

By Norman Pollack

From [Counterpunch](#) | Original Article

A Silence on Atrocities

Even the mightiest have their come-uppance when their internal logic spews out destructiveness returning on the self—“blowback” in a way perhaps not seen before. I refer to James Risen’s extraordinary article in the New York Times, “Before Shooting in Iraq, a Warning on Blackwater,” (June 30), in which the customary meaning of “blowback” refers to policies, e.g., the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the “pivot” of military power to the Pacific intent on the encirclement, containment, isolation of China, produce unintended, or if intended, still unwelcome, consequences for the initiator of the policy or action.

Thus: Iraq, out-of-control (from the US standpoint, a raging civil war negating massive intervention and alerting the world to America’s hegemonic purposes); Afghanistan, original support of the Taliban against the Soviet Union, resulting in their material strengthening now turned against the US, endangering its power-position in the region; use of Ukraine as a basis for bringing NATO forces to the Russian border, now an overreach which may disrupt the EU and weaken US dominance over it; and blatant confrontation with China, both military and trade, with potential for war leading to nuclear annihilation. The status and role of world policeman is losing its blackjack, its reputation as global bully being challenged through the rise of multiple power-centers and industrial-commercial-financial patterns no longer defined, supervised, indeed controlled, by American global interests and military implementation.

That is blowback in its familiar guise. Less so, the self-chosen instruments of repression spilling out of behemoth’s mouth because America’s dependence on repression to secure its aims makes it dependent as well on the executors of repression, in this case, given the extreme stress on privatization (the core of the monster’s functional existence), Blackwater at your service, a private army on hire to USG for pursuit of the dirty work, deemed necessary, yet, delegated to official forces, the cause of embarrassment and shame. Browbeating indigenous populations, with an overwhelming swagger and display in the grand tradition of conquerors, in addition to protecting representatives of the conquerors, is a mission worthy, as here, of billion

dollar contracts to the private militias (euphemism: “security guards”) as insurance the military victory and occupation will hold.

Here Blackwater is, and is treated as, inseparable from the intervention (read: conquest) itself, at times assisting in the fighting on an informal basis—it has not yet been invited to join NATO(!)—but more to the point, the intimidating presence in the post-military phase, as though instilling the message: You Iraqis think the military is bad, well don’t mess around, for far worse awaits you, we former Navy SEALs know nothing can touch us. Our motto might as well be, A Law Unto Ourselves, even USG—beyond the status-of-forces agreement it forced your government to sign—afraid of us. Blowback: the cancer in the bowels of behemoth rapidly spreading to the extremities, spinal column, brain. Soon we shall all be made over in the image of Blackwater, or rather, as Blackwater would like to see, as its actions show, America become, a nation subservient to its thugs, extolling martial glory for its own sake and for the sake of global dominance. Authoritarianism once off the ground knows no limits and demands the complete adherence of its subjects. America has lived with CIA for decades; Blackwater is icing on the cake.

Before turning to the evidence contained in James Risen’s article, it is important to see how events from the past are converging on the present. His credentials as a whistleblower are borne out by his previous record (exposure of CIA dirty tricks, in his book *State of War*, with respect to Iran’s nuclear program) and current circumstances (he faces a possible jail sentence for refusing to disclose, from that account, the identity of an anonymous source). In the Bush doghouse for exposing the use of warrantless wire taps in 2005, and now, Obama contemplating more serious action, jail time for not complying with a DOJ subpoena, possibly leading to an Espionage Act prosecution, for which Obama excels over all of his predecessors combined (liberals, of course, furiously denying the sordid record), Risen not only stares down his persecutors, Obama, Holder, DOJ, but here presents an exposure in some ways more damning of US baseness from the top down, nurturing a murderous nest in the structure of government.

As for the administration hounding, Jonathan Mahler’s *New York Times* article, “Reporter’s Case Poses Dilemma for Justice Dept.,” (June 27), implies that Risen’s refusal to be intimidated is causing Obama and Holder second thoughts about pushing for his imprisonment. According to John Rizzo, CIA’s acting general counsel, Bush people wanted *State of War* kept off the market—too late, however. Risen then was subpoenaed to testify against the suspected leaker—and refused. “More than six years of legal wrangling,” in what Mahler terms “the most serious confrontation between the government and the press in recent history,” is coming to a head. Risen “is now out of challenges. Early this month, the Supreme Court declined to review his case, a decision that allows prosecutors to compel his testimony.”

But The Times, in defending its own man, cannot strongly protest, lest it antagonize the White House. Yes, Obama appears to be in a bind: “Though the court’s decision looked like a major victory for the government, it has forced the Obama administration to confront a hard choice. Should it demand Mr. Risen’s testimony and be responsible for a reporter’s being sent to jail? Or reverse course and stand down, losing credibility with an intelligence community that has pushed for the aggressive prosecution of leaks?” If Obama and USG were truly democratic (small “d”), there should not be a choice but only one course of action, moreover reigning in the “intelligence community” serving under their control.

