

Representative Jan Schakowsky
Statement made on the House Floor
November 30, 2011

While many hours have been spent by this body debating the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, far too little has been devoted to the United States' growing dependence on private military contractors -- the weapon-carrying, for-profit security companies -- mercenaries -- who have become integral, and counterproductive, actors in our war efforts.

I believe that increased reliance on hired guns to provide security in war zones undermines our policy objectives, and I am not alone. In 2007, then Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated that the mission of many security contractors was "at cross purposes to our larger mission in Iraq."

We should be concerned. Private contractors don't wear the badge of the United States. They answer to a corporation, not a uniformed commander. Our government doesn't even know how many contract personnel we've hired. Because legal jurisdiction remains murky, we may lack the ability to prosecute contractors for alleged violations committed overseas.

We need to end our reliance on security contractors in war zones. Since 2007, I've introduced the Stop Outsourcing Security Act to phase out the use of for-profit contractors for "mission critical" tasks -- including security, intelligence, and interrogation -- in conflict areas. The SOS Act builds on bills I've introduced since 2001, including the Andean Region Contractor Accountability Act to prohibit military contracting in Colombia and neighboring nations.

While the problem applies to other private contractors, there is one company that has become synonymous with misconduct: Blackwater.

Operating under a culture of recklessness created by its founder -- Erik Prince -- Blackwater employees have been implicated in a wide range of alleged misconduct since 2004, from shooting and killing civilians to gun-running.

Five former Blackwater executives, including its former president Gary Jackson, were indicted in 2010 for weapons charges. The company agreed to a \$42 million administrative settlement with the State Department for 288 alleged violations of the Arms Export Control Act and International Traffic in Arms Regulations. At least seven civil suits, for alleged abuses by Blackwater personnel in Iraq, have been settled. And legal action is still pending against four Blackwater guards accused of massacring 17 civilians in Baghdad's Nisour Square in 2007. Further, the Iraqi government – our ally – has repeatedly asked that Blackwater be ousted, leading the U.S. State Department to refuse to renew the company's contract in 2009.

In short, Blackwater, now renamed Xe, has been a center of controversy for years – in Congressional committees, the press, and among members of the military. Yet the company has received over \$1.25 billion in taxpayer dollars. Recently, Mr. Prince has launched a video game, called Blackwater, glorifying the discredited company he started.

And now, Mr. Prince has adopted a new, heavy-handed tactic – trying to intimidate a Member of Congress. Last month, a letter from his attorney was hand-delivered to my congressional office. I am entering that letter in the Congressional Record. It accuses me of defamatory statements, characterizes my efforts to urge investigations into Mr. Prince as a violation of Congressional power, and describes possible legal action if I persist.

I come to the floor today because I believe it is my responsibility, as a member of Congress, to speak out against policies and entities that I believe are damaging to our nation.

I want to make it clear to Mr. Prince that I will not stop working to end our reliance on private security contractors and to investigate any and all allegations of misconduct.

I want to make it clear to the military men and women who have shared their concerns that they are endangered by the behavior of hired guns employed by Blackwater-like companies that I will keep speaking out to protect our mission and our brave troops from risk.

And I want to tell the families of the men and women who have been killed in incidents involving Blackwater and other such companies that I will continue to push for full investigations and,

whenever appropriate, criminal charges.