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**Prince Strikes
Back: A Review
of Erik Prince's
*Civilian Warriors:
The Inside Story of
Blackwater and the
Unsung Heroes of
the War on Terror***

| Molly Dunigan



In the recent conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the international community saw a spike in military outsourcing that was unprecedented in the history of modern conflict. By 2008, the US Department of Defense employed 155,826 private contractors in Iraq – alongside 152,275 US troops.¹ This trend continued in Afghanistan, where by 2010 there were 94,413 contractors along-

side 91,600 US troops. The vast majority of the contractors on the ground in both theaters provided base support and maintenance services (e.g., laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc.) – these providers totaled over 80,000 contractor boots-on-the-ground in Iraq throughout 2008. Others provided logistical support, transportation, construction, translation, and communications services, among other functions.²

¹ “Statistics on the Private Security Industry,” Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy, http://psm.du.edu/articles_reports_statistics/data_and_statistics.html.

² Moshe Schwartz and Joyprada Swain, *Department of Defense Contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq: Back-*

But the most highly visible contractors throughout both wars were comprised of a smaller force of armed security contractors deployed primarily to perform three tasks: *personal security details* for US and coalition officials; *static site security* in fixed locations; and *convoy security*. Estimates vary regarding the number of security contractors operating in either theater at any one time, and indeed, data is difficult to accurately assess due to the diversity of clients employing security contractors. However, all indicators point to a force of between 10,000 and 30,000 security contractors on the ground in Iraq through most of the war there.³ These contractors worked for a variety of different companies, under contract to a variety of governmental and non-governmental entities. Their operations have raised a number of concerns throughout both wars concerning (a) the extent to which they are reducing the state's so-called "traditional" monopoly on violence; (b) the extent to which they are held accountable for their behavior under international humanitarian law; and (c) their impact on military operations and effectiveness.⁴

ground and Analysis (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011).

3 Sarah K. Cotton et al., *Hired Guns: Views About Armed Contractors in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010).

4 For instance, see Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (New York: Cambridge Univer-

Less vocal, but slowly gaining increased traction within the community of academics focused on these issues, have been those who voice concerns regarding individual contractors' well-being, and the impact of contract deployments on these highly-trained, often former military, personnel.

Erik Prince's recent book, *Civilian Warriors: The Inside Story of Blackwater and the Unsung Heroes of the War on Terrorism*, provides a refreshingly frank account of the operations of one of the largest contingents of security contractors on the ground in both theaters – those working for the company that he founded, owned, and headed as CEO from 1998 to 2010, Blackwater USA (later renamed Blackwater Worldwide and Xe Services under Prince's leadership, and then Academi after Prince sold it in 2010). Often denigrated in the press, both Prince and his company had – misguidedly, according to Prince – become synonymous in the minds of many Americans with "mercenaries," "guns for hire," and "cowboys." Perhaps most notably, Prince and Blackwater were highly criticized in journalist Jeremy Scahill's 2007 book *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Merce-*

sity Press, 2005); Christopher Kinsey, Corporate Soldiers and International Security (London: Routledge, 2006); Elke Krahnmann, *States, Citizens, and the Privatization of Security* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Molly Dunigan, *Victory For Hire: Private Security Companies' Impact on Military Effectiveness* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

nary Army, which focused perhaps too indiscriminately on Prince's religious upbringing, conservative political leanings, and wealthy family background.⁵ As a result, Scahill's best-selling book is now commonly disregarded by experts in the field, who consider it to be a highly biased account of Blackwater.

Following years of notoriously keeping mum regarding both his own personal life and Blackwater's operations, *Civilian Warriors* is Prince's opportunity to respond to his critics. As he puts it, "For years my company's work was misconstrued and misrepresented. At the time, our government contracts explicitly barred Blackwater from responding to the public broadsides . . . So now I'm done keeping quiet. What's been said before is only half the story – and I won't sit idly by while the bureaucrats go after me so that everyone else can go back to business as usual . . . Our critics have spoken. Now it's my turn."

Prince pulls off this effort with well-researched, well-articulated panache. Granted, he had help – the book was ghost-written by Davin Coburn, and the research for it was conducted at least in part by Dr. Mike Waller, whom Prince thanks in the acknowledgments.

