

# Blackwater abandons plans for California training camp

Kevin Martinez  
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On March 7, private contractor Blackwater Worldwide announced it was abandoning plans to construct a military and police training facility in Potrero, California, a small town in southeast San Diego County. The decision came after a storm of public protest that culminated in a special recall election that replaced county officials who supported Blackwater's bid.

The Blackwater mercenary outfit, headquartered in Moyock, North Carolina, is best known for an incident last September 16 in Iraq, when a convoy of its heavily armed security contractors opened fire without provocation at a Baghdad intersection, killing 17 unarmed civilians and wounding 27 others. The incident focused public attention on the operations of Blackwater and other security contractors, who operate with impunity in Iraq at the behest of the Bush administration and the US military, and who have been responsible for numerous instances of violence against Iraqi civilians.

The move to Potrero, California, would have been the second expansion of Blackwater in the US. In May 2007, Blackwater opened up "Blackwater North," a training center in Rockford, Illinois. Due to widespread popular opposition to plans for the installation in Potrero, the mercenary company was not able to implement its California project. Town residents moved to recall every official who voted to allow the company into their backyard.

Despite spending more than \$1 million on buying the property and seeking county approval, Blackwater announced on March 7, 2008, that it was withdrawing its application for the project. The company insisted that it had nothing to do with the recall election or the community's strong disapproval, but instead cited its own noise tests. San Diego County noise standards require less than 50 decibels, well below the gunfire noise tests of 80 decibels.

The training camp, which had been dubbed "Blackwater West," would have given the company a strategic West Coast foothold. Blackwater was planning to build an 824-acre military complex on a former chicken and cattle ranch, in rural Potrero, population 850. The area is known for heavy border crossing due to its close proximity to the US-Mexico border, just eight miles away. There are many indications that the private contractor wanted to utilize its paramilitary capabilities to strengthen the US Border Patrol's efforts to further militarize the international border.

At a public hearing with the Potrero planning group on September 13, 2007, Brian Bonfiglio, vice president of Blackwater, was asked whether the facility would be used for the deployment of Border Patrol agents. "Actually, we've offered it

up as a substation to Border Patrol and US Customs right now," Bonfiglio replied. "We'd love to see them there."

In May 2005, the company's then-president Gary Jackson appeared before a US House subcommittee to testify on how Blackwater could help train Border Patrol agents and private security personnel. Discussing hypothetical contracts worth \$80-\$200 million, Jackson reportedly told Congress, "I can put as many men together as you need, trained and on the borders."

One of Blackwater's many friends on Capitol Hill is California Congressman Duncan Hunter, a ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee and, until 2006, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee.

Hunter met with company officials in May 2006 to discuss their border patrol proposal. Hunter recommended that the firm contact Dianne Jacob, the county supervisor of Potrero and one of five county supervisors to vote in favor of Blackwater West. Company officials met with Jacob in May, and in June submitted their proposal to the county. In December of that year, the Potrero planning group voted to support Blackwater's bid for a military training camp.

At a February 7, 2007, meeting of the Planning Commission, Brian Bonfiglio admitted the close connections between Duncan Hunter and Blackwater. As recorded in the meeting's minutes, Bonfiglio stated, "We talk to Duncan about *many* things" (emphasis in original).

The mercenary training facility for 360 staff and "students" would have included 11 firing ranges, a helipad, an armory, a mock combat "village," and a heavy vehicle operator's course that would have covered the length of 10 football fields. The facility also would have encroached upon endangered wildlife in the Cleveland National Forest, such as the California condor and Golden eagle.

The firing range could have also posed a serious safety risk for the residents of Potrero. Many residents of Mount Carroll, Illinois, home to Blackwater's second training facility, have complained about stray bullets falling on their homes and property. The regular detonation of ammunition in such a dry, fire-prone area would have put the residents of San Diego County at serious risk, especially after the deadly Harris Fire of 2007. Indeed, many fires have been ignited by live-fire exercises at military bases in the past. Even a fire started off-site could have become an inferno if the flames reached an armory full of weaponry in the box canyon where Blackwater sought to locate.

During the October wildfires last year, many residents of Potrero were trapped in the canyon, suffering from a lack of water, food and other supplies. Despite a sheriff's blockade on the small town, Blackwater VP Brian Bonfiglio, with the aid of local politicians, was able to enter the area and hand out supplies and Blackwater logo pins to homeless and hungry residents from the back of his white Hummer, while community-based relief efforts were impeded by local police.

