

SPY VERSUS SPY WITH ERIK PRINCE

It's best to start reading the big Vanity Fair Erik Prince piece from this paragraph.



Prince blames Democrats in Congress for the leaks and maintains that there is a double standard at play. "The left complained about how [C.I.A. operative] Valerie Plame's identity was compromised for political reasons. A special prosecutor [was even] appointed. Well, what happened to me was worse. People acting for political reasons disclosed not only the existence of a very sensitive program but my name along with it." As in the Plame case, though, the leaks prompted C.I.A. attorneys to send a referral to the Justice Department, requesting that a criminal investigation be undertaken to identify those responsible for providing highly classified information to the media.

I say that not because we've got a few Plame experts hereabouts. And not because that revelation—that the CIA referred the stories on Blackwater to the DOJ for criminal investigation—is news to me, at least, though I think it very significant news.

But because of the premise.

Erik Prince complains that Blackwater's role in the assassination and drone programs was leaked, just as Plame's identity was leaked. And it's worse, Prince says. Not because the kinds of operations he was involved in were leaked (on that level, it is worse; it took years before any details of Plame's identity in preventing Iranian proliferation came out, not least because Cheney didn't want that out). But because his "name along with it" was revealed.

As if the entire country didn't already know

that Erik Prince—who has testified to Congress as the head of Blackwater—is the head of Blackwater.

(I should say, “was,” since Prince claims he is “through” with Blackwater.)

Yet, in the same article where Prince complains that he, personally, has been outed, here are the things that he, personally, reveals.

- He was tasked by the CIA to create a “small, focused capability”
- The CIA’s original assassination squad trained at his personal estate outside of DC
- Prince integrated third-party nationals into the assassination squad who did not know of the CIA connection
- He (personally) and a team of foreign nationals targeted someone in 2008
- He did the targeting on al-Qaeda middleman Abu Ghadiyah in Syria

It even reveals some of Prince’s operational tactics—such as flying coach, or switching vehicles shortly after arriving at a destination.

Prince doesn’t seem all that bugged, when you take a step back, about the details of this program being leaked.

This, then, is not (or not just) a rant designed to attack those he claimed outed him. (He conveniently blames Democrats for this, in spite of the fact that the Blackwater stories have all been sourced to intelligence people, not

political ones.) Rather, it's either an attempt to fully burn one cover, in an attempt to sustain another cover. It's an attempt to strike back in a game of leaking turf battle. Or it's an attempt to distract away from the really sensitive parts of his business.

With those suggestions in mind, read what Prince offers as his explanation for leaking wildly in this article.

This past fall, though he infrequently grants interviews, he decided it was time to tell his side of the story—to respond to the array of accusations, to reveal exactly what he has been doing in the shadows of the U.S. government, and to present his rationale. He also hoped to convey why he's going to walk away from it all. To that end, he invited *Vanity Fair* to his training camp in North Carolina, to his Virginia offices, and to his Afghan outposts. It seemed like a propitious time to tag along.

That is, in light of the articles already written about his involvement in this program, Prince dialed up *Vanity Fair* and asked to tell a story of himself walking away from it all. That's how the story ends, with emphasis on Prince walking away, off to teach high school. But look carefully at the narrative here:

And up until two months ago—when Prince says the Obama administration pulled the plug—he was still deeply engaged in the dark arts. According to insiders, he was running intelligence-gathering operations from a secret location in the United States, remotely coordinating the movements of spies working undercover in one of the so-called Axis of Evil countries. Their mission: non-disclosable.

Exit Strategy

Flying out of Kabul, Prince does a slow burn, returning to the topic of how exposed he has felt since press accounts revealed his role in the assassination program. The firestorm that began in August has continued to smolder and may indeed have his handlers wondering whether Prince himself is more of a liability than an asset. He says he can't understand why they would shut down certain high-risk, high-