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Don't Privatize the Afghan War—Just End It

Sonali Kolhatkar

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An Afghan National Army soldier, left, smokes as a U.S. Army soldier sits for a photo in Nangarhar province, Afghanistan, in 2015.

Erik Prince, the notorious founder of the military contracting company formerly known as Blackwater, has been making the rounds of media outlets to promote his idea for privatizing the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Prince, whose company was renamed Academi, and who now chairs a Chinese-owned company named Frontier Services Group, is unabashedly vying for a lucrative Pentagon contract that would turn over military operations in Afghanistan to a private corporation. He has gone as far as calling for an “American viceroy” in Afghanistan to fix the United States’ failing war.

Prince’s bid began on June 1, when he penned an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* suggesting that President Donald Trump should “consolidate authority in Afghanistan with one person: an American viceroy who would lead all U.S. government and coalition efforts.” The Trump administration then reportedly reached out to him in July “to devise alternatives to the Pentagon’s plan to send thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan.” Trump has been resisting calls from Gen. John Nicholson, who leads U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, for an increase of 20,000 troops. But after Prince waved his seductive, business-friendly approach to the war in Trump’s face, the president is now considering handing over the longest official war the U.S. has ever waged to an unaccountable private corporation.

Under Prince’s leadership, Blackwater’s operations in Iraq in 2007 included the horrific massacre of 17 civilians in Baghdad’s Nisour Square. Four of Blackwater’s employees were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in 2014, but fortuitously for Prince and his reputation, a federal appeals court earlier this month rejected prison sentences for three of them and ordered a new trial for the fourth.

The type of impunity that Blackwater employees demonstrated in Iraq will likely show up in Afghanistan if Prince has his way. Indeed, he seems to have no patience for the military bureaucracy and has brazenly suggested that any “viceroy” Trump appoints in Afghanistan should remain fully in control of the war and be accountable to no one. “Troops fighting for their lives should not have to ask a lawyer sitting in air conditioning 500 miles away for permission to drop a bomb,” he writes.

When questioned by CNN’s Erin Burnett why he would use such an overtly colonialist term like “viceroy” to describe a private head of operations in Afghanistan, Prince simply dismissed it, saying, “we’re not there to colonize.” But the word “viceroy” originates from the British colonial control of India, which began with the East India Co. and its economic plunder of South Asian resources. Perhaps it is an apt word to describe U.S. policy in Afghanistan under Trump given the president’s recent interest in exploiting that nation’s untapped mineral reserves.

Trump may be partial to Prince, given that Steve Bannon, the president’s controversial white-nationalist adviser, is, according to the *Daily Beast*, “very friendly with Prince, having hosted the former Blackwater honcho on his onetime Breitbart radio show to discuss how to battle ‘Islamic fascism,’ ” and apparently the two “maintain a mutual respect and admiration.” Additionally Prince may have acted as “an unofficial envoy for Trump” in the United Arab Emirates just

before the inauguration this January in “an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump.”

Two months after he first proposed his ideas for the Afghanistan war in The Wall Street Journal, Prince published a follow-up op-ed in USA Today expanding on his ideas. “The president can ‘restructure’ the war, similar to a bankruptcy reorganization,” he wrote. Prince is using language that Trump understands given that the president has himself filed for bankruptcy four times, a fact he has referenced proudly. Prince’s promise that his “approach would cost less than 20% of the \$48 billion being spent in Afghanistan this year” is also likely to tempt Trump into taking the cheaper way out.

So far there is little in the proposal that Prince has publicized that suggests he has hit upon a genius idea to end a decade and a half of failure. In vague terms he wrote, “By aligning U.S. efforts under a presidential envoy, all strategic decisions regarding humanitarian aid, military support and intelligence become laser-focused on creating a stable, self-supporting Afghanistan.” But how exactly that will happen he does not say. In his CNN interview he implies that private contractors would work for the Afghan government at the battalion level to train Afghan troops. But the U.S. has already been training and advising Afghan troops for years, and all U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan (15 in total) have had the same authority he is proposing for his “viceroy.”

While Prince is correct in assessing the prolonged war as a disastrous and unparalleled failure that has become a sinkhole for American tax dollars and resulted in greater instability and violence, Prince’s proposals are naive at best. Nearly 16 years of misguided U.S. policies have created a monster that cannot easily be tamed. By deliberately bringing back the Taliban’s ideological cousins into political power, wasting trillions of dollars, and even pouring money into the Taliban’s coffers, successive U.S. presidents and military commanders are responsible for the resulting situation wherein a record number of Afghan civilians were killed in the first half of this year, and wherein Islamic State has now terrifyingly gained a foothold, even possibly collaborating with the Taliban. Prince’s solution of a private military force headed by an unaccountable American “viceroy” is just as unlikely to make any constructive gains as Gen. Nicholson’s plan for a surge in troops (an idea that Obama tried and that ultimately failed).

But given that Prince only needs the most inexperienced, unqualified and intellectually bankrupt president in U.S. history to sign on to his ludicrous proposal, it is quite possible that we may actually witness the privatization of the longest war. Not surprisingly, the U.S. military is unhappy with the prospect and a former senior military official recently told the Daily Beast, “The Pentagon is not interested in privatizing the war in Afghanistan.”

Neither the Pentagon nor a high-profile mercenary is capable of ending the harrowing war in Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghans—who are always left out of the calculations of American experts—are the first to suffer and the last to be included in war plans. All that the U.S. is doing in Afghanistan today is adding to the violence through its sheer presence in the country. That will hardly change by swapping out costly government forces for cheaper private ones. Indeed,

leaving Afghanistan in the hands of an unaccountable institution will likely worsen the situation. The war in Afghanistan has long been an out-of-sight, out-of-mind affair for the American public. To relegate Afghan lives to the mercy of an even less visible force will be to write them off altogether.

If we truly want to end the Afghan war as Trump, Prince and the Pentagon claim they want, then we can and must simply end it by withdrawing all forces. Now.