

Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army

Jeremy Scahill

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Meet BLACKWATER USA, the world's most powerful mercenary firm. Based in the wilderness of North Carolina, it is the fastest-growing private army on the planet with forces capable of carrying out regime change throughout the world. Blackwater protects the top US officials in Iraq and yet we know nothing about the firm's quasi-military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and inside the US. Blackwater was founded by an extreme right-wing fundamentalist Christian mega-millionaire ex-Navy Seal named Erik Prince, the scion of a wealthy conservative family that bankrolls far-right-wing causes. Blackwater is the dark story of the rise of a powerful mercenary army, ranging from the blood-soaked streets of Fallujah to rooftop firefights in Najaf to the hurricane-ravaged US gulf to Washington DC, where Blackwater executives are hailed as new heroes in the war on terror. This is an extraordinary expose by one of America's most exciting young radical journalists.

Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army Details


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From Reader Review Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army for online ebook

Odai Al-Saeed says

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Phil Smith says

Perhaps the greatest enemy to the United States is its military-industrial complex. Add Christian fundamentalism into that mix, and a dash of stupid president, and one has the ingredients for our own downfall.

This book is already scary, and I'm only 20 pages into it. The author clearly has a liberal slant, but it is also clear he has done his homework (one can also compare his conclusions with current news on Blackwater).

In college, I once wrote a short story called Battle Corp. that dealt with a company that focused on building a private military capable of destroying almost any country on Earth. I had no idea that such a piece of fiction could actually come true in my own country.

Chad Walker says

First, a little background on my own biases: I saw September 11th with my own eyes, and fully supported a military response (of whatever form necessary) to capture Osama bin Laden and break up Afghani training camps for Al-Qaeda. I opposed the invasion of Iraq from day one, though was happy to see one less dictator in the world who had committed genocide against a portion of his own population. I used to subscribe to *The Nation*, but eventually found its "reporting" to be wildly simplistic, dogmatic and plain uninteresting. I have interned for the UN in Rwanda, and read widely about international affairs.

This is a book on a fascinating topic, written moderately well. The question at its center - are we comfortable with the increasing privatization of our military, and all the attendant questions it raises - is a good one. Unfortunately, the author's answer is a foregone conclusion from page one, and the reader is expected to agree from the same starting point. This was frustrating, and this book did not answer my questions, merely emphasizing them. Often, the author cites DoD officials, leaders in the "private security contracting" industry, and political supporters as if the points they raise are so ridiculous they speak for themselves. If the reader is not beholden to a specific political agenda, but genuinely curious about these issues, I think s/he will find many times that these individuals will raise a good point. Scahill needed to argue clearly and

concisely why the things they were saying were so offensive. Lots of research done for this book, but it did not quite up to the damning conclusion the author reaches.

If anything, the disaster in Iraq should prove that the world's emerging security threats cannot be solved through traditional military solutions. Many of the cases cited in the book, from Sierra Leone, to car bombings in the Middle East, to the ravages of Darfur, prove that the worst cases require new answers - more mobile, more efficient, more versatile forces, buoyed by more in-depth intelligence.

There are many questionable aspects to the rise of mercenary forces in the "war on terror." The fact that they sit outside of any legal jurisdiction for their actions is perhaps the most damning, especially when so many of these soldiers come from countries with notoriously bad human rights records. The amount of connections Blackwater (specifically) has with curious, secretive government initiatives (such as the readying of military bases all along the Caspian border countries) should get anyone's inner conspiracy theorist buzzing. The extreme religious outlook of its leaders, given the places its troops are primarily active, should give one pause as to the true motives of this company.

But like I mentioned, the overall effect of this is to raise some big questions - ones that the author assumes are answered from page one. In short, *The Nation* choir will sing its praises, but comes far short of claiming the conclusions it stakes out at the end. Still, it's well researched, dives deep into many of the questions at play, and should be read as a means of provoking discussion on an important topic.

Todd says

This book is full of double standards and petty fault finding. I do believe there is an issue with rampant government contracting, but Scahill picks at Blackwater like a sibling annoyed with his little brother-- EVERYTHING they do is WRONG.

He condemns Eric Prince for being a "theocon" who wants to make God have more of a roll in government, but then sees nothing wrong with Iraqi's praising God and talking about how God will kick the Americans out. The feeling I go is that religion is okay in a society that has been oppressed and kept ignorant, but not in the elite country of the US with all it's education.

Another point that was laughable was when he talked about Blackwater's "dubious" business practices. He stated they would pay soldiers 600 a day, but charge 800. That organization would charge 1200, and that organization would charge 1500. True, that's a lot of subcontractors, but charging more than your actual, physical costs is not "dubious", it's good business. If you only charged what it cost you, you would never make any money. Scahill has so little understanding of how a business actually works and makes money, it's laughable.

I would have preferred a book that examined the problem more objectively, and less vindictively.

Jerome says

A good book about subject matter that raises a lot of questions, but Scahill doesn't always do a satisfactory job of answering them.

Scahill has done his best to penetrate the veil of secrecy that surrounds Blackwater and its operations, and has probably done as good a job as anyone could in the circumstances. But he's better at the small-scale stuff (the story of how a bunch of Chilean Blackwater recruits ended up fighting an American war in Iraq, for instance) than he is at the big-picture context, and that's what ended up making this a disappointing read for me. I learned a lot about Blackwater and its founder, Erik Prince.

This book is pretty one-sided for the most part. This is probably since Blackwater is so secretive, and because few of Blackwater's people wanted to do interviews with Scahill, which is a shame, since then we pretty much only hear Scahill's side of the story.

