Media and Mercenaries: A Study of Prominent Newspaper Coverage of Private Security Contractors in the Iraq War

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Private security contractors (PSCs) constitute the second largest, if unofficial, member of the US-led coalition that has occupied Iraq since March 2003. Although estimates of the total number of PSCs in Iraq vary widely, at least 50 firms have employed between 25,000 and 75,000 private soldiers in that country for most of the conflict.¹ They provide a variety of security services for their clients, which range from the US, Iraqi, and other governments to NGOs, international organizations, and local and foreign businesses. These services include providing static defence for government and commercial buildings and foreign embassies; static defence for private-, government-, and military-led development and reconstruction efforts; and mobile defence for VIPs and convoys of goods and people throughout Iraq, but particularly in major cities, like Baghdad and Basra, and on the roads that link them.² Although employed for defensive purposes, these actors frequently engage in combat against suspected threats, discharge their weapons on a regular basis, and suffer and inflict casualties.³

PSCs have been involved in at least two highly significant politico-military events during the conflict. The first took place on March 31, 2004, when four Blackwater/Xe employees ventured into the city of Fallujah in unarmoured sport utility vehicles and were ambushed by Iraqi insurgents. The men were quickly killed inside their vehicles and their bodies were then dragged out, burned, mutilated, and strung up on a bridge spanning the Euphrates River by a crowd of Iraqi insurgents and civilians. This incident sparked Operation Vigilant Resolve, during which US Marines laid siege to Fallujah in an attempt to capture the individuals suspected of killing the four contractors as well as other suspected insurgents in the city. The second engagement occurred on September 16, 2007, when a Blackwater/Xe personal security detail, which was escorting a convoy of US State Department vehicles, opened fire on perceived threats in Baghdad’s Nisour Square, and killed 17 Iraqi civilians. These actions sparked an international diplomatic incident, motivated the Iraqi government to bar Blackwater/Xe from operating in Iraq, and convinced the US Congress to pass legislation that, for the first time since the conflict began, made all PSCs working in Iraq and other conflict zones subject to the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act and, therefore, prosecutable in US courts.

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4 On February 13, 2009, Blackwater announced that it would begin operating under the name Xe Worldwide.
Despite the prevalence of PSCs in Iraq and the significance of their actions in this conflict, few published studies have examined how the American news media have covered these actors since the war began. Among these is a PEW Research study, released in June 2007, which examined how frequently PSCs were mentioned in a range of news sources, but failed to provide a detailed discussion of the tone of media coverage of these actors.9 Similarly, James Jay Carafano’s *Private Sector, Public Wars* offered a brief overview of media coverage of PSCs, and concluded that, “few major press outlets have given sustained coverage,” to these actors and their activities in Iraq.10

In an effort to help redress this gap in the literature on media and armed conflict, this study engages two questions: first, how frequently have private security contractors received front-page coverage in prominent American newspapers during the Iraq War? Second, what has been the tone of front-page coverage in prominent American newspapers of private security contractors during the Iraq War? Given that mercenaries have, throughout history, been largely despised and afforded distinctly secondary importance in historical accounts of conflicts that saw extensive use of these actors, such as the American Revolutionary War, this study hypothesizes that PSCs should have received little front-page newspaper coverage during the Iraq War, and also that the tone of front-page newspaper coverage of PSCs should be largely negative. Moreover, taking into account Steven Livingston’s assertion that national news media tend to focus almost exclusively on the actions of their own country’s armed forces in foreign conflicts, this

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This study hypothesizes that, to the extent that any prominent newspaper coverage is devoted to private security contractors, this coverage should focus largely on American firms.\textsuperscript{11}

This study is intended to be exploratory; its focus is on front-page news articles that ran in \textit{The New York Times} and \textit{The Washington Post} from the first day of the Iraq War, on March 19, 2003, to December 31, 2009. These newspapers were selected as the data sources for this study because they are widely considered to be the most influential daily newspapers in the United States, and may, therefore, be viewed as providing the dominant print media narrative on PSCs.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, there is considerable agreement that studies of the frequency and tone of media coverage should concentrate on front-page articles because articles appearing on the front-page of newspapers are the ones that news producers believe readers will pay the most attention to and are, therefore, intended

\textsuperscript{11} Steven Livingston, “Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention (Research Paper R-18),” (Cambridge, MA: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, June 1997), 14.

