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Exclusive: Bannon & Kushner Want to Outsource Afghanistan to Mercenaries

By Mark Perry
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On July 10, the *New York Times* revealed ^[1] that the Trump White House had recruited Erik Prince, the founder of the notorious private security firm Blackwater, and wealthy Trump backer Steve Feinberg, the owner of the high-profile military contractor DynCorp International, to “devise alternatives to the Pentagon’s plan to send thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan.” The story suggested that the president and his top advisers were dissatisfied with the military’s thinking on the conflict, the subject of an intense series of a consultations between senior military officers and Trump’s national security team over the last several months.

While the recruitment of Prince and Feinberg, who are close friends, was intended to provide new options for winning the 16-year war, the administration has been hesitant to describe their role. Both men are controversial for their advocacy of the U.S. government contracting out the Afghan conflict to a private company that would build Afghan state capacity, provide logistical support to the Afghan army, and battle the Taliban. At the very least, the new arrangement would mean a lighter footprint for the U.S. military (or perhaps none at all); at the most it would mean that corporate America, and not the U.S. government, would be responsible for running an overseas war—a kind of “War Inc.”

“Dyncorp has its hands all over Afghanistan anyway, and I mean they’re just everywhere,” a high-level former intelligence officer who is privy to the administration’s thinking told me, “so

[senior White House adviser Steve] Bannon and crew figure, ‘What the hell, let’s just turn the whole country over to them.’”

But the proposal has shocked the handful of senior Pentagon and CIA officials familiar with it, who point out the difficulty the United States has had in controlling private armies—and those who run them. This was particularly true of Blackwater, whose contractors gave the U.S. military fits in Iraq’s Anbar Province in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom, where both national security adviser H.R. McMaster and Defense Secretary James Mattis served in key command positions. Senior military officers blame Blackwater for destabilizing Fallujah in 2004 (forcing Mattis to send his Marines into the city in “Operation Vigilant Resolve”) and for the deaths of 20 Iraqi civilians in Baghdad (the “Nisour Square Massacre”) in 2007.

“That Trump’s people would even think that McMaster or Mattis would listen to Prince shows just how tone-deaf they are,” a senior military officer told me after the *Times* piece was published. “If there’s one name guaranteed to get H.R.’s back up it’s Erik Prince. How you can’t know that is beyond me.” Even so, Bannon and Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner insisted that McMaster read a May 31 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed written by Prince entitled “[The MacArthur Model for Afghanistan](#) ^[21].” The president read the article and liked it, McMaster was told.

In fact, Prince’s op-ed read like a plea for new business for his Hong Kong-based Frontier Services Group (FSG), which would supplant the U.S. military in providing “reliable logistics and aviation support” to Afghan security forces, monitor a new effort to exploit Afghanistan’s vast mineral holdings, be charged with building Afghan state capacity and, not least, oversee an aggressive air campaign targeting the Taliban. Prince suggested that a “viceroy,” a Douglas MacArthur-like figure, be appointed to oversee the effort. In sum, Prince’s plan would turn Afghanistan over to an American version of Britain’s famed East India Company—which, as Prince wrote, “prevailed in the region” for 250 years by relying on private military units. It was a neat package: the Prince model would save the U.S. billions of dollars, help build Afghanistan’s economy, and settle the conflict by forcing the Taliban back to the negotiating table.

McMaster didn’t buy it, as he told Prince when they met at the White House soon after Prince’s *Wall Street Journal* article appeared. According to the McMaster colleague who spoke with *TAC*, “The meeting began well enough,” but soon devolved into a series of increasingly acrimonious exchanges. “It got ugly fast,” *TAC* was told. McMaster, who is notoriously short-fused, told Prince “in no uncertain terms” that the United States wasn’t going to replicate the British colonial empire in South Asia and wasn’t going to serve as an agent for FSG profits. (The details of this meeting remain uncertain, but the White House did not respond to requests for comment on this article.)

But, while the reaction to Prince’s ideas on Afghanistan was immediate and negative, the views of Feinberg proved less controversial, in part because the New York financier went out of his way to solicit outside opinions on the conflict and to sidle up to Washington insiders with strong ties to officials close to both McMaster and Mattis. Feinberg, who is close to Trump and was a major donor to his 2016 campaign, also had an in-depth discussion with the president on his ideas, we were told. “This isn’t Steve’s first time at the dance,” says a fellow business executive

who has known him for years. “He knew that if he showed up at meetings on Afghanistan with dollar signs in his eyes this would be a non-starter.”

Over the last three weeks, Feinberg has quietly held a series of high-level meetings on the conflict, which included a recent dinner at Washington, D.C.’s Trump International Hotel. Included in the confab, TAC was told, was then-Dyncorp CEO Lewis Von Thayer and Ambassador Michael Gfoeller, a now retired 26-year veteran of the U.S. diplomatic service and close associate of retired Gen. David Petraeus. Since that dinner, Von Thayer’s place as a Feinberg sidekick has been filled by George Krivo, brought on to bring added credibility to Feinberg’s Afghanistan initiative. Krivo is a 20-year Army veteran, served in Bosnia and Iraq, and was once a policy adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Additionally, as TAC has been reliably told, Von Thayer (who has moved on to become the head of Battelle, a well-heeled Ohio-based research firm), “was never entirely comfortable with the whole Dyncorp hired gun thing.”

That is certainly not true for career diplomat Gfoeller, a smooth foreign-policy intellectual. Gfoeller was Petraeus’s senior political adviser from 2008 to 2010, before heading off to Exxon Mobil, where he served as the corporate giant’s head of Middle East and North African affairs in its office of government relations. Not surprisingly, Gfoeller’s stint at Exxon Mobil also put him inside the orbit of Rex Tillerson, a not inconsiderable ally in any effort to reshape the U.S. approach to Afghanistan.