Scahill shockingly omits the fundamentally important fact that the overwhelming majority of contractors doing security and reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan are Iraqis and Afghans - the very people who should be doing security in reconstruction in their own country. While military operations certainly have their place in stability operations, it is wages and capacity building from the stability operations industry are the building blocks for long term state viability.

Also while the U.S. military is designed to be the most capable organization in the world, it is not really designed to be cost-effective. It is estimated that the Pentagon was paying \$15-25,000 per month per soldier in Iraq. Contractors, brought in to support the effort from a hundred different countries, bring remarkable cost effectiveness, capabilities and expertise. And yes, not surprisingly they cost far less than trained combat soldiers. There are tasks that only the military should be doing, but supporting the military can be done better and cheaper utilizing private services.

Phrases such as "...unloading cartridges of ammo..." (pages xii and 102) boggled my mind. My English teachers wouldn't have allowed such poor English in my papers. It's like saying "sandwiches of food." What did author Scahill mean by "...a heavy SAW machine gun with a 180-degree scope..." anyway? Did he mean "field of fire?" The M4 Carbine is properly referred to as either a carbine or a rifle--but not a "carbine rifle" (pages xxiii and 369).

Visual Flight Rules (VFR) was wrongly defined on page 240--under VFR pilots DO use instrumentation (turn and bank indicators, altimeter, gyro compass, magnetic compass, GPS navigation, rate-of-climb) much like they do under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR)--but you need to ask a real pilot to explain the difference. The main difference is that VFR bans flying when visibility is too poor and IFR permits flying when VFR grounds aircraft.

But a bigger problem for me was Scahill's bias and sometimes misleading reporting. For example, Scahill quotes people comparing Blackwater to Hitler's SA brownshirts, which is laughable.

Scahill also finds it "scary" that Erik Prince is a Christian, and he calls Chuck Colson and Gary Bauer "militant Christian extremists." Scahill calls every Christian organization affiliated with Prince "extremists", but he never bothers to explain what supposedly makes them so extremist. Scahill pretends that Prince's Christian "connections" and viewpoints have serious implications, but he never bothers to explain what those implications are.

Scahill also accuses William Boykin, former undersecretary of defense for intelligence, of going on "anti-Muslim rants" in public speeches, but if you've ever studied any of those speeches, they are not anti-Muslim and were given in front of Christian audiences. Scahill also writes that Boykin was put in charge of hunting "high-value targets", which is not true, and has nothing to do with the position that Boykin occupied. After Scahill is done reporting his "facts", he utterly fails to connect them in any way whatsoever to the larger

narrative about Blackwater. If Boykin had nothing to do with Blackwater, then Scahill's anti-Boykin's rants are distracting and utterly pointless.

Trevor says

There is little need for me to do a review of this one as the review that encouraged me to read it in the first place pretty well sums up my feelings about it too: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/....> Another excellent review by my mate Eric.

Now, one of the recent books I have read called *Mistakes Were Made, but not by me* points out that the most dangerous people in the world are people who have high self-esteem and they are at their most dangerous when they are forced to do bad things to powerless people. You might think that there may well be a parallel here – given that it is possible that the US is the nation with the highest apparent ‘self-esteem’ in the world and in Iraq they are dealing with people of very limited power to retaliate.

I thought about this a lot during this book – I also thought that the people who set up Blackwater are fundamentalist Christians and I thought it might be a good thing to say something along the lines that when people who have very strict moral standards are confronted with people who have different moral standards the first group of people often tend to do incredibly nasty things to the second group of people if they can get away with it.

But what I find most fascinating is that these ‘faith-based’ organisations – and, believe it or not, Blackwater is ‘faith-based’ – almost invariably do things (even to their ‘friends’) that simply cannot be considered moral in any sense. These people are low-life, pure and simple.

I used to think that people would need to be able to believe something before they could espouse it. Let’s stay with Christianity for a moment and its links to free market economics. You know, Jesus Christ didn’t really say very much about economics, but one of the things he did say was that the rich will have a rather hard time getting into the kingdom of heaven – something like a camel struggling through the eye of a needle. And he said that if you want to be good you should follow his example and give everything you own to the poor.

The only quote by him that seems to justify the right wing excesses that his religion seems inspire is perhaps “The poor are with you always” – as an excuse for him getting pampered for a while with essential oils and such. Even great men are allowed a moment of weakness, I guess. But honestly, the whole kill or be killed, an eye for a tooth, make money at any cost, stomp on your brother before he stomps on you – is so opposite to the clear message of Christ that it is hard to know how these guys like Prince and Black can live with the dissonance.

The other interesting thing is how often these guys say things like, private armies are more effective and cheaper than regular armies. Naturally, no proof is required and the US government hides the figures so no one can check – a clear indication that there is something worth hiding. They also quote the US founding fathers whenever possible, but never that crap Washington came off with about never telling a lie – what was that guy on, anyway?

This is another deeply disturbing book in the mode of Blowback, Failed States and The Shock Doctrine. Although not as disturbing as The Shock Doctrine (even when they cover the same territory) this is still a

confronting read.

Mariella says

This is dense so I'm glad I listened to the audio book instead. Insightful and introduced me to the names of a whole cast of warmongers that I now need to stalk and sabotage.