The reporter, I believe reflecting the paper’s view, however, credits the Obama administration with actually weighing alternatives and being capable of making moral choices: “The dilemma comes at a critical moment for an administration that has struggled to find a balance between aggressively enforcing laws against leaking and demonstrating concern for civil liberties and government transparency.” What balance? What concern? Everything points the other way, on both civil liberties (e.g., due process and habeas corpus rights for detainees) and government transparency (simply, a thick protective shield in place, symbolized by the high art of redaction—and, as with Blackwater’s killing sprees, the refusal or half-heartedness about prosecution). Its reporter’s back against the wall, NYT ignores the Espionage Act prosecutions of whistleblowers.

Mahler succinctly describes the reporting: “The failed C.I.A. action at the heart of Mr. Risen’s reporting was intended to sabotage Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Intelligence officials assigned a former Russian scientist who had defected to the United States to deliver a set of faulty blueprints for a nuclear device to an Iranian scientist. But the Russian scientist became nervous and informed the Iranians that the plans were flawed.” One readily appreciates the dangers to the National Security State, especially revelations of the stupidity and dangerousness of its crown jewel, CIA, posed by investigative journalism. The Times, to its everlasting shame, bowed to Coldoleezza Rice’s request to withhold publication of the article. As a Times spokesperson later declared, “We weighed the government’s concerns and the usual editorial considerations and decided not to run the story.” Hence, James Risen—enemy of National Security; he “broke the story” later in State of War. Yet Bush is not the only culprit in this story; Obama ordered two additional subpoenas to force Risen to testify, his DOJ going after him hammer-and-tongs: “After a trial court largely quashed his third subpoena [the first under Bush] in late 2010, the Justice Department successfully challenged the ruling in a federal appeals court, arguing that the First Amendment does not afford any special protections to journalists.” Enough said about the dedication to civil liberties and freedom of the press: “The administration then urged the Supreme Court not to review Mr. Risen’s case.”

I have already discussed the mass killings in Nisour Square, Baghdad, in a previous article. Now we learn that this was part of a pattern in Blackwater's behavior—again, Risen's reporting. Even for one who is a seasoned critic, it is painful for me to write about. Organized thuggery knows no limits particularly when working for the highest authority, immunity from punishment worn as a badge of honor, as meanwhile government officials hide their eyes. Risen writes, "Just weeks before Blackwater guards fatally shot 17 civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square in 2007, the State Department began investigating the security contractor's operations in Iraq. But the inquiry was abandoned after Blackwater's top manager there issued a threat: 'that he could kill' the government's chief investigator and 'no one could or would do anything about it as we were in Iraq,' according to department reports." A private contractor threatens the life of a State Department investigator! No reprisal, punishment, cancellation of the contract, not even disclosure of the threat—yet Blackwater still in place years later, as part of the silence on atrocities in the Obama-Hillary era.

Those 17 killed are on America's hands, bloody hands. There was a clear warning about what to expect: "After returning to Washington, the chief investigator wrote a scathing report to State Department officials documenting misconduct by Blackwater employees and warning that lax oversight of the company, which had a contract worth more than \$1 billion to protect American diplomats, had created 'an environment full of liability and negligence.'" Even more outrageous, Risen notes, the investigators become the criminals gumming up the security works: "American Embassy officials in Baghdad sided with Blackwater rather than the State Department investigators as a dispute over the probe escalated in August 2007, the previously undisclosed documents show. The officials told the investigators that they had disrupted the embassy's relationship with the security contractor and ordered them to leave the country, according to the reports."

Jean Richter, lead investigator, wrote, in a memo to the State Department only weeks prior to Nisour Square: "The management structures in place to manage and monitor our contracts in Iraq have become subservient to the contractors themselves. Blackwater contractors saw themselves as above the law.... 'hands off' [management meant that] the contractors, instead of Department officials, are in command and in control." Now, nearly seven years later, four Blackwater guards are on trial, facing, if ever convicted, watered down charges, this being "the government's second attempt to prosecute the case in an American court [I wonder how serious the effort under Holder and Obama] after previous charges against five guards were dismissed in 2009." Much of the time this is on Obama's watch, yet, "despite a series of investigations in the wake of Nisour Square, the back story of what happened with Blackwater and the embassy in Baghdad before the fateful shooting has never been fully told."