According to Adrian Del Rio, one of the many volunteers who tried to get supplies into Potrero, a sheriff who publicly supported Blackwater contemptuously asked him, "Why do you need to go to Potrero? There are not too many people—just a bunch of drug addicts." Tragically, one person from the town died in the fires.

Blackwater also set up a tent city to house 200 people who were displaced by the wildfires. This cynical PR stunt was aimed at influencing votes in the upcoming recall of local officials who voted for Blackwater West. Just weeks before recall ballots were to be sent on November 13, Blackwater was the only "relief" organization allowed to help this hard-hit community.

Carl Meyer, a town resident who successfully ran to replace the Potrero Community Planning Group chairman, told the media, "Locals will hopefully see through this disaster capitalism. When we talk to people door-to-door it does not seem to change their minds about Blackwater—they see right through this."

Meyer, along with many other local activists, began gathering petitions last July for a recall election of the five planning group members who voted for the training camp. On October 9, 2007, more than 200 anti-Blackwater and antiwar protesters marched to the gates of the proposed site, while a few dozen supporters of the mercenary company gathered on the other side of the road.

Despite Blackwater's so-called aid to the community, Potrero residents came out decidedly against Blackwater and on December 11, 2007, voted to recall all five of the Planning Commission officials who voted for the training camp. By March of this year, Blackwater had made its decision not to move to Potrero.

Blackwater Worldwide still maintains a massive operation, training more than 40,000 people a year, from both US and foreign military and police services. According to Jeremy Scahill, author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army*: "About a decade ago Blackwater didn't even exist; today it has become one of the most powerful actors in the so-called 'global war on terror.' The company boasts of a database of 21,000 troops it can deploy on a moment's notice."

Blackwater was founded in 1997 by Erik Prince, a former Navy Seal and son of a wealthy auto-parts industrialist. Prince interned for the first President Bush, but in 1992, he and his father supported the candidacy of arch-conservative Pat Buchanan.

At age 19, Erik Prince made his first contribution of \$15,000 to the Republican Party. By 2006, he was a regular contributor to the Republicans, giving more than \$200,000 in donations to various candidates. The list of those to whom he has contributed reads like a who's who of the Republican right, and includes Senators Tom Coburn (Okla.) and Rick Santorum (Penn.), Rep. Duncan Hunter and indicted former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay.

The Prince family participates in a network of right-wing evangelicals. It has donated generously to a number of Christian

outfits and ultra-conservative causes as well. Prince's father donated money to the evangelical Gary Bauer, founder of the Family Research Council and one of the authors of the neo-conservative document "Project for a New American Century." Erik Prince serves as a board member of Christian Freedom International, a missionary group dedicated to defending "persecuted" Christians around the globe.

Blackwater went from receiving government contracts in the tens of millions between 1995 and 2005 to \$593 million in 2006. Its rise thus directly coincided, together with numerous other arms merchants and private security firms, with the ascension of the second Bush administration

Blackwater was awarded an exclusive \$27 million deal to provide security to L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in the early days of the US occupation of Iraq. For their services in Iraq, Blackwater and other contractors were given immunity, whereby none of their employees could be held accountable and tried by an Iraqi court for crimes committed in the occupied country, the same privilege awarded to US troops.

While private security contractors are not commissioned to take part in offensive operations, according to an October 1, 2007, memo from the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Blackwater guards were the first to fire in over 80 percent of the nearly 200 shooting incidents they were involved in since 2005. In the majority of these instances, they fired from moving vehicles and did not remain on the scene to see if any casualties were inflicted.

In the deadly incident last September involving Blackwater mercenaries, multiple investigations found no evidence that their convoy had been fired upon, despite the contractor's claims to the contrary. After the massacre, Erik Prince was called to testify before Congress, but the House Committee was asked by the State Department not to directly question him about the shooting at the hearing.

In light of the unfavorable publicity surround this and other incidents involving Blackwater, Prince told the *Wall Street Journal* in an article dated October 15, 2007, that he saw the market diminishing for his company's line of dirty work in Iraq and was refocusing more on domestic security. Blackwater thus saw an opportunity in Potrero, California, to expand its operations around several military bases, as well as the US-Mexican border.



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