

# America's 'invisible army' in Iraq

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When the mother of a Blackwater USA employee saw images on TV of four dead and burned "civilian contractors" in Fallujah, Iraq, she continued flipping through the channels, not realizing one of them was her son, author Jeremy Scahill told a Chico audience of nearly 100 people at the Arc Pavilion Sunday night (May 6).

As far as she knew, her son, Scott Helvenston, an ex-Navy SEAL, had gone to Iraq to guard Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, and wasn't a civilian contractor in the dangerous city of Fallujah, said Scahill, author of *Blackwater: Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. Scahill is a correspondent for the radio and television news show *Democracy Now* and a frequent contributor to *The Nation* magazine.

The woman's son is just one of the 770 American contractors who have died in Iraq, which brings the total American death count above 4,000, Scahill said.

On the last stop of the California leg of a nationwide book tour, Scahill spoke with a sense of urgency, rarely looking down at his notes as he outlined the implications of the growing private military market.

One implication, mentioned above, is the fact that the deaths of these mercenaries, who make up about 48,000 of the 126,000 private contractors in Iraq, are not included in the official tally, he said. Couple the 770 deaths with the 7,761 injuries reported, and one can see how "President Bush's invisible army" helps keep casualty numbers lower.

The nearly one-to-one ratio between contractors and the 145,000 soldiers in Iraq has allowed Bush nearly to double the size of the occupation in Iraq without stretching the military even thinner than it is, Scahill said. Many of the contractors do jobs that were traditionally done by the military, such as laundry, food service and truck driving, but Blackwater is a company of highly trained soldiers--well-paid mercenaries.

Headquartered in North Carolina, the 10-year-old company has benefited from close ties to the Republican Party and a series of tragedies, from Columbine to Katrina, he said. Its founder is



## UNACCOUNTABLE WAR

Jeremy Scahill, left, signs copies of his book about private American soldiers, *Blackwater: Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*. Some 770 of them have died in Iraq, but they aren't part of the official tally of American war dead.

PHOTO BY BRYCE BENSON

Erik Prince, an ex-Navy SEAL and Christian conservative, whose wealthy father has been influential in funding conservative causes.

After the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, Blackwater created "Are You Ready High" to train its troops to "face down the violent youth of America," Scahill said. Following the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, the company received \$45 million from the government to train its mercenaries--and then hit the jackpot after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Initially working in Afghanistan, Blackwater later made its name by guarding high-profile individuals like Bremer, so hated by the Iraqi people he earned the nickname "Little Saddam," Scahill said. Since guarding Bremer for a year--at a cost of \$21 million--Blackwater has secured \$750 million worth of contracts from the U.S. State Department alone since 2004.

Since these mercenaries are privately contracted, there is virtually zero accountability for their actions, Scahill said. Bremer granted all private contractors immunity from Iraqi courts, and they are not officially U.S. military, so they cannot be prosecuted under the military commission code.

Many mercenaries were implicated in the Abu Ghraib scandal and the murders of several Iraqi civilians, yet their taxpayer-funded actions have gone undisciplined, he said. In fact, he added, the mercenary's motto is, "What happens here today, stays here today."

Worsening the situation is the pay disparity between the mercenaries and their military counterparts. The average salary of a soldier is around \$30,000 a year, while mercenaries can make that much in a month. That's bad for military morale, Scahill said.

Some soldiers, on the other hand, "go Blackwater," slang for joining the private military sector instead of re-upping in the military.

Those who go Blackwater don't necessarily have to stay in Iraq to find work, he said. FEMA hired Blackwater--at \$243,000 per day--to secure New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. This entailed having mercenaries roam Bourbon Street with M-4 assault rifles and body armor.

The idea of a private military has a long history, Scahill said, but in the United States it's a new phenomenon associated with a familiar name--Cheney. After three years of military budget cuts during the first Bush administration, Cheney, who was secretary of defense, awarded his future employer, Halliburton, a \$5 million contract to study and research what could be privatized in the military.

In this unaccountable war, it's no surprise that some people ask for answers, and the families of those "civilian contractors" hanged from the bridge in Fallujah are doing just that, Scahill said. Their lawsuit against Blackwater USA is scheduled to go to court Monday (May 15) in North Carolina.

As a nation we need to go further than asking for accountability, Scahill said. "We don't need to bring accountability to an unaccountable war," he said. "We need to bring an end to an unaccountable war."