DoctorM says

When I was a boy, I did want to be a mercenary soldier one day--- I'll admit that. And in grad school I wrote extensively about Fritz Redlich's idea of the "military entrepreneur" in the late 16th/early 17th.-c. So I dislike seeing "mercenary" always used as a pejorative. That said, I'll say that Jeremy Scahill's "Blackwater" gets points for reportage, for his interviews and legwork. "Blackwater", unlike P.W. Singer's "Corporate Warriors" sets out to be an expose rather than a work of analysis, and Scahill is a fine reporter. He just hasn't been able to get beyond his need to Find the Bad Guys. "Blackwater" is a polemic, and Scahill far too often forgets the data his research has uncovered to Find the Bad Guys.

Companies like Blackwater (now re-named) developed in order to sell technical training to police and military, and only second to provide armed security and direct military service. As the US (and other) militaries downsized in the 1990s, private contractors filled in the gaps in training and technical services and provided things like diplomatic security details and bodyguards that armies no longer had the manpower to do. Governments liked not having to pay overhead costs--- no training, no pensions, no recruitment costs, no maintenance. This is the MBA "just-in-time" idea: hardly the right-wing conspiracy Scahill imagines.

Scahill overstates the sheer size of Blackwater and other companies' presence in war zones. There may well have been up to 100,000 private contractors in Iraq, but few of those are armed men. Most are transport and logistics personnel. By his own figures, there were at most 2300 Blackwater armed men ('trigger-pullers') worldwide. Screening personnel, assuring adherence to contracts, auditing expenses--- those are all legitimate issues, and Scahill rightly points out abuses and failings. But private military contractors require State Dept. licenses, and since 2007 military contractors in war zones are subject to the UCMJ and to military courts. Whatever the problems with private companies such as Blackwater (and, yes, there absolutely should be some indictments and prison sentences), Scahill is simply wrong in seeing them as a threat to democracy and a deep, nefarious conspiracy.

Eric_W says

Addendum 8/6/09: Erik Prince accused of murder. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090817...>

I had no idea the depth of antagonism toward the Clinton election evinced by such stalwarts as Scalia, Colson, Dobson, et al who, in public statements, suggested that any ruler, elected or otherwise, who was not following the divine mandate as they understood it to be, deserved to be overthrown, violently if necessary. The level of their vitriol is astonishing. Place the rise of Erick Prinz's private army, the Blackwater folks, and

you have a scary scenario, since Prinz and his family were in the forefront of support for these guys.

Support for privatization of military support had begun with Cheney and Rumsfeld long before their Bush the 2nd years as they reduced the military budget. Cheney's connections to Halliburton and KBR made his motivation suspect since they would be primary beneficiaries of government largess for such a scheme. There is no question that the Blackwater "mercenaries" (I think they meet the standard definition of the word and Blackwater hired many non-US nationals, so why quibble unless you are trying to obfuscate.)

The biggest concern I have after reading this book is that the United States government had ceded foreign policy to a corporate entity. Clearly, the Blackwater folks had a very broad mandate in their charge to protect civilians. They could interpret that charge in any way they saw fit and we all know that a good offense is the best defense. The military, whose soldiers made about a fifth of the mercenary salary, were often forced to come to the aid of the Blackwater folks who might have begun a larger engagement in a situation, where, for policy reasons, the US government or military did not want to engage troops. That the mercenaries had been specifically exempted from the standard rules of engagement which applied to the military could only make things worse. This included the use of non-standard weapons. One Blackwater type admitted to using "blended metal bullets" which made virtually any impact fatal.

In its infinite wisdom, the administration (Bremer) decided to make contractors immune from any prosecution for crimes committed while in Iraq while performing their role under contract. That gave them virtual license to do whatever they wanted since Bremer had also ruled that the Uniform Code of Military Justice also did not apply. In addition, Congress and the administration permitted them to conduct their business in secret (since they were private companies) and even managed to vote down an anti-war-profiteering bill proposed by Senator Leahy. Now think about that, they were saying, in essence, go ahead and make all the money you want, however you want, and screw the government all you want, because we say it's OK.

Let's face it, it's all about money. Rumsfeld and Cheney wanted most of the cost of the war off the books, they didn't want any kind of draft that would have forced the US to take a close look at their policies, they wanted their companies (Halliburton and Blackwater - a major Republican contributor) to make a shitload of money, which they have. Not only that, but these private armies became instruments of hidden policy. The "Caspian Guard" operation used Blackwater troops to guard the oil pipeline through Georgia (after the US helped to subvert the government of Eduard Amvrosiyevich Shevardnadze during the so called Rose Revolution in favor of Mikheil Nikolozis dze Saakashvili because the former wasn't pro-US enough.) Using these private armies, I believe, carries significant risks for the United States. Should they be attacked, it's most likely whatever administration is in power would come under enormous pressure to send in the troops. Not only that, but the companies insist they are not responsible for benefits for the families of those killed while under contract. That's the US government's job. So we get screwed twice.

It's time for a serious debate on the role of private contractors as instruments of foreign policy, and I suggest it may go beyond the military's impact. Clearly corporations with a large presence in a foreign country will have a decidedly different view of US hegemony and imperialism than Washington.

So here I am reading this book and a thought springs to mind. What organization in the United States would have the manpower, the most to lose, the true belief, and the money to engage in regime change in the United States. Blackwater? Nah, I must be just paranoid, right?

David Sarkies says

Privatising the Military

10 August 2018

I had already read a book on the rise of the modern mercenary forces, so while this book had sat on my shelf ever since I bought it, a part of me felt that maybe it was not only going to go over much of the same stuff that I had already read, but that it was going to be so focused upon Blackwater that it would start to get quite boring. More so, it looked pretty thick, and a part of me really didn't want to simply read a thick book all about one particular company. Well, it turned out not to be the case, and the main reason that it took the title of Blackwater was because not only was Blackwater probably the first company to go down this road, but it was also the company that pretty much set the benchmark.