\textsuperscript{12} Bernard C. Cohen, \textit{The Press and Foreign Policy} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 136; Robert M. Entman, "Framing US Coverage of International News: Contrasts in Narratives of the KAL and Iran Air Incident," \textit{Journal of Communication} 41, no. 4 (December 1991): 9; Robert M. Entman, \textit{Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10-11; Seth Mnookin, \textit{Hard News} (New York, NY: Random House, 2004), xiii; Piers Robinson, \textit{The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention} (London, UK: Routledge, 2002), 140; Piers Robinson, "Operation Restore Hope and the Illusion of a News Media Driven Intervention," \textit{Political Studies} 49, no. 5 (December 2001): 955. This population of articles was collected using a Factiva keyword search, employing Factiva’s “Page-One Story” filter, which confined the searches to articles contained on the front-page of the newspapers. For the March 19, 2003 to December 31, 2009 period, the searches utilized the terms “Iraq,” “Blackwater,” “Mercenary,” “Mercenaries,” “Security Contractor,” “Xe,” “Security Contractors,” “Security Company,” “Security Companies,” “Security Firm,” “Security Firms,” “Military Firm,” “Military Firms,” “Military Company,” and “Military Companies.” The article population was then edited to remove any articles that did not pertain to the security situation in Iraq and those that contained fewer than 100 words on the activities of private security contractors because these did not contain sufficient content to allow for in-depth analysis. Moreover, because this study focuses on reportage, columns, editorials, and letters to the editor were also removed from the article population. To determine the tone of the reportage, the articles in the population were read line-by-line, noting word choices, quotes, interview sources, prominence of critics, and theme.
to reflect the issues and stories that news producers consider to be particularly important.\textsuperscript{13}

**Frequency of Front-Page Reportage on Private Security Contractors during the Iraq War: March 19, 2003 to December 31, 2009**

Examining front-page coverage from the day the Iraq War began, March 19, 2003, to the end of 2009, revealed that PSCs received very little prominent reportage in either *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. Indeed, *The New York Times* only ran 45 front-page articles that made more than a passing reference to PSCs during this period. This represents an average of 0.018 front-page articles per day on these actors. *The Washington Post*, similarly, ran only 43 front-page articles focusing on these actors, which represents an average of only 0.017 front-page articles per day. Taking this into account, it is clear that, despite constituting the second largest foreign military force in Iraq, PSCs have been rendered largely invisible in two of America’s leading news outlets.

The data yielded several other interesting findings. First, prominent coverage of PSCs has varied considerably over the course of the war. For example, *The New York Times* ran only one front-page article on PSCs during 2003. This increased to eight front-page articles in 2004, virtually all of which focused on the March 31 Fallujah incident. 2005 saw only two front-page articles on these actors. Coverage dropped even further, to just one front-page article, in 2006. This trend of decreasing coverage sharply rebounded

in 2007, which saw the largest total number of front-page articles on PSCs, at 24, most of which focused on the September 16 Nisour Square incident. Prominent coverage of PSCs dropped sharply in 2008, with only five front-page articles making more than a passing reference to these actors. Finally, coverage dropped still further to just four articles in 2009. Prominent coverage of PSCs in *The Washington Post* followed a broadly similar pattern, with one article in 2003, eight in 2004, four in 2005, two in 2006, 25 in 2007, two in 2008, and one in 2009. Moreover, as in *The New York Times*’ coverage, the increases in 2004 and 2007 focused almost exclusively on the Fallujah or Nisour Square incidents.

In addition, prominent coverage of PSCs in the Iraq War has been quite narrowly focused. For example, eighty-six percent of the total front-page articles in *The New York Times* (39) and seventy-nine percent of the total front-page articles in *The Washington Post* (34) focused in whole or in part on a single American firm, Blackwater/Xe. In contrast, only 19 front-page *New York Times* articles, representing just over forty percent of the total coverage, and 23 front-page *Washington Post* articles, representing just over fifty percent of the total coverage, made *any* reference to other major PSCs, like DynCorp, Triple Canopy, Hart, Custer Battles, Crescent, Aegis, ArmorGroup, Globe Risk, or Erinys. Moreover, most of these articles devoted far less text to others firms than they did to Blackwater/Xe.

