

Outsourcing the war

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

The Bush administration seems to be of two minds on Iraq. It's sovereign. It's not.

When the Iraqi government initially banned Blackwater USA because of the private security firm's role in the deaths of Iraqi civilians, the State Department prevented it.

When Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki vowed to bring Blackwater to justice and when Iraqis launched their own investigation, they were persuaded to, instead, participate in a joint U.S.-Iraqi investigation.

Iraq's Interior Ministry has put the finishing touches on draft legislation that would end the legal immunity Blackwater now enjoys. But Congress is considering legislation by Rep. David Price, D-N.C., that would subject such private contractors to prosecution in U.S. courts.

So is Iraq sovereign or not? This, of course, depends on who's answering and what advantage the answer offers at that moment. Blackwater is deemed necessary to protect U.S. diplomats because President Bush launched a war without enough troops to stabilize Iraq in the first place. Now he finds the United States without enough troops to do what Blackwater does, sustain Iraqi operations, operate in Afghanistan and contend with other possible global events.

Blackwater is accused of killing at least eight Iraqis while escorting a U.S. embassy convoy in Baghdad on Sept. 16. It says its employees came under fire. Witnesses disagree, and, on Monday, a scathing congressional report accused it of essentially being out of control. Other deaths and cover-ups are alleged. If Blackwater is going to perform military functions in Iraq under the umbrella of U.S. operations, it must come under U.S. military oversight and, when appropriate, investigation and prosecution.

Unwilling or unable to reach key benchmarks that enable true sovereignty, an Iraqi government that can't be trusted to protect its own people can't be trusted to mete out justice to U.S. forces, even outsourced ones.

This failure is yet another reminder that Congress must find the exit that inflicts the least amount of damage to Iraq, the U.S. and the Middle East.

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