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Blackwater's Free-Market Crusade

By Nathan Schneider

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Erik Prince discovered a passion for freedom long before founding Blackwater.

Freedom is a mighty thing. Its exercise unleashes, its defense galvanizes. In the imagination, it conjures a dream that meets reality only in glimpses: an open field, a decisive choice, or a long-held desire finally in reach. Freedom, such ecstasy reveals, is the principle (or anti-principle) that organizes the whole universe. It is simple. But grasping it for oneself, without slipping into a new sort of bondage, is hard.

The athletic, adventuresome son of a Michigan car-parts billionaire, Prince experienced the benefits of free-market business firsthand. After a short spell at the Naval Academy, he finished his undergraduate years at Hillsdale College, renowned in conservative circles for its stubborn libertarianism. Later, after returning to the Navy as a SEAL and inheriting from his father's riches, he co-founded Blackwater and became a pioneer in the freewheeling growth industry of private military contracting.

This turned out to be a fortuitous move. Only a few years later, a worldwide war on terror began in defense of—you guessed it—freedom, which the US government was ill-equipped to execute. In exchange for their help, Blackwater and its siblings won wide-reaching deliverance from the constraints of military and civilian oversight while implementing American government policy at home and abroad. Lucrative Pentagon and State Department contracts meant that, now a free-market businessman in his own right, Erik Prince had come full circle.

Prince's freedom, however, may not last. On August 4, Jeremy Scahill reported in *The Nation* that the night before, a pair of anonymous former Blackwater employees had filed sworn affidavits (John Doe #1 and #2) against Prince and his company in a Virginia federal court. Neither informant feels at liberty to reveal his identity for fear of retribution.

The former employees allege that, during ongoing federal investigations, Prince "murdered, or had murdered" informants to keep them from testifying. Both say that Blackwater employees injured and killed Iraqi civilians without cause, at times with restricted weaponry, then destroyed the evidence. Prince's private planes were used,

says John Doe #2, to smuggle weapons into the country. He also alleges that Blackwater maintained a “wife-swapping and sex ring” at its North Carolina compound (which Prince seems to have encouraged), and that his men were in the habit of using child prostitutes. (Employees of another contractor, DynCorp, were found in 2000 to have been organizing a child sex ring in Bosnia.) Freedom to fire at will, the statements suggest, mixes in Blackwater’s culture with experiments in sexual liberation.

Battle for the Defense of Christendom

John Doe #2’s testimony makes particularly troubling claims about more cosmic aspects of Prince’s leadership at Blackwater. Prince, he alleges, “views himself as a Christian crusader tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe.” He adds, “Mr. Prince intentionally deployed to Iraq certain men who shared his vision of Christian supremacy, knowing and wanting these men to take every available opportunity to murder Iraqis. Many of these men used call signs based on the Knights of the Templar, the warriors who fought the Crusades.”

These remain unverified contentions, and anonymous ones at that. But they’re hardly surprising. Scahill is also the author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army*, a book full of troubling revelations about the company and its founder. The fascination with medieval bloodshed appears to run deep; Scahill reports that some Blackwater bosses boast membership in the Sovereign Order of Malta, another Crusader brotherhood. “Some,” he observes (well before seeing John Doe #2’s affidavit), “appear to believe they are engaged in an epic battle for the defense of Christendom.” Throughout, the book explores Prince’s longstanding ties with reactionary religion. Prince’s father, whose business success was referred to as “a boom built on Biblical principles,” by Republican operative Gary Bauer, bankrolled Bauer and James Dobson’s Family Research Council. The younger Prince converted to Catholicism in 1992, but his old ties with evangelical organizations has made him a bridge-builder among conservative Christians of both stripes.

Prince’s personal philanthropy goes through his Freiheit Foundation (*freiheit* is German for “freedom”). In addition to conservative think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute, many of its beneficiaries are expressly religious, including the embattled Legionaries of Christ, Charles Colson’s Prison Fellowship, and Christian Freedom International. These are decidedly not militant organizations. But in the imagination of Erik Prince, freedom of militancy and freedom of religion go, literally, hand in hand. He once described his liberated militia thusly: “Everybody carries guns, just like Jeremiah rebuilding the temple in Israel—a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other.”

It’s a fabulous prospect, to a certain habit of thinking, where freedom is the substance of things hoped for and its evidence can be seen in the wonders of free enterprise and powerful weaponry. The grace of an Invisible Hand falls upon its

chosen ones with riches, as if proclaiming, “These are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to them!” Free-market war, like all free markets, promises to exceed the prospects of the alternative, creating more wealth for more people beyond our wildest imaginations. But it may be that warfare isn’t a wealth that we need to increase. Our imagination of it is already quite wild enough.

Through their arrangements with the Pentagon and the civilian government, Blackwater and companies like it achieved quite nearly the “armed and dangerous” epitome of market-driven freedom. If they flub up, there are no consequences to bind them except losing the contract or, as for Blackwater-turned-Xe, a public-relations makeover. So empowered, private armies can spread like viruses, everywhere the market they create can sustain them. For their employers, they become an addiction. In 2006, the Department of Defense officially began including contractors as part of its “Total Force.” Blackwater celebrated. “Hiring mercenaries was no longer an option,” Scahill writes of this sea change; “it was US policy.”

There are currently about as many private contractors in Iraq as there are active-duty soldiers. And while much is made politically of plans to pull back frontline troops, the kinds of support and security roles contractors play suggest that they are likely to remain behind a good deal longer. Last week, Scahill reported that, despite losing their operating license with the Iraqi government, the US State Department continues to allow Blackwater/Xe to maintain an armed presence there. Wherever these contractors go, one can be assured that they will (freely) pursue their own interests ahead of their employers’, and the two might not always coincide.

Prince speaks of biblical swords, but what about ploughshares? There are other freedoms, other visions of liberty than what he learned at home and models in his company. One can long for freedoms *from*, as well as freedoms *to*: from never-ending wars for profit, from sexual exploitation, from fear of retribution for speaking out, and from murderous religious intolerance. These I find, in preference to Prince’s, to be the more splendid.

Nathan Schneider is a writer who lives in Brooklyn, New York. He holds a master’s degree in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a bachelor’s in the same subject from Brown University. Nathan blogs at The Row Boat.

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