Honestly, there has always been private security companies, and I remember when I was much younger we used to look down on such security guards and referred to them as 'rent-a-cops'. Sort of like the Paul Blart Mall Cop type of person – the person who wasn't good enough to get into the police force, or had simply retired from the force and really had no other options available. Actually, the Victorian government set up a similar organisation to provide security for the railway stations, and even though these PSO (public security officers) are government employees, they are still considered to have been rejected by the police force.

Well, it turns out that Blackwater isn't quite this type of company. For instance, the average Blackwater mercenary is basically an ex-special forces type of guy, and unlike the rent-a-cops we see here, these guys are paid quite well, though we must remember that the reason that they are paid so well is because they are being sent into warzones. I suspect that the security details that were sent to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina weren't paid anywhere near the same amount as the ones that were sent over to Iraq and other war zones. In fact, I suspect cops don't look at private security guards with the same amount of envy that your average soldier would look at a Blackwater contractor.

No, this book has much more to do with rapid privatisation of the military as opposed to one particular organisation, and does spend quite a lot of time looking at not only their role in the Iraq War, but also a lot of background with regards to the war. The thing is that this has a lot to do with privatisation, and honestly, it is a really tricky topic to look at. My issue with privatisation is that it tends to work on the principle of charging what the market can bear, so while a private electricity/telephone company may be run better than a government organisation, the the government tends to keep the prices down, whereas private companies need to make a profit to remain in business, and the government does not necessarily provide assistance for those who cannot afford the bare essentials, such as electricity.

Honestly, I don't think privatising aspects of the military is necessarily a bad thing. For instance, one argument is that by having private security perform guard duties frees up soldiers who can then do more important tasks that fits their role. The other problem is that the army can have a lot of difficulties in actually recruiting people to join. In fact recruiting rates have dropped off substantially over the years, so some form of stop gap is actually required. The other thing is, there is something nice about actually having options when on base, such as a choice between going to the mess, or deciding that maybe going to the local Pizza Hut on base is a better option (though in my opinion what Pizza Hut offers is probably little different to what the mess offers). Actually, there are probably a lot of aspects of army life that can be farmed out to the private sector so that the force can become a lot more leaner. However, there are problems that arrive.

One instance is that since the private sector is only concerned with profit, in many cases the quality of the service can drop in an attempt to maximise the profits that are being made, and then there are the problems where soldiers are pretty much forced to use this inferior service, such as cleaning clothes and what not. Also, it is unlikely that you are going to have anything anywhere near your local pizza shop on base, so in the end you are pretty much going to have to put up with Pizza Hut. This is actually one of the major problems when you are dealing with fixed term, and no bid, contracts.

This was of the other problems, and that is the idea of the no-bid contract. Okay, that does sort of make sense when nobody else wants the job, or nobody else is equipped to do the job, so it is going to be no-bid. However, if we are dealing with companies being awarded contracts due to connections that they have, then there is a much bigger problem. This almost reeks of corruption, especially when these companies are in reality provided a sub par service. Then let us consider the idea of the cost-plus arrangement, which simply turns into a means of siphoning government money into the coffers of the private company. The thing with cost plus is that the company bills the government for the cost of the service, plus any profit on top. Sure, that sounds fine in practice, and in fact we see this happen all over the corporate world, though here the government didn't seem to be querying the costs, or any justification of the plus. This further blows out when the contractor employs sub-contractors on a similar basis.

It seems that many people view the government as literally having an unlimited pool of money, which theoretically they do – they can print more if they want. However, there are problems when it comes to that. The other thing is that the government makes its money through taxation, and in many cases it seems that this is little more than a shifting of wealth from the poor and middle classes to the wealthy elite. Then there is the so called 'free-market experiment' that was conducted in Iraq, where the neo-cons pretty much went in, removed the government, and established their free-market paradise where companies paid no tax, and could shift money out of the country with no consequences whatsoever. Honestly, this doesn't sound like a noble cause, this sounds like somebody is basically looting the spoils of a defeated foe. There were also the executive orders laid down which basically meant that the private security contractors could not be held accountable for their actions on the ground.

The thing is that this is war, but in another way it was also an experiment. It seemed to be that a certain faction within the US government wanted to see how far they could push the boundaries. They succeeded in one part in being able to turn the public opinion to support an invasion, but the thing was that the whole experiment blew up in their faces. Yet the same propaganda was constantly being pumped out, and it was difficult to actually see the other side of the story. Theoretically, the Iraqi's should have been pleased to have been liberated from tyranny, but in the minds of many of them they weren't – one bad government had been replaced with another, except that when Saddam was in power there was law and order, yet once he was removed, society literally collapsed. The exact same thing has happened in Libya with the removal of Gaddafi.

There was even a chapter on privatising peace keeping efforts, such as what was happening in Dafur. That sounds like a reasonable idea, until we raise the question of whether there is going to be any accountability, and where do you draw the line. This book is somewhat dated though, since Blackwater contractors have been held accountable for their actions in Iraq by the American courts. Also, Blackwater no longer exists, since it not only changed its name, but has also been bought out by a larger company. Then again that probably shouldn't be all that surprising as the number of wars that the United States has been involved in has dropped somewhat, and troops have been brought home from various theatres. The thing is that relying on supporting the military wasn't going to be something that would last forever.

