

Looking out for America in Iraq

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

In mid-September, the hired guards for American diplomatic personnel in Baghdad - Blackwater USA, the guards call themselves - engaged "suspected troublemakers" in a firefight that cost the lives of 11 to 17 Iraqi civilians. (The exact number depends on the varying reliability of eyewitnesses.)

Descriptions of what happened that day (Sept. 16) vary only slightly. The driver of one of four Blackwater Suburbans mistook an oncoming civilian vehicle as a possible attacker. Machine-gun fire ensued from the entire Blackwater convoy, which then hightailed back to "Green Zone" safety. There is no evidence its assault had prompted return fire from Iraqi civilians, although - in addition to the dead - 27 people were injured by gunfire or the ensuing collisions in a heavily trafficked intersection.

Contributing to a sense of panic were two Blackwater helicopters.

Almost immediately, there emerged a "joint U.S.-Iraqi government announcement," released by a spokeswoman in the American Embassy. Pending an investigation of the unfortunate shootout, it said U.S. and Iraqi officials agreed it was OK for Blackwater to resume riding shotgun for American VIPs venturing beyond their heavily walled embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone.

Experience tells me to regard such public utterances as this with the same level of belief you'd give suspected cocaine pushers, maybe, or professional wrestling promoters. In its offhand clearance of Blackwater, we see, that announcement conveyed the inherently bogus suggestion that governments of the United States and the Republic of Iraq are essentially equal international entities bent on resolving an unfortunate incident.

But our country and Iraq are in no way equal - certainly not in a physical nor even in a legal or diplomatic sense. We are an occupying power, imposing our will with the presence of 150,000 military and heaven knows how many hirelings such as Blackwater's on the ground there. America's stance is far closer to that of the storied legions of ancient Rome, who ruled all of their era's known world.

Indeed, a few more Blackwater-style incidents, and Americans overseas will be every bit as unpopular as those far-flung procurators of old. (The name of Judea's Pontius Pilate comes to mind.)

But back to things as they are today. It should not escape notice that Iraq's elected leaders - feeble and U.S.-dominated as we had assumed them to be - finally have shown some guts. Exactly 26 days after the Sept. 16 fatalities - an interval marked mainly by Blackwater's bluster and an embarrassing silence of American officials on the scene - Iraq formally voiced its own assessment of what happened.

Absent the dulcet tones of that U.S. Embassy spokeswoman pretending to speak for them, Iraqi leaders offered seemingly irrefutable proof that Blackwater's machine-gun fire was unprovoked, and that those Blackwater helicopters had added to the confusion. The statement urged that our embassy find more responsible ways of protecting any personnel who feel they must venture beyond their walled haven.

And get this - Iraq wants the families of Blackwater's shooting victims compensated with not less than \$8 million each.

So the bloom is off the rose. This government in Iraq may not be all that Washington had hoped - but it's tired of playing patsy, too. Like legislators elsewhere, they've doubtless been hearing voter complaints. Across a nation where no recent reconstruction seems to get done on time, and folks must make do with a few hours of electric power each day, they've watched this biggest of all embassies nearly completed in a year's time - and flood-lit with power provided around the clock.

I'd suppose some Americans might be wondering about the purpose of this grand enclave nearly a dozen time zones distant? Equal in size to the Vatican, our mammoth new headquarters in Baghdad was scheduled to open in September, but the opening has been delayed by a host of problems. Its full 104 acres include six square blocks of residential apartments, plus a sports center, beauty salon and Baghdad's largest swimming pool. It might be newsworthy if someone in authority - Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, say, or even the man in the Oval Office - were to tell us why all this must be maintained in so parlous a location anytime in the future.

I'm looking to a happy day when the "surges" will be done, Gen. Petraeus is at work on his memoirs and our troops are brought home. Meanwhile, if the nearly 1,000 American diplomatic personnel already stationed there cannot venture beyond their heavily fortified enclave without Blackwater's guns to bolster their courage - well, can these neo-Roman counterparts be expected ever to establish a haven of serenity in that part of the world?

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