to maintaining the US occupation of Iraq. While many of them perform logistical support activities for American troops, including the sort of laundry, fuel and mail delivery, and food-preparation work that once was performed by soldiers, tens of thousands of them are directly engaged in military and combat activities. According to the Government Accountability Office, there are now some 48,000 employees of private military companies in Iraq. These not-quite G.I. Joes, working for Blackwater and other major US firms, can clear in a month what some active-duty soldiers make in a year. "We got 126,000 contractors over there, some of them making more than the secretary of Defense," said House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John Murtha. "How in the hell do you justify that?"

House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Rep. Henry Waxman estimates that \$4 billion in taxpayer money has so far been spent in Iraq on these armed "security" companies like Blackwater—with tens of billions more going to other war companies like KBR and Fluor for "logistical" support. Rep. Jan Schakowsky of the House Intelligence Committee believes that up to forty cents of every dollar spent on the occupation has gone to war contractors.

With such massive government payouts, there is little incentive for these companies to minimize their footprint in the region and every incentive to look for more opportunities to profit—especially if, sooner or later, the "official" U.S. presence shrinks, giving the public a sense of withdrawal, of a winding down of the war. Even if George W. Bush were to sign the legislation the Democrats have passed, their plan "allows the President the leeway to escalate the use of military security contractors directly on the battlefield," Erik Leaver of the Institute for Policy Studies points out. It would "allow the President to continue the war using a mercenary army."

The crucial role of contractors in continuing the occupation was driven home in January when David Petraeus, the general running the President's "surge" plan in Baghdad, cited private forces as essential to winning the war. In his confirmation hearings in the Senate, he claimed that they fill a gap attributable to insufficient troop levels available to an overstretched military. Along with Bush's official troop surge, the "tens of thousands of contract security forces," Petraeus told the senators, "give me the reason to believe that we can accomplish the mission." Indeed, Gen. Petraeus admitted that he has, at times, been guarded in Iraq not by the US military, but "secured by contract security."

Such widespread use of contractors, especially in mission-critical operations, should have raised red flags among lawmakers. After a trip to Iraq last month, Retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey observed bluntly, "We are overly dependent on civilian contractors. In extreme danger—they will not fight." It is, however, the political rather than military uses of these forces that should be cause for the greatest concern.

Contractors have provided the White House with political cover, allowing for a back-door near doubling of US forces in Iraq through the private sector, while masking the full extent of the human costs of the occupation. Although contractor deaths are not effectively tallied, at least 770 contractors have been killed in Iraq and at least another 7,700 injured. These numbers are not included in any official (or media) toll of the war.

More significantly, there is absolutely no effective system of oversight or accountability

governing contractors and their operations, nor is there any effective law-military or civilian-being applied to their activities. They have not been subjected to military courts martial (despite a recent Congressional attempt to place them under the Uniform Code of Military Justice), nor have they been prosecuted in US civilian courts—and, no matter what their acts in Iraq, they cannot be prosecuted in Iraqi courts. Before Paul Bremer, Bush's viceroy in Baghdad, left Iraq in 2004 he issued an edict, known as Order 17 .

It immunized contractors from prosecution in Iraq which, today, is like the Wild West, full of roaming Iraqi death squads and scores of unaccountable, heavily-armed mercenaries, ex-military men from around the world, working for the occupation. For the community of contractors in Iraq, immunity and impunity are welded together.

Despite the tens of thousands of contractors passing through Iraq and several well-documented incidents involving alleged contractor abuses, only two individuals have been ever indicted for crimes there. One was charged with stabbing a fellow contractor, while the other pled guilty to the possession of child-pornography images on his computer at Abu Ghraib prison. While dozens of American soldiers have been court-martialed—sixty-four on murder-related charges—not a single armed contractor has been prosecuted for a crime against an Iraqi. In some cases, where contractors were alleged to have been involved in crimes or deadly incidents, their companies whisked them out of Iraq to safety.

As one armed contractor recently informed the Washington Post, “We were always told, from the very beginning, if for some reason something happened and the Iraqis were trying to prosecute us, they would put you in the back of a car and sneak you out of the country in the middle of the night.” According to another, US contractors in Iraq had their own motto: “What happens here today, stays here today.”

### **Funding the Mercenary War**

“These private contractors are really an arm of the administration and its policies,” argues Rep. Dennis Kucinich, who has called for a withdrawal of all U.S. contractors from Iraq. “They charge whatever they want with impunity. There's no accountability as to how many people they have, as to what their activities are.”

Until now, this situation has largely been the doing of a Republican-controlled Congress and White House. No longer.

While some Congressional Democrats have publicly expressed grave concerns about the widespread use of these private forces and a handful have called for their withdrawal, the party leadership has done almost nothing to stop, or even curb, the use of mercenary corporations in Iraq. As it stands, the Bush administration and the industry have little to fear from Congress on this score, despite the unseating of the Republican majority.

On two central fronts, accountability and funding, the Democrats' approach has been severely flawed, playing into the agendas of both the White House and the war contractors. Some Democrats, for instance, are pushing accountability legislation that would actually require more US personnel to deploy to Iraq as part of an FBI Baghdad “Theater Investigative Unit ” that would supposedly monitor and investigate contractor conduct. The idea is: FBI investigators would run around Iraq, gather evidence, and interview witnesses, leading to indictments and prosecutions in U.S. civilian courts.