So much for transparency, civil liberties, and prosecuting the crimes of a predecessor (the cardinal rule of presidents, at least this one, cover-up WAR CRIMES past and present, a

solemn command of the National Security State). Silence and deniability, in all matters large and small, characterize the responses of USG and private principals: “The State Department declined to comment on the aborted investigation. A spokesman for Erik Prince, the founder and former chief executive of Blackwater, who sold the company in 2010, said Mr. Prince had never been told about the matter.” The \$1B contract itself testifies to the fusion of patriotism, secrecy, repression, and yes, corporate profit: “After Mr. Prince sold the company, the new owners named it Academi. In early June, it merged with Triple Canopy, one of its rivals for government and commercial contracts to provide private security. The new firm is called Constellis Holdings.” Like war, private security stands to make a killing (pardon the pun), no doubt in flight from the original name for damage-control and public-relations purposes.

Previous to Nisour Square (Sept. 16, 2007) Blackwater guards “acquired a reputation...for swagger and recklessness,” but complaints “about practices ranging from running cars off the road to shooting wildly in the streets and even killing civilians typically did not result in serious action by the United States or the Iraqi government.” After firing in the Square, there was closer scrutiny, the Blackwater claim that they were fired on even US military officials denied, and “[f]ederal prosecutors later said Blackwater personnel had shot indiscriminately with automatic weapons, heavy machine guns and grenade launchers.” To no avail, given the symbiotic relationship between the company and the government. In fact, Blackwater had itself been run by Prince as a nation in microcosm, its people shortly before Nisour Square gathered by him at company headquarters in Moyock, North Carolina and made to “swear an oath of allegiance” like the one required of enlistees in the US military. They were handed copies of the oath, which, after reciting the words, were told to sign.

The State Department investigation into Blackwater in Iraq, which began Aug. 1, 2007 and was slated for one month, led early to the “volatile” situation (including the death threat), our knowledge coming from “internal State Department documents” furnished “to plaintiffs in a lawsuit against Blackwater that was unrelated to the Nisour Square shootings,” seemingly by accident then and fleshed out by Risen. In that month—or that part of it before being forced to leave—the investigators discovered “a long list of contract violations by Blackwater,” staffing changes of security details “without State Department approval,” reducing the number of guards on details, “storing automatic weapons and ammunition in their private rooms, where they were drinking heavily and partying with frequent female visitors,” and, for many, failing “to regularly qualify on their weapons” or “carrying weapons on which they had never been certified” nor “authorized to use.” Extravagance for mayhem abroad, less than peanuts for critical needs at home, education, health care, employment, beyond the means or reach of Imperial grandeur as the national obsession.

In addition to “overbilling the State Department by manipulating its personnel records, using guards assigned to the State Department contract for other work and falsifying other staffing

data on the contract,” (no wonder the investigators’ poor reception by Blackwater’s resident head in Iraq), one of its affiliates forced “third country nationals” who did the dirty work at low wages “to live in squalid conditions, sometimes three to a cramped room with no bed,” according to the investigators’ report. Their conclusion: “Blackwater was getting away with such conduct because embassy personnel had gotten too close to the contractor.”

Ah, the denouement; we have a name to go with the face of the project manager who threatened Richter’s life, Daniel Carroll, who said he could kill him without anything happening to himself “as we were in Iraq” (this was witnessed by Donald Thomas, the other investigator), and Richter, in his memo to the Department stated: “I took Mr. Carroll’s threat seriously. We were in a combat zone where things can happen unexpectedly, especially when issues involve potentially negative impacts on a lucrative security contract.” Nicely put, and corroborated by Thomas, who wrote in a separate memo that “others in Baghdad had told the two investigators to be ‘very careful,’ considering that their review could jeopardize job security for Blackwater personnel.” The wonder perhaps is that Richter and Thomas were not prosecuted under the Espionage Act for spoiling the show. It didn’t matter. No one at State listened.

The two men were ordered to leave (Aug 23), and “cut short their inquiry and returned to Washington the next day.” Finally, on Oct. 5, after the Nisour Square scandal, State Department officials responded to Richter’s “August warning,” and took statements from him and Thomas about “their accusations of a threat by Mr. Carroll, but took no further action.” A special panel convened by Rice on Nisour Square “never interviewed Mr. Richter or Mr. Thomas.” The official who led the panel “told reporters on Oct. 23, 2007, that the panel had not found any communications from the embassy in Baghdad before the Nisour Square shooting that raised concerns about contractor conduct.” Voila, vanished in thin air. This State Department officer deserves the last word: “We interviewed a large number of individuals. We did not find any, I think, significant pattern of incidents that had not—that the embassy had suppressed in any way.” And my last word: fascism. Beyond all structural-cultural-societal considerations about wealth-concentration, industrial-financial consolidation, foreign expansion through preponderant power and the spirit of militarism, the rampaging privatization with government consent witnessed here, which has wreaked havoc on another people, only to be covered over by the state, aka, the National Security State, disregarding its Constitutional protections to the individual, as in sponsoring massive surveillance, is enough for me to satisfy the working definition of that single word.

Norman Pollack has written on *Populism*. His interests are social theory and the structural analysis of capitalism and fascism.