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**Why demonize Iraq war contractors?**  
By Lawrence J. Haas

War opponents have learned a thing or two over the years. Rather than take the political risk of demonizing U.S. troops, as they did during Vietnam, they now say they “support the troops” even though they oppose whatever military exercise those troops happen to be engaging in.

The war in Iraq has offered a new human target for war opponents' distaste for military matters – the 100,000 or so private contractors who are providing essential services for the troops and others. Contractors are the proxy for anti-military sentiments on the political left.

Not surprisingly, some of the war's biggest critics in the media and elsewhere are some of the loudest critics of contractors, complaining about everything from how much money the contractors supposedly earn to what they actually do on the job.

Before we demonize contractors as we once did our troops, however, we should cut through the angry rhetoric and look at the facts – who the contractors are, the variety of services they provide and the terms under which they operate. Whether we understand these issues has huge implications for whether we move forward effectively in the war on terror.

Critics deride contractors as a “private army” of “mercenaries,” evoking images of an out-of-control force that seeks enemies to kill for the highest bidder. They warn of threats of American democracy by drawing analogies to private armies, such as the Praetorian Guard in ancient Rome, that authoritarian governments have used to maintain their power.

The analogy makes little sense.

For one thing, contractors in Iraq come in many varieties and do many things. A large share of them perform the unglamorous tasks that the military once did for itself, such as preparing meals and delivering mail for the troops. Of those doing that kind of work, more than half are Iraqi nationals.

For another thing, even firms that perform more dangerous task, such as Blackwater USA (which is seeking to open a training facility in eastern San Diego County), operate under restrictive rules of engagement that hardly make them a “private army.” They are hired mostly to protect high-ranking officials and train troops for specific tasks, such as securing their bases of operations, and they use force only in response to confrontation.

It was the killing of four Blackwater employees and the public desecration of their bodies in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004 that highlighted the issue of contractors. As a result, it is Blackwater around which most controversy evolves. A closer look at its terms of engagement should clarify things.

Critics charge that the Bush administration, seeking more troops in Iraq but constrained by Congress, is filling the gap with what they call Blackwater's "paramilitary force." In fact, while Blackwater operates in nine countries around the world, the company says it rarely has more than 1,000 of its people in Iraq at any one time (compared with the 155,000 U.S. soldiers now there).

Moreover, at the moment Blackwater has no contracts with the agency that actually makes war – the Pentagon. Instead, it contracts only with the State Department to protect officials and members of Congress when they visit Iraq and to perform other tasks.

Nor does Blackwater operate "outside the law," as critics argue. It wins 90 percent of its contracts through competitive bids, and it is subject to various U.S. laws and regulations and international treaties.

While Paul Bremer, the president's envoy to Iraq, issued an edit in 2004 to immunize contractors from prosecution in Iraqi courts, he did so as a presidential appointee. Critics may not like the policy, but that doesn't make it illegal, nor does it make Blackwater unaccountable. Besides, since early this year, security contractors have been covered by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, making them subject to trial in military courts for violating the code.

To be sure, Blackwater is a money-making enterprise. Companies are like that. But it hardly has the power through its political ties to keep the war in Iraq going so it can keep making money, as critics charge. Politicians, and the public at large, will decide whether we stay in Iraq, not a supposedly sinister company.

The role of contractors is a legitimate issue for debate. But we should not contaminate that debate with preconceived notions about war itself that demonize everything and everyone attached to the enterprise.

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