Even while assessing it with an objective, critical eye, *Civilian Warriors* pro-

vides a fascinating firsthand account of both Prince as an individual, and of Blackwater's operations. All in all, the image that pervades the book is of an honest, hard-working, incredibly entrepreneurial Navy SEAL veteran who first conceived in the late 1990s of a privately-owned, elite military training center that "might gross \$200,000 annually" – not the \$340 million it was grossing on one contract by mid-2005. As both Prince and his company have virtually been an impenetrable "black box" to researchers working on military and security privatization topics over the past several decades, the result is perhaps most exciting in terms of the primary data that it provides for analysts in this field.

Numerous incidents and events, on which only sporadic, limited, and questionable information had previously emerged in media reporting and web-based discussion fora for contractors, are recounted firsthand throughout the book – from the 2004 brutal killings of four Blackwater contractors in Fallujah; to the incident immediately following that when a small Blackwater team defended the Coalition Provisional Authority compound in Najaf for several hours from an onslaught by the Mahdi Army, with virtually no coalition military support; to the crash of "Blackwater 61" in the Hindu Kush mountains during a re-supply and troop transport flight for the US Army, later in 2004. Prince also discusses Blackwater's role in responding to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the

⁵ Jeremy Scahill, *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2007).

company's humanitarian response efforts in the October 2007 wildfires in San Diego County, and the early 2008 Blackwater rescue of three college students who were part of an international aid team that had gotten stuck in Kenya in the midst of unexpected post-election violence. The book provides detailed coverage of the 2007 Nisour Square attacks in Baghdad involving Blackwater personnel, as well as the company's multiple legal battles and the scrutiny it faced from Congress later in 2007.

In many cases, Prince's narrative of the chain of events is surprisingly candid. His re-telling of events is at times shockingly unapologetic – for instance, openly admitting that the Blackwater “November 1” team killed in Fallujah in 2004 was operating on a subcontract that Blackwater had rushed to start before the contractual date because “ESS [the prime contractor] was a major global supplier – a company well worth making a good impression upon. Blackwater's men always said yes first. We would figure out the details as we went.” This meant that, “November 1 didn't have the heavy-duty squad automatic weapons that were still en route from Regency (the Kuwaiti hospitality firm with which Blackwater had partnered on the contract.) Worse, the men knew they'd be driving a pair of ESS's old Mitsubishi Pajeros that were being used only until Regency could deliver us vehicles and protection kits . . . ESS's Pajeros were just regulation SUVs with armor plates mounted behind the

back seats.” Yet, Prince does point out that “the men weren't forced into the mission or somehow ordered to do it – a private company doesn't have that sort of military authority.”

While a captivating read and a substantial source of previously unconfirmed information on the firm and its relationship with the US government, Prince's success in responding to his critics does have its limits. In particular, his repeated efforts to place blame on the US government bureaucracy for actions-gone-wrong leaves open the question of where the responsibility for contractors' operations, behavior, and well-being truly lies in the modern age of military outsourcing. Since Blackwater's operations began, the US government and other major governmental clients of the industry have made progress in terms of both assigning and taking on such responsibility.

Yet, the unmet needs across the industry pertaining to contractors' individual health and well-being is an issue gaining increasing recognition that has yet to be addressed – due primarily to this question of who, between the government and the contracting industry, bears the burden of responsibility for the personnel involved. These unmet needs include, for instance, mental healthcare for deployment-related issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, which a 2013 RAND Corporation study found affects up to 25% of contractors recent-

ly deployed to theaters of conflict.⁶ Given that the subtitle and dedication of Prince's book reflect admiration for his former company's personnel as "unsung heroes," it is not entirely infeasible to think that this might be a topic to which he could fruitfully turn his attention in his future endeavors with the industry.

All in all, *Civilian Warriors* presents a well-written, seemingly credible defense of many of Blackwater's operations, and of the managerial intent behind them. However, in some ways it raises more questions than it answers regarding military outsourcing in today's world. It is now up to scholars and analysts of security privatization to utilize the information provided in Prince's work and apply it toward such questions. 

*Molly Dunigan is a political scientist at the RAND Corporation. Her research interests focus on field coordination issues between private security forces and professional militaries, but also include civil-military relations, irregular warfare, security force assistance, maritime security, and arms control. Prominent among her published work are the RAND reports *Hired Guns: Views About Armed Contractors in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Cotton et al., 2010) and *Characterizing and Exploring the Implications of Maritime Irregular Warfare* (Dunigan et al., 2012),*

*as well as her 2011 book *Victory for Hire: Private Security Companies' Impact on Military Effectiveness* (Stanford University Press, 2011). Dunigan received her Ph.D. from Cornell University.*

⁶ Molly Dunigan et al., *Out of the Shadows: The Health and Well-Being of Private Contractors Working in Conflict Environments* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013).



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