Look, I believe that there are pros and cons when it comes to privatisation, but the thing is that there really

needs to be some accountability. It is true that companies tend not to pay tax in the same way as we do, but the thing is that companies are taxed on profits, as opposed to earnings, which makes sense. Individuals are taxed on earnings, though if you are wealthy enough there are ways of being able to restructure that arrangement. However, what we are looking at was an experiment that went wrong, but that doesn't mean that it can't work, it is just that there needs to be boundaries, and there needs to be some form of accountability, and more so, there needs to be checks and balances not only on people in power, but also with the media as well, who really does need to be a lot more independent than it was.

Wes says

I picked up this book hoping it would provide some good basic information about Blackwater, with the understanding from the dust jacket that it likely would reach certain ultimate conclusions I might not agree with. In reality, the book provides only superficial information, merely regurgitating the reporting of several already-public incidents, then quoting supporters and detractors of Blackwater and similar private military companies. Mr. Scahill almost invariably characterizes statements from supporters as misleading spin or the conspiratorial lies of right-wing, neoconservative, Christian fundamentalist Republicans. By contrast, Mr. Scahill quotes the statements of opponents as though they were transparent utterances of unalloyed truth. The real truth, of course, is much more complex, and so Mr. Scahill's book does not provide any analysis of real value. There are serious concerns that should be addressed related to the use of private military forces, but this book cannot contribute meaningfully to any discussion because of its political presumptions, strident tone and lack of content. Instead of a history of Blackwater, it is more akin to "hist-eria".

Joshua says

Okay, first some literary criticism. And I hate to do this, because I saw Jeremy Scahill speak a few months ago and I genuinely liked him. He's brilliant, he obviously knows what's going on in the world, he's a first-class investigative journalist, a crusader for the truth, and I sincerely applaud him for what he does. But, though the story of Blackwater is gripping, chilling, and more than just a little sinister (more on that later), I have to honestly say that carrying around this book and reading it over the course of about a month was more of a burden than a joy. Yes, of course there's nothing about it that should make one feel joy, and maybe it had more to do with my state of mind at the time, but something about the actual style and mode of writing turned me off. Fact thrown upon fact thrown upon fact, reinforced by supporting facts, and somewhat long and convoluted digressions of even more facts thrown in just to make sure the reader is paying attention. Yes, we get it, you did your research. But the story itself--and the dramatic pacing specifically--suffer because of this never-ending barrage of facts. Yes, again, I understand this is nonfiction--not the latest Michael Crichton political thriller--and maybe others feel differently, but reading this book was like trudging through mud, or wading in quicksand, or stumbling up all 108 flights of stairs in the Sears Tower dragging a ball and chain: you know it's going to be cool when you get to the top and finally grasp the enormity of the panoramic landscape spread out before you, but it was one tough climb getting there.

Maybe I'm being too critical. I sure hope Mr. Scahill doesn't read this. Don't get me wrong, I am disturbed by the fact that our government is semi-secretly building a corporate army (the new "Praetorian Guard" as the author calls it) to loyally serve the far right, that this army seems so far to be impervious to any attempt to hold it accountable for its actions in the way that the actual military is (to some degree anyway), etc. (Even writing a review of this book has drained me to the point where I just throw an "et cetera" at the end of my

sentence because I don't feel like going on anymore.) I'll end on this note: of all the frightening, alarming, horrific things this book touches upon, if one thing really stands out in my mind it is this: what incentive does a private, profit-driven mercenary army have to create and maintain peace and democracy, and to eradicate suffering and anarchy? Oh yeah, the same incentive that our current government has--none, to be exact. And that is scary. So, thank you Mr. Scahill for your hard work and dedication in exposing this story and bringing it to a mass audience. I promise I will never again say a bad word about you.

Jeremy says

Yes, I read the whole book. Painfully so.

No, I don't think it was worth my time or money.

Like many other reviewers, I bought this book hoping to get a historical perspective on the Blackwater company. Instead, I got a heavily biased opinion piece on the US Government's use of military contractors. Scahill cites many quotes and facts in his book, but most of these are from heavily biased liberal writers or publications, and most of these cited works are opinion pieces, not factual evidence. Worse yet, Scahill himself admits he didn't research or write most of this book, rather one of his graduate assistants did (read the foreward).

The author strays off topic repeatedly, droning on about the influence of the religious right within the US Government, or about other contractors besides Blackwater. The total factual information about Blackwater contained in this book could have easily been condensed down to 100 pages or less. And should have been.

The author's anti-Christian and left-leaning Liberal bias is so strong as to taint any facts presented in this text, regardless of whether you are liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. That's a shame, since there is some interesting information presented in the book. Unfortunately you have waded through a 400+ page opinion piece on religion and outsourcing to get to it.

If you want to find out more about Blackwater, read something else. If you want to reinforce your own Liberal bias against the US Government...well then you don't need to read this book anyway.

Tinea says

This is a fucking fantastic book. It is so huge and dense with research but it skips along in intense narration. Classic muckraking on the mercenary, military contractor, "peace and security" industry, focusing on Blackwater's story in particular.

Blackwater began as a couple extremely rich ex-Navy Seals who built a training ground and used their expertise to train military and police in the US. Then they realized they could take all the other ex-special ops dudes like themselves, except poorer, and sell their bodies as weapons of war to do the politically dirty work of guarding detested US colonial politicians using any means necessary, as in, quite literally as detailed in the book, shooting at any Iraqis in the vicinity, even if the convoy is driving without warning through a crowded city square. Which is what Blackwater and other private security staff do-- they fucking kill so many Iraqi people with complete impunity. We don't know how many though, because no one keeps those

statistics. They work for the State Department and US military, but neither monitors mercenary actions. Here is some feeble umbrage I got going on, all kinds of impotent rage: yes, people are being shot and killed and injured and all of that by bored ex-military soldiers who feel like they don't have any other useful skills and want to make bank in as quick a way possible and actually do not recognize humanity in other humans, talking about 'bad guys' and 'the terrorists' and that is just like, happening, now, and all the time. Wow I hate soldiers of just about all kinds. Money. Jesus. Anyway.

