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## **Blackwater and Bush's War**

**by Sheldon Richman**

If Iraq is really a sovereign country, which is the fiction maintained by the Bush administration, then why aren't the Blackwater USA personnel who are accused of murdering 17 innocent Iraqis accountable to the criminal justice system in that country?

Private contractors such as Blackwater have had immunity from criminal prosecution, but Congress now has voted to make them liable under U.S. law. That seems odd. If an American commits a crime in Iraq, why should he be accountable to U.S. authorities? It shouldn't matter that he was under contract to the U.S. government. If the tables were turned and Iraqis under contract to Iraq's government were murdering Americans on our streets, Congress would be singing a different tune.

We shouldn't be surprised by the treatment of Iraq as a ward of the United States. That attitude has been at the center of U.S. policy since President Bush decided to go to war. Ask yourself why American politicians almost unanimously favor imposing "benchmarks" on the Iraqi government. If Iraq is sovereign, by what right do they make any demands at all? The war parties (yes, the Democrats too) would reply that "we" (who?) have vital interests in the region. But that reveals quite a lot. When a government insists that the country it speaks for has vital interests worldwide, the defense of which may require direct or indirect intervention at any time — and it is in a position to carry out that intervention — it is an imperial power, call it what you will.

Blackwater's involvement in Iraq has been ugly but misunderstood. The presence of security contractors in Iraq does not signify that the war has been privatized. Unfortunately, the word "privatization" has been corrupted over the years. It used to mean that a service provided by government was fully relinquished to the private marketplace. For example, if a city government picked up the trash, it could privatize that function simply by stopping and letting private companies offer trash-removal services directly to city residents.

But somewhere along the line "privatization" has come to mean "government's *contracting* with private companies for the provision of services." Some cities have turned the management of

their schools or water plants over to contractors. This has been touted as a way to achieve efficiencies that government cannot match because if one contractor doesn't produce, it can be replaced by a competing one.

Whatever the merits of that argument, the arrangement is *not* privatization for one obvious reason. The government pays contractors with money forcibly extracted from the taxpayers and the services are forced on everyone. In a free market, sellers *and* buyers are free. Consumers are at liberty to reject services they don't want.

But under phony privatization, consumers are not free to say no. They are taxed by the political *authorities*, who pay the contractors (who are often cronies) for services the authorities want. This is nothing like a free market.

Calling the situation in Iraq a privatized war is absurd. With all the resources of the U.S. government at his disposal, President Bush sent troops to invade Iraq, overthrow the government, and subdue the population. It was a government operation from top to bottom. The American people were the financiers without the power to stop the juggernaut. (Who would have offered his own money voluntarily for this war?) That the administration has used taxpayer money to buy the services of "private" companies changes nothing about this story. And if such companies exist by virtue of tax money, are they really private?

In a corporatist economy such as ours, government funnels lots of money to nominally private firms to accomplish things it might have done directly. But there is no essential difference between those two ways of doing things. What counts is who controls the money.

If the government were to close down the Internal Revenue Service and hire H&R Block to collect taxes, would that be privatization of the tax system? The question answers itself.

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