Beyond this, as mentioned above, front-page coverage of these actors has overwhelmingly focused on just two events, both of which involved the American firm, Blackwater/Xe: the 2004 Fallujah incident and the 2007 Nisour Square incident. Indeed, out of the 45 front-page *New York Times* articles focusing on PSCs during the Iraq War,
40 articles, or almost ninety percent of the total front-page coverage, focused in whole or in part on these two incidents. Similarly, out of the 43 front-page articles in The Washington Post on PSCs in the Iraq War, 33 articles, or approximately seventy-five percent of the total front-page coverage, focused in whole or in part on these two incidents. This finding corroborates a June 2007 Pew Research study, which also noted a spike in coverage in several newspapers and television newscasts following the Fallujah incident.14

Taking these findings into account, readers of this coverage are being directed toward a fairly narrow range of plausible conclusions about PSCs in Iraq, including that the US-based Blackwater/Xe is by far the most active and important PSC operating in Iraq, and that PSCs are inherently tied to tragedy, death, and destruction.

**Tone of Front-Page Reportage on Private Security Contractors during the Iraq War**

To properly discern the tone of front-page coverage of PSCs in the Iraq War, this section first outlines what is implied by positive, neutral, and negative coverage before moving on to a discussion of the tone of The New York Times’ and The Washington Post’s front-page coverage of these actors. Briefly, reportage that largely focused on the mistakes or failures of PSCs, or discussed their actions using critical language, was considered negative coverage.15 Conversely, reportage that largely focused on the positive aspects of their work, such as military or political successes, or discussed their

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actions using favourable language, was considered positive coverage. Finally, reportage that provided a balance of negative and positive stories about the activities of PSCs, and devoted an approximately equal amount of text to supporters and critics of these actors, was considered neutral coverage.

Employing these criteria, it is clear that prominent newspaper coverage of PSCs during the Iraq War has been largely negative. For example, within The New York Times’ front-page coverage of PSCs, 40 articles, representing almost 90 percent of all prominent coverage, were negative in tone. Likewise, within The Washington Post’s front-page coverage of these actors, 35 articles, representing over 80 percent of the total prominent coverage, were negative in tone. As discussed further below, these articles frequently focused on topics such as the grizzly deaths of four Blackwater/Xe employees in Fallujah in March 2004, which energized anti-US insurgents; the alleged lack of accountability among PSCs for their actions in Iraq; and corrupt or criminal acts allegedly perpetrated by PSCs, such as shooting Iraqi civilians and overcharging for their work. The remaining five articles in The New York Times were determined to be neutral in tone, and seven of the remaining eight Washington Post articles were determined to be neutral in tone.

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16 Aday, Livingston, and Herbert, "Embedding the Truth," 10; Fitzsimmons, "Media Power and American Military Strategy," 58.
17 Aday, Livingston, and Herbert, "Embedding the Truth," 10; Fitzsimmons, "Media Power and American Military Strategy," 58.
No articles in The New York Times were determined to have a positive overall tone. However, one article that was classified as neutral contained a positive story on PSCs, which recounted the actions of eight Blackwater/Xe employees who fought alongside US marines and Salvadorian soldiers to protect a Coalition Provisional Authority building in Najaf from being overrun by hundreds of Iraqi militia members.\(^{19}\) The article also included a heroic account of three Blackwater/Xe helicopter crews who braved enemy fire to transport vital ammunition to the beleaguered combatants and rescue a wounded marine. Nevertheless, this one positive story was included along with several negative stories about the violence sparked by the Fallujah incident.\(^{20}\) A neutral article in The Washington Post also contained an account of Blackwater/Xe’s actions in Najaf, and another neutral article contained heroic accounts of PSCs holding off scores of insurgents in other siege-like engagements.\(^{21}\) However, as in The New York Times’ article, these articles also contained several critical accounts of the purported negative behaviour of PSCs. Finally, one front-page article in The Washington Post was determined to have a positive overall tone. It suggested that PSCs play vital roles in Iraq, such as protecting most convoys transporting reconstruction materiel, which frees up American soldiers to perform other essential tasks, and called for greater public recognition of the casualties suffered by PSCs in support of American policy objectives in Iraq.\(^{22}\)


\(^{20}\) Ibid.