Anyway, on with the impotent rage.

Some particularly egregious shit include the way once they established themselves with their fancy & very expensive ex-American soldiers, Blackwater then outsourced to hiring way cheaper fancy soldiers from disgraced dictatorial regimes, like Chilean torturers. The daily pay goes from like \$600 per DAY to \$4000 per MONTH, and eventually there's a minor scandal when a bunch of Colombians are shipped to Iraq on short notice only to realize the contract they signed two hours before getting on the plane had been edited from their previous one to reduce their pay to \$1000/month, and when they protested were told, "He who wanted to go back could do so, but we didn't have a single peso and where were we going to get in Baghdad the 10 or 12 millions pesos for a ticket to Colombia?" (p. 267) So from sweet lucrative 2-months for \$60,000 to indentured servitude, but killing rando Iraqis either way. In the words of a Chilean torture victim turned advocate:

There is something deeply perverse about the privatization of the Iraq War and the utilization of mercenaries. This externalization of services or outsourcing attempts to lower costs-- 'Third World' mercenaries are paid less than their counterparts from the developed world-- and maximize benefits, i.e. 'Let others fight the war for the Americans.' In either case, the Iraqi people do not matter at all. It is precisely this dehumanization of the 'enemy' that makes it easier for the private companies and the US government to recruit mercenaries. It is exactly the same strategy used by the Chilean military to train members of the secret police and make it easier to annihilate opponents of the dictatorship. In other words, Chilean mercenaries in Iraq is business as usual. (p. 273)

Scahill exposes the events leading up to four Blackwater soldiers getting shot as they drove in a convoy of kitchen equipment, dragged out of the SUVs, set on fire, hacked into pieces, and hung over a bridge in the center city. Apparently the company was cutting costs and sent the men out in pairs instead of the normal 3, so there was no dude with a gun in the backseat protecting the guys in front who didn't have accurate maps and were kind of lost and occupied navigating a city that even the marines wouldn't enter at that time because the Americans were so hated there. OK that sucks insanely much yeah but in the words of one of those Blackwater men's mothers, "Over a thousand people died because of what happened to Scotty [Helveston] that day," referencing the first of several mass bombings/invasions of Fallujah that took place immediately following the incident at the behest of Rumsfeld de Privatization despite the local marine commander's request that they please not do that (p.304).

Blackwater's latest project is trying to get in on NATO missions and UN Peacekeeping missions. Also, spying for corporations, with a division composed of retired CIA agents. Also, training various Iraqi ethnic militias to act as death squads in a tactic they actually call the Salvadoran Option. Oh and Blackwater was one of the first on the ground in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, armed to the teeth and offering protective services to rich people and businesses as the "donation" to the suffering city.

Scahill's book slides gracefully between stories of massacres and contracted soldiers dying from cheap business practices, to tracing the behind the scenes money and motives, and onto synthesis about why, tying these specific examples of horror and scandal clearly into the greater system of privatization that has surged forward in these past ten years. Dude claims Amy Goodman and Naomi Klein as mentors and comrades, and this book compliments Democracy Now! and the Shock Doctrine, zeroing in on this specifically graphic

form of neoliberal violence. From an anti-torture NGO worker: "To the extent that a population is called on to go to war, there is resistance ... to prevent wars of self-aggrandizement. ... Private forces are almost a necessity for a United States bent on retaining its declining empire." (p. 433)

Final fun fact: South Africa recently banned all "South Africans from participating 'as a combatant for private gain in an armed conflict' or from involvement in 'any act aimed at overthrowing a government or undermining the constitutional order, sovereignty, or territorial integrity of a state' EXCEPT in "legitimate armed struggles, including struggles waged, in accordance with international humanitarian law, for national liberation; self-determination independence against colonialism, or resistance against occupation, aggression, or domination by foreign nationals or foreign forces." (p.431)

Viva war resisters everywhere.

Trish says

One can draw a straight line from Tim Weiner's extensive report on the CIA, *Legacy of Ashes*, and this book by Jeremy Scahill on the outsourcing of American military, security, and investigative duties. Scahill centers his work around the event that transfixed the world and brought awareness of Blackwater to the fore for those of us not immediately engaged in military operations. The event was the 2004 murder of Blackwater employees in the city of Fallujah wherein the victims were killed, dismembered, and hung from an overpass to remind Americans that in Fallujah at least, Americans were not welcome.

What Scahill shares with us here is his report of a Christian army of for-profit soldiers headquartered in North Carolina who have grown in size and weaponry to rival national militaries around the world. Begun in 1997 as a private advanced training facility for active-duty soldiers and police, Blackwater grew during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to supplying weapons-trained military "security personnel," receiving lucrative contracts from a U.S. government unwilling to face the political backlash from a public unhappy with military losses overseas. Blackwater marketed its services by saying it could accomplish more with less, though it is difficult to see how their proffered services cost us less.

As profits grew for the corporate organization, Blackwater sought cheaper and cheaper contracts with mercenary soldiers in South American and Latin American countries, as well as Eastern European, African, and select Asian countries. Sometimes when they cut corners on equipment, training, or staffing they found themselves embroiled in lawsuits in the U.S. as a result of tragic and allegedly preventable deaths.