This is a plan almost certain to backfire, if ever instituted. It raises a slew of questions: Who

would protect the investigators? How would Iraqi victims be interviewed? How would evidence be gathered amid the chaos and dangers of Iraq? Given that the federal government and the military seem unable—or unwilling—even to count how many contractors are actually in the country, how could their activities possibly be monitored? In light of the recent Bush administration scandal over the eight fired US attorneys, serious questions remain about the integrity of the Justice Department. How could we have any faith that real crimes in Iraq, committed by the employees of immensely well-connected crony corporations like Blackwater and Halliburton, would be investigated adequately?

Apart from the fact that it would be impossible to effectively monitor 126,000 or more private contractors under the best of conditions in the world's most dangerous war zone, this legislation would give the industry a tremendous PR victory. Once it was passed as the law of the land, the companies could finally claim that a legally accountable structure governed their operations. Yet they would be well aware that such legislation would be nearly impossible to enforce.

Not surprisingly, then, the mercenary trade group with the Orwellian name of the International Peace Operations Association (IPOA) has pushed for just this Democratic-sponsored approach rather than the military court martial system favored by conservative Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. The IPOA called the expansion of the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act—essentially the Democrats' oversight plan—"the most cogent approach to ensuring greater contractor accountability in the battle space." That endorsement alone should be reason enough to pause and reconsider.

Then there is the issue of continued funding for the privatized shadow forces in Iraq. As originally passed in the House, the Democrats' Iraq plan would have cut only about 15 percent, or \$815 million, of the supplemental spending earmarked for day-to-day military operations "to reflect savings attributable to efficiencies and management improvements in the funding of contracts in the military departments."

As it stood, this was a stunningly insufficient plan, given ongoing events in Iraq. But even that mild provision was dropped by the Democrats in late April. Their excuse was the need to hold more hearings on the contractor issue. Instead, they moved to withhold—not cut—15 percent of total day-to-day operational funding, but only until Secretary of Defense Robert Gates submits a report on the use of contractors and the scope of their deployment. Once the report is submitted, the 15 percent would be unlocked. In essence, this means that, under the Democrats plan, the mercenary forces will simply be able to continue business-as-usual/profits-as-usual in Iraq.

However obfuscated by discussions of accountability, fiscal responsibility, and oversight, the gorilla of a question in the Congressional war room is: Should the administration be allowed to use mercenary forces, whose livelihoods depend on war and conflict, to help fight its battles in Iraq?

Rep. Murtha says, "We're trying to bring accountability to an unaccountable war." But it's not accountability that the war needs; it needs an end. By sanctioning the administration's continuing use of mercenary corporations—instead of cutting off all funding to them—the Democrats leave the door open for a future escalation of the shadow war in Iraq. This, in turn, could pave the way for an array of secretive, politically well-connected firms that have profited tremendously under the current administration to elevate their status and increase their government paychecks.

## **Blackwater's War**

A decade ago, the company barely existed; and yet, its "diplomatic security" contracts since mid-2004, with the State Department alone, total more than \$750 million. Today, Blackwater has become nothing short of the Bush administration's well-paid Praetorian Guard.

It protects the US ambassador and other senior officials in Iraq as well as visiting Congressional delegations; it trains Afghan security forces and was deployed in the oil-rich Caspian Sea region, setting up a "command and control" center just miles from the Iranian border. The company was also hired to protect FEMA operations and facilities in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, where it raked in \$240,000 a day from the American taxpayer, billing \$950 a day per Blackwater contractor.

Since September 11, 2001, the company has invested its lucrative government payouts in building an impressive private army. At present, it has forces deployed in nine countries and boasts a database of 21,000 additional troops at the ready, a fleet of more than twenty aircraft, including helicopter gun-ships, and the world's largest private military facility—a 7,000 acre compound near the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina.

It recently opened a new facility in Illinois ("Blackwater North") and is fighting local opposition to a third planned domestic facility near San Diego ("Blackwater West") by the Mexican border. It is also manufacturing an armored vehicle (nicknamed the "Grizzly") and surveillance blimps.

The man behind this empire is Erik Prince, a secretive, conservative Christian, ex-Navy SEAL multimillionaire who bankrolls the President and his allies with major campaign contributions. Among Blackwater's senior executives are Cofer Black, former head of counterterrorism at the CIA; Robert Richer, former Deputy Director of Operations at the CIA; Joseph Schmitz, former Pentagon Inspector General; and an impressive array of other retired military and intelligence officials. Company executives recently announced the creation of a new private intelligence company, "Total Intelligence," to be headed by Black and Richer.

For years, Blackwater's operations have been shrouded in secrecy. Emboldened by the culture of impunity enjoyed by the private sector in the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Blackwater's founder has talked of creating a "contractor brigade" to support US military operations and fancies his forces the "FedEx" of the "national security apparatus."

As the country debates an Iraq withdrawal, Congress owes it to the public to take down the curtain of secrecy surrounding these shadow forces that under gird the US public deployment in Iraq. The President likes to say that defunding the war would undercut the troops. Here's the truth of the matter: Continued funding of the Iraq war ensures tremendous profits for politically-connected war contractors. If Congress is serious about ending the occupation, it needs to rein in the unaccountable companies that make it possible and only stand to profit from its escalation.

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