“Sitting down with Gfoeller was the smartest thing Steve could do,” a Middle East hand says. “When you get to Mike, you get to Petraeus, when you get to Petraeus you get to Mattis. You have to remember, Mattis and Petraeus worked together on the counterinsurgency manual and they remain in close touch. Gfoeller is a known quantity in the Mattis Pentagon.” Indeed over the last weeks Feinberg and Gfoeller have become nearly inseparable, a tag team intent on selling the Feinberg-Prince initiative in official Washington. “It’s an unbeatable constellation—you have the money man [Feinberg], the public intellectual who adds heft [Gfoeller], and the can-do adventurer, Erik Prince,” the high level former intelligence officer told me. “You add Krivo to that mix, with his JCS contacts, and suddenly this looks sellable. But Gfoeller is the key.”

Indeed, Gfoeller might well be the most important under-the-radar official in Washington, with ties not only to Petraeus at global investment powerhouse KKR but also to the Washington, D.C.-based Chertoff Group (a security firm headed by former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff) and the U.S. intelligence community. This latter is the result of his work as coordinator of U.S. counterterrorism policy while serving as deputy chief of mission in Saudi Arabia. Gfoeller’s intelligence community ties are crucial because a large segment of that community loathes military contractors. “The key here is [CIA Director] Mike Pompeo and [National Intelligence Director] Dan Coats. They will be asked to sign off on this and their opposition would probably kill it. That’s why Gfoeller is important. He’s the guy who would sell this across the river [at the CIA headquarters in Langley].” Under the Feinberg initiative, TAC has been told Dyncorp would not answer up a military chain, but be under the supervision of the CIA.

Feinberg also solicited the views of a number of well-known development hands with experience in South Asia, including economists tasked with building Afghanistan's economic capacity during the Bush and Obama years. That effort, initially headed up by former Rumsfeld troubleshooter Marty Hoffman and labeled the "Afghan Reachback" program, identified extensive mineral deposits that could be used to attract international business investments. Additionally, Gfoeller promoted the establishment of a "New Silk Road" that would link the Afghan economy more tightly with its neighbors during the Obama years—a high profile effort that brought him into close contact with the corporate side of the Afghanistan conflict.

"I have to admit, watching this guy Feinberg work is pretty impressive," says the high level former intelligence officer interviewed by *TAC*. "He's checked all the boxes, conferred with all the right people and gotten Bannon on his side. Forget a MacArthur-like viceroy for Afghanistan. Right now it looks like that viceroy will be Feinberg."

Yet when Steve Bannon suggested that Defense Secretary Mattis meet with Feinberg, Mattis politely but firmly declined. Mattis's "no" was, in large part, the result of having to subdue Fallujah after four Blackwater contractors died there in 2004 ("he's convinced that his Marines died for Blackwater," I was told, "and he hasn't forgotten that"). For Mattis, the issue with the Feinberg initiative is accountability. "The problem is that mercenaries don't come under the Uniform Code of Military Justice," a senior Pentagon officer says. "If they were under a UCMJ structure there could be confidence in command and control and there would be accountability. But they're not; which means their behavior is impossible to control. Young testosterone filled men carrying weapons and operating outside the law is a recipe for disaster. That scared the hell out of Mattis in 2004, and it scares the hell out of him now."

As crucially, *TAC* has been told, Mattis doesn't believe that Prince or Feinberg understand the conflict. Indeed, according to a senior Pentagon officer, both Mattis and McMaster believe the real challenge for the Trump administration isn't Afghanistan but Pakistan—which is what former CIA officer Bruce Riedel told Barack Obama aboard Air Force One after his own 90-day deep dive into the Afghanistan problem back in 2009. The Taliban are making gains in Afghanistan, Riedel said, because Pakistan is allowing them to.

That's true now, eight years later. The one who knows this best is McMaster. During the first week of April, he appointed Lisa Curtis, a South Asia expert at the Heritage Foundation, to head up the NSC's South Asia desk. The Curtis appointment signaled McMaster's acceptance of Curtis's view that to succeed in Afghanistan the U.S. needed to be tougher with Islamabad. Curtis made this point prior to her appointment in a widely circulated paper that she wrote with Husain Haqqani, an official of the Hudson Institute.

In "A New U.S. Approach to Pakistan: Enforcing Aid Conditions without Cutting Ties," Curtis and Haqqani proposed the adoption of a new get-tough approach to Pakistan as a necessary centerpiece for resolving the Afghanistan war. The United States, the two wrote, should "no longer sacrifice its anti-terrorism principles in the region for the sake of pursuing an 'even-handed' South Asia policy, but rather should levy costs on Pakistan for policies that help perpetuate terrorism in the region." It won't be enough for the Trump White House to somehow

“coax” a change in views in Pakistan, as was done during the Obama years. What will be needed is for the United States to enforce its principles, even if that means losing an ally.

This means that while Trump advisers Bannon and Kushner promote what they tout as the administration’s new thinking and foster the plans of men whom they consider “out of the box” thinkers—such as Prince, Feinberg, Gfoeller and Krivo—the powerhouse figures of Mattis, McMaster, and Curtis have yet to weigh in. Then too, highly respected former CIA officers who served in South Asia, are known to be upset by the Feinberg proposal, and are expected to weigh in against it with Pompeo. The key, ultimately, will be Trump. He will decide whether America’s wars should continue to be fought by Americans or whether they will be contracted out to an out-of-uniform army of guns for hire who will be allowed to kill in the name of America.