What was particularly shocking to me was the overt tone of the speeches and promotional material produced by the leadership of the organization, in that it completely resembled ISIS rhetoric about holy wars, and fighting for the will of God. Far right wing religious groups with which Blackwater founder Erik Prince is affiliated were writing in the 1990's that the Christian community might need to face the possibility that the "regime" (our government!) might force their Church into confrontation ranging from "noncompliance...to morally justified revolution." It is in this context that the largest privately-held store of military grade weapons was begun. Their god is a Christian one, but they stand allied with Israel, and trace their religious roots back to the Crusades, which was medieval in its very concept and reflected the fanatic religious warriors now terrorizing the Middle East.

Scahill is scrupulous in his reporting on the effect of Blackwater forces in the Iraq and Afghan wars, and when it seems he might be getting off the point by describing, for instance, the Chilean mercenary contingent

that became a part of Blackwater, he is so vastly interesting that I'm glad he left the material in. Scahill also details the use of Blackwater forces in the catastrophe that was Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, providing property and force protection for FEMA officials. It seems appropriate somehow that Bush was more concerned with property than with residents.

More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that these contractors do not operate under the same restrictions and set of rules that govern national troops, and their contracts often leave them free of liability or of obligations in terms of insurance that we commonly find acceptable. Critics decry the rise of heavily-armed mercenaries as "killers for hire," suggesting that their contractual freedom from culpability and their for-profit motive may lead them to *start* conflict rather than prevent it.

The growth of Blackwater was exponential during the years of a Republican government and was not curbed enough under a Democratic president. "In 2008 the number of private contractors in Iraq was at a one-to-one ratio with active-duty U.S. soldiers," according to Scahill. This book was published in 2007 and updated in 2008, but a June 2010 article in *Nation* magazine written by Scahill brings us up to date:

"Blackwater is up for sale and its shadowy owner, Erik Prince, is rumored to be planning to move to the United Arab Emirates as his top deputies face indictment for a range of alleged crimes, yet the company remains a central part of President Obama's Afghanistan war. Now, Blackwater's role is expanding...

Earlier this year, Schakowsky and Senator Bernie Sanders reintroduced the Stop Outsourcing Security Act, which would phase out the use of private security contractors by the government. Ironically, Hillary Clinton was a co-sponsor of the legislation when she was a senator and running for president. Now, as Secretary of State, she is the US official in charge of most Blackwater contracts. Blackwater is also bidding on a contract potentially worth up to \$1 billion to train the Afghan National Police."

It is difficult for me to accept the concept of a religiously-motivated army and I am not comfortable with a extra-legal military force that operates for profit.

Scahill won the George Polk Award for his reporting on Blackwater. The book is beautifully written and, though a large book, it is an engrossing read. I listened to the Blackstone Audio production audio read by Tom (not Tim) Weiner and thought it terrific.

Valerie says

This book covers Iraq and mercenaries in great detail. However, I was unprepared for the section on Blackwater and Hurricane Katrina. The author makes the point that guns were on the ground long before humanitarian aid was deployed. I checked Blackwater's website and they claim to have donated time and effort, although they hide behind wording like 'in the first few days', leading one to believe this book's claim that they were well paid after those first few days. I was also disturbed by the political lobbying to overturn South Africa's restrictions on its Nationals participating in private armies and the situation in Darfur.

I could only read a little bit every morning. The rage and disgust made this book impossible to read at night. Also the short-sightedness, what will happen now that we don't have a president who matches agendas with the owners of this large private army?

Jerome says

Not a book for the conservative/republican reader, but very informative as to the privatization of the military. A real expose of corruption at the highest levels of government. As a past member of the USMC, I believe the privatization of the military to be a cancer on the real military and it should be exterminated post haste.

"OF all the insane Bush privatization efforts, none is more frightening than the corporatizing of military combat forces." - Michael Moore.

"Blackwater is the utterly gripping and explosive story of how the Bush administration has spent hundreds of millions of public dollars building a parallel corporate army" - Naomi Klein

Cwn_annwn_13 says

This gives a history and account of various misdeeds by Blackwater and their born ultra-rich right wing Christian kook founder Erik Prince. It goes in depth with the infamous Fallujah incident where "civilian contractors" (actually they were former Special Forces guys working for Blackwater) were ambushed, yanked out of the car, burnt alive and their corpses were hung from a Fallujah bridge. It looked like an inside job set up to me when I first saw the incident in the news a few years back and now I am even more convinced. Between it being a last minute assignment, at least one of the guys was in the doghouse with higher ups, the Iraqis not only had a camera there to record the whole event but they had an anti-American sign written up in ENGLISH all ready to show. Plus Bush was on the campaign trail so this would fire up all the dumb rednecks in the States and they needed this as propaganda to justify going full bore into Fallujah. Sorry but the Blackwater/Fallujah incident was a blatant Psy-Op.

Another shocking thing was how politically clueless some of these Blackwater mercenaries seemed to be. There was one where he thought Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11 and another was quoted as saying if he was going to die it would be "out with a bang", "defending his country". Somebody please explain to me what the hell shooting at a bunch of Arab hillbillies on the other side of the world has to do with defending America? Put Blackwater on the Mexican border might be of use for defending America but that will never happen because they are really a globalist goon squad that pimp patriotism to morons when its convenient.