Private Security Contractors Cause Significant Problems for the US Government and Military, the Iraqi Government, and the Iraqi People

Several trends are apparent in the negative coverage of PSCs. Most prominent among these is the notion that PSCs cause a great deal of problems in Iraq. For example, several negative articles suggested that the deaths of the four Blackwater/Xe employees in Fallujah in March 2004, a city that Blackwater/Xe was not authorized to enter at the time, forced the US marines to launch a major offensive in that city that they otherwise would not have launched.23 One negative article contained a quote from Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, a spokesperson for American military forces in Iraq, stating that, “the reason we went into Falluja included the killing of the four contractors.”24 Another article was entirely devoted to criticizing Blackwater/Xe’s use of tear gas at a crowded US military traffic checkpoint in May 2005. It included a quote from US military personnel describing Blackwater/Xe’s actions as, “very, very dangerous,” to the safety and security of the US soldiers that were exposed to the gas, and also contained a paraphrased statement from an American soldier, who argued that the PSC’s use of gas, “could be used for propaganda purposes to convince Iraqis that the United States was using chemical weapons,” in a densely populated civilian centre.25

In addition, several negative articles suggested that the use of PSCs was creating administrative and political problems for the Bush administration, such as widespread cost overruns, due to, in the words of one article, what PSCs, “unblushingly charge,” for their services. Moreover, multiple negative articles suggested that the behaviour of PSCs in Iraq, particularly attacks on civilians and Iraqi security personnel, have severely strained diplomatic relations between the US and Iraqi governments. For example, one article contained a quote from a Western official in Iraq who noted that, “I would say that Iraqi officials are no different than other Iraqi citizens: They can’t stand the Western security companies.... Blackwater is particularly egregious, but I guess they’ve been told to use those procedures by the U.S. Embassy.” Another contained a quote from Mathew Degrn, a one-time senior American advisor to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, who recalled that, “The Iraqis despised them (PSCs), because they were untouchable.” Among the most heated diplomatic incidents discussed in the coverage described, “a furious phone call,” from Iraqi Vice President Abdel Abdul Mahdi to US Ambassador Zalmay

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Khalilzad on Christmas Day, 2006, demanding an immediate meeting and the arrest of an American employee of Blackwater/Xe who shot one of the Vice President’s bodyguards on the previous evening. Khalilzad refused the Vice President’s demand, a decision that reportedly had, “serious implications,” for US-Iraqi relations.

Beyond this, several negative articles suggested that PSCs’ violent behaviour, which includes numerous shooting incidents, has resulted in direct harm to Iraqi civilians. For example, one Washington Post article included quotes from General Karl R. Horst, deputy commander of the US Army’s 3rd Infantry Division, who argued that,

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31 Ibid.
“These guys run loose in this country and do stupid stuff.... They shoot people, and someone else has to deal with the aftermath. It happens all over the place.” In addition, a New York Times article printed statements from an Iraqi policeman who argued that PSCs were “butchering” ordinary Iraqi citizens without cause.

The negative coverage also suggested that PSCs are undermining US efforts to win over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi populace. For example, one article in The New York Times suggested that the actions of PSCs have, “stoked outrage among Iraqis;” another stated that, “Blackwater’s behavior is... proving counterproductive to American efforts to gain support for its military efforts in Iraq;” and still others contained references to cheering crowds of Iraqi civilians following the deaths of PSC employees. Another article in this paper contained a quote from Jan Schakowsky, a Democratic Member of Congress, who argued, similarly, that, “It’s really affecting attitudes toward the United States when you have these cowboy guys out there. These guys represent the US to them and there are no rules of the game for them.” Likewise, a highly critical article in The Washington Post contained a statement from an official in the Iraqi Interior Ministry, who argued that PSCs, “are part of the reason for all the hatred that is directed at Americans, because people don’t know them as Blackwater, they know them only as Americans. They are planting hatred because of these irresponsible acts.” Another article in this paper printed a statement from a senior official in the US Department of Defence, who argued that, “the overall philosophy and tactics of Blackwater were not in

37 Broder and Risen, "Blackwater Tops All Firms in Iraq in Shooting Rate," A1.
38 Fainaru, "Where Military Rules Don't Apply," A01.
keeping with winning hearts and minds.” Finally, yet another negative article in *The Washington Post* contained a statement from US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, who argued that the behaviour of PSCs in Iraq is at “cross purposes” with the US military’s goal of winning the support of the Iraqi people.

