

Blackwater mercenary convicted of first-degree murder in Iraq massacre

Jacob Crosse
24 December 2018

On December 19, Nick Slatten, former Blackwater mercenary and US Army-trained sniper, was convicted of first-degree murder. It was the second time Slatten had been convicted of murder for his role in the September 2007 massacre in Baghdad's Nisour Square, during the US military occupation, which left 14 Iraqi civilians dead and another 17 injured.

Slatten was convicted by a jury of firing the first two shots that killed 19-year-old Ahmed Haithem Ahmed Al Rubia'y and touched off a shooting spree by US mercenary troops that killed and wounded unarmed innocents, including women and children. While no sentencing date has been set, the murder conviction means Slatten faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison.

Slatten was previously convicted of first-degree murder in 2014, but the conviction was overturned in August of 2017 when a three-judge federal appeals court panel ordered a retrial for Slatten and resentencing for three of his Blackwater colleagues—Dustin Heard, Evan Liberty and Paul Slough.

Slatten's second trial ended in a mistrial last September because a hung jury could not determine if Slatten had fired first or if Paul Slough had shot first in the one-sided slaughter. A new trial began on November 5. After five weeks of testimony, including from 34 eyewitnesses, four of whom were flown in from Iraq, the jury, after five days of deliberation, unanimously decided that Slatten had indeed discharged his automatic rifle first and had not acted in self-defense.

The Blackwater convoy, consisting of 19 heavily armed mercenaries and four vehicles, was tasked with protecting visiting US diplomats in the Iraqi capital. It is estimated that at the height of the US occupation of

Iraq over 100,000 private contractors hired by the US government were operating in the country. On the day of the massacre, an alleged car bomb had detonated a few blocks from the location of US diplomats.

This prompted an order to all US personnel operating in the area, including the contractors, to retreat to the Green Zone, a heavily fortified swath of Baghdad that had been carved out by American forces as a "safe space" for occupying troops, US dignitaries and Washington's puppet government. While the diplomats fell back to the Green Zone, the Blackwater convoy set up a blockade of heavily trafficked Nisour Square, outside of the Green Zone, and prevented vehicles from entering. The initial report dispatched to the mercenaries stated that the vehicle that had exploded earlier had been a white Kia passenger car.

This was the justification cited by Slatten's defense team for the fatal shooting of Ahmed Haithem Ahmed Al Rubia'y, who that day was driving his mother to a doctor's appointment in the family's white Kia. The jury was unconvinced by this argument. As the foreperson told the *Washington Post*, "There had been a lookout for a white Kia, but there's a million Kias in Iraq. You don't just shoot every white Kia."

The foreperson also stated that the jury "didn't believe the white Kia presented or could be perceived as a threat," adding, "And we didn't perceive that the convoy was taking small-arms fire."

Several investigations into the massacre, including by the US government, have concluded that the only weapons that were fired belonged to the Blackwater contractors, and no improvised explosive device was ever recovered. The only explosions that occurred during the massacre were from grenades thrown by Blackwater mercenaries. The only small arms fire came from Blackwater weapons that were fired

indiscriminately into the crowded square, ricocheting off of several vehicles, including a school bus.

The three other mercenaries who were charged in connection with the massacre—Heard, Liberty and Slough—were previously convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Their sentences were vacated after the September mistrial for Slatten, pending the conclusion of his new trial. All four will remain in prison pending their new sentencing hearings.

While it appears that Slatten may have run out of appeals, the architects and profiteers of the Iraq war, such as Blackwater CEO Erik Prince, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, remain free men. Prince continues to reap profits from his mercenary and private intelligence operations.

The billionaire war profiteer, the brother of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, also a billionaire, has since reconstituted Blackwater as Academi. He served as an adviser in Donald Trump's post-election transition team and has advocated the privatization of the war in Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria and cut troop levels in Afghanistan, and the ensuing resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis, the *Military Times* reported that Blackwater USA, which no longer is linked to Prince, and other contractors might be used to fill the void left by the drawdown of conventional forces. It noted that Blackwater USA has taken out a full-page ad in the January/February 2019 issue of *Recoil*, a gun and hunting magazine, featuring the Blackwater logo and a single sentence: "We are coming."



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