Probably the scariest thing is Blackwater is angling to be some sort of global mercenary "peacekeeping" force for the United Nations. If there is a problem area, instead of sending in Nato, or UN forces to the Sudan or where ever they send in Blackwater. But really corporate goon squads for the "elite" are nothing new (ever heard of the Pinkertons?) but Blackwater may end up like America as a whole, a snake eating its own tail out of their lust for short term greed. They already are using a significant number of soldiers from third world nations because they are cheaper to hire. This book does have a big left wing bias but I actually think only a leftist would write a realistic book on Blackwater. I can only imagine the garbage a book about Blackwater would be if it had been written by a Neo-Con Republican.

Huyen says

I'd quite like to like this book. I mostly agree with what the author is trying to say, but don't like his sensationalist style. And I have this awful nagging feeling throughout this book that it's terribly biased as Jeremy Scahill makes it quite clear from the start. It is biased along what I already opined, but I'd be much happier to see something more balanced. It is one thing to have a strong opinion, but quite another to let that brilliant idea cloud your judgment and from his style, I am rather doubtful how objective the history he's presenting is. Second, he basically summarizes the whole book in the beginning and then unravels them, often repeating himself without any more insight. Third, the title of the book is about Blackwater, but many of the chapters are quite irrelevant.

But let me try to be more lenient on this book. In all fairness, it is quite an interesting and informative book. Among other things, what disturbs me the most about private companies is that they can commit any crime, including murder or use of illegal weapons, with impunity. They are exempt from the US Uniform Code of Military Justice because they are "civilians", and much worse, no law can touch them at all. They can refuse to provide information about their business conduct on grounds that the contracts contain proprietary information. It is rather concerning that a (arguably) democratically-elected government is sending an army that is not accountable to anyone into a troubled region, which has now proven to cause disastrous consequences.

The behaviour of American soldiers probably hasn't been that impeccable in Iraq and elsewhere, but at least, you can bring them to court. That's not the case with Blackwater. The implication for US foreign policy and American image overseas is immense. The US government is sending all over the globe huge companies whose sole purpose is to earn money, not to stabilize peace. And they can brutalize, kill, abuse the local population as much as they like, without any fear of being brought to justice. I keep thinking again and again about how Robert Fisk describes the UN forces from poor countries operating in Iraq tend to be a lot more sympathetic and humble to the local population compared to the forces from richer countries. And here we have non-peacekeeping forces with dubious credentials getting paid shit loads treating locals like dirt just to get their job done. Looks like typical arrogant imperialistic behaviour to me.

Another disturbing fact about Blackwater is that they do not just disregard their enemies' lives but their own employees' lives too. To reduce cost and boost their profits, they cut down on security measures, pushing their employees into dangerous situations with inappropriate protection. That's the reason why the four Blackwater men got ambushed in Fallujah in 2004. Private companies are accountable to pretty much no government for their recruitment practices. They can hire anyone, including thugs that were involved in apartheid South Africa and Chile. BW has enough manpower and force to overthrow many governments in the world, and if the military complex has manipulated the US gov to such an extent and has such military prowess, isn't that horribly bothersome?

Another thing that is quite distressing is the ideology behind BW. It is all about money, not charity, not peace, not security. They have a vested interest in destabilizing the situation in Iraq, more violence, more need for security, more contractors, more violence, the cycle goes on. I often find it extremely hard to reconcile the Christian "morality" they're claiming with their actual practice. Jesus said nothing about patriotism or privatization, but these people with wonderful imagination can cook up all of these things, I always find that puzzling and fascinating. But maybe as my friend said, this ideology is made up by people who don't think at all. Sending fundamentalist Christians who want to kill off as many Muslims as possible

into Iraq is probably a sign that my friend is correct.

The privatization of the US military initiated by Rumsfeld and Cheney et al has created a huge opportunity for private security companies like BW to flourish, at the expense of chaos, violence and a huge human cost. if there's one argument against privatization then I think this would make one of the strongest cases. to me it seems, war no longer serves as a means to pursue national interests but an ends in itself, driven by the powerful special interests that are vested in the private military companies. In the process, America is letting private companies undermine the principle of democratic accountability. Usually, if a president wants to increase the size of the military forces or send troops abroad, he has to seek approval from Congress. Decisions about contracts for private security are made exclusively by the executive branch, and very inaccessible to the public. Private companies are not held accountable to the public and very hard to be monitored by journalists or non-governmental organizations, unlike the US military. And by excluding their casualties from the official figure, the government practically tells a lie about the war.

At this point, the free market people would balk and say despite all of its shortcomings, privatization is more efficient. but who's to say that it is? who discloses and monitors the costs? literally no one. Government frequently curtail competition to preserve reliability and pay service to particular companies that had contributed to their campaigns. I wonder how that efficiency argument can hold if it is repeatedly stressed in the book that private contractors are paid 3 times as high as a US military personnel. In an interview with PBS on frontline a spokesperson of KBR repeatedly dodged the question about the cost of the operation.

I think the one point that is quite weak about this book is his argument against using private companies in peacekeeping forces. The private forces could have helped halt the atrocities in Rwanda in no time. He didn't seem to have a convincing argument against that.

another interesting book on US militarism that is worth looking at is Political Economy of US Militarism by Ismael Hossein zadeh.

Cara M says

Seemed to run out of steam toward the end when it shifted from recounting of major events to personnel profiles. My major issue with this book was that it was a bit of a disjointed read. From a literary perspective, there were odd tense-issues, the pacing was off, and I did not come away with a clear feeling of the narrative. From a message/content perspective, the juxtaposition of the inundation of fact with the author's entirely subjective tone was weird for me. But, even though it took forever to get through, this was definitely worth the read.