**Private Security Contractors are Reckless and Undisciplined**

Another recurring theme in the negative coverage of PSCs is the notion that they are both reckless and undisciplined. For example, one article noted that, “critics say the rapid growth of the industry is raising troubling concerns. There is little regulation of the quality of training or recruitment by private companies... The result may be inexperienced, poorly prepared and weakly lead units playing vital roles in combat situations.” Several negative articles also stated that that PSCs are, “reckless gunslingers charging around Iraq with impunity,” and often, “quick to shoot,” and, “quick on the trigger,” when they encounter a threatening situation. One article, for example, accused Blackwater/Xe of flaunting, “an aggressive, quick-draw image that leads its security personnel to take excessively violent actions to protect the people they are paid to guard.” Another stated that Blackwater/Xe’s personnel generally do not stop to,

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39 Fainaru, "Warnings Unheeded On Guards In Iraq," A01.
40 DeYoung, "State Department Struggles to Oversee Private Army," A01.
41 DeYoung, "Other Killings Blackwater Staff Detailed," A01; DeYoung, "Security Firms in Iraq Face New Rules," A01; Fainaru, "Guards in Iraq Cite Frequent Shootings," A01; Fainaru, "Where Military Rules Don't Apply," A01; Partlow and Raghavan, "Guards Kill Two Women in Iraq," A01; Raghavan, Partlow, and DeYoung, "Blackwater Faulted in Military Reports from Shooting Scene," A01.
44 Broder and Risen, "Blackwater Tops All Firms in Iraq in Shooting Rate," A1.
“count the dead or assist the wounded,” after discharging their weapons. Still another article, written in the wake of the Nisour Square incident, included quotes describing Blackwater/Xe’s personnel as “criminals.” Moreover, several articles highlighted incidents where PSCs, particularly Blackwater/Xe, were accused of encountering and immediately firing at Iraqi civilians and security personnel without provocation.

_Private Security Contractors are Unaccountable, Uncontrollable, and Corrupt_

Yet another recurring theme in the negative coverage of PSCs is the notion that these actors are uncontrollable and unaccountable, even to the US and Iraqi governments, and also corrupt. For example, several articles suggested that PSCs are not closely monitored by the US or Iraqi governments and adhere to few, if any, government-
imposed rules. Another described the regulation of PSCs in Iraq as, “uneven and largely dysfunctional.” Still another article raised concerns regarding whether, “the line between the military and its contractors has become too blurry and whether the military (has) become too dependent on contractors it can’t properly control,” or even monitor.

Moreover, numerous articles suggested that, even in cases where PSCs may have violated rules or laws, they tend to, at worst, leave Iraq, rather than face judicial punishment. One article stated, for example, that, “the laws governing contractors on the battlefield are vague and rarely enforced.” Another suggested that, “it is exceedingly unlikely that… (PSCs) will be called to account,” for their actions in Iraq. Yet another included quotes stating that the employees of Blackwater/Xe are, “repeat offenders, and yet they continue to prosper in Iraq.” Still other articles suggested that PSCs frequently violate the rules of engagement contained in their contracts with organizations, like the US State Department, which officially limits the use of force by PSCs to purely defensive purposes and prohibits preemptive or offensive actions.

Finally, several negative articles touched on the notion that some PSCs may be corrupt

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50 Fainaru, "Where Military Rules Don't Apply," A01.

51 Cha and Merle, "Line Increasingly Burred Between Soldiers and Civilian Contractors," A01.


because they allegedly smuggle illegal weapons into Iraq, fraudulently overcharge for their services, commit tax fraud, and/or maintain close personal or political ties to members of the George W. Bush administration and Congress.\textsuperscript{57}

Conclusion

This exploratory study, which focused exclusively on front-page coverage within *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, was intended to provide an overview of prominent coverage of private security contractors in two of the United States’ most influential newspapers. It revealed several notable findings that offer support to the hypotheses driving this inquiry. Indeed, front-page media coverage of PSCs was found to have been generally low throughout the Iraq War. Moreover, front-page coverage focused largely on the activities of a single American PSC, Blackwater/Xe. Finally, the tone of front-page coverage of PSCs was found to have been largely negative, focusing largely on alleged problems caused by these actors, their alleged reckless and undisciplined nature, alleged difficulties in controlling their activities and holding them to account for their behaviour in Iraq, and alleged corrupt actions and relationships involving these actors. The anticipated next step for this research initiative will be to test these hypotheses against an expanded range of news sources, including prominent coverage in other influential newspapers, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, and also network and cable newscasts.

Bibliography


Private military and security companies (PMSC) are the modern reincarnation of a long lineage of private providers of physical force: corsairs, privateers and mercenaries. Mercenaries, which had practically disappeared during the XIXth and XXth centuries, reappeared in the 1960â€™s during the decolonization period operating mainly in Africa and Asia.