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Profiteering in War: the Case against Mercenaries

By L. Michael Hager
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Opening the August 30 *New York Times,* I was surprised (and personally appalled) to find Erik Prince on the opinion page with his own by-lined article ("Contractors, Not Troops, Will Save Afghanistan"). While Prince is entitled to his opinion, it seemed to me his former role as head of Blackwater should have denied him the privilege of expressing it from the vaulted platform of the *NYT*.

Taking issue with the Prince op-ed, I maintain that the U.S. military should *never* hire mercenaries, whether directly or through Blackwater-type firms since contract soldiers have a

vested interest in prolonging a war. Their private employers, investors, and lobbyists have a similar interest in advocating pro-war policies in the halls of Congress.

Enriched by a succession of lucrative government security contracts and serving for years as a CIA lackey, Prince's security company Blackwater earned opprobrium for its high-handed aggressiveness in Iraq as it escorted government VIPs around Baghdad and beyond. Repeated abuses of Iraqi pedestrians and motorists came to a head when four Blackwater employees opened fire in a crowded square in Baghdad in 2007, killing 17 and wounding 20. Prince defended his security force but sold the company in 2010.

Now Prince would elevate the role of the private contractor from security to actual combat. His op-ed envisions a "contractor force of less than 6,000 (far less than the 26,000 in the country now)" that would "provide a support structure for the Afghans, allowing the United States' conventional forces to return home." All this sounds attractive, but why would such "former Special Operations veterans" be expected to accomplish on the battlefield what U.S. Special Ops cannot?

In a 2007 Brookings article ("The Dark Truth about Blackwater"), Peter W. Singer concluded that the "massive outsourcing of military operations," creating a dependency on private firms like Blackwater, has given rise to "dangerous vulnerabilities." He went on to cite the firm's cutting corners "that may have contributed to employee deaths," the classification of documents "to cover up corporate failures," and public relations fiascos that have diverted the attention of military planners and shamed America. As to costs, Singer questioned whether firms like Blackwater really save the taxpayer money.

A more serious objection to outsourcing soldiers lies in its bypassing of citizen scrutiny. As opposed to the deployment of more troops or the call-up of National Guard and Reserves, the hiring of contract forces lies beneath the public radar screen. Even in its more limited "bodyguard" role, the private military industry has become, according to Singer, "the ultimate enabler, allowing operations to happen that might otherwise be politically impossible."

As with Blackwater in Iraq, military contractors often create a negative image of America. Disrespect of and assault on ordinary civilians were frequent complaints against Blackwater in Iraq. With direct government control lacking, private contractors take orders from their corporate bosses, who in turn respond to investor preoccupation with the "bottom line."

Corruption is another reason to limit contractor roles in warfare. In addition to the contributions and gift travel that military industry lobbyists shower on lawmakers in an effort to win contracts, there is corruption in contractor procurement practices. According to Singer, the Defense Contract Audit Agency identified "a staggering $10 billion in unsupported or questionable costs from battlefield contractors" in Iraq.

Many of the same objections can be laid against private prison operators, where an inherent conflict of interest divides contract employee loyalty between government and the corporate bosses who pay their salaries. In war, the military industry profits from continuing conflict, while in peace, private prison companies profit from occupied cell blocks and minimal operating

costs. Without government control and civilian oversight, both military and prison contractors tend to skimp on support costs and resort to abuse.

Private military/security companies and private prison companies have in common the vulnerabilities of conflict of interest, corruption, policy distortion and lack of transparency. To remain the guarantor of the public interest, the U.S. government should beware of contracting out its military, security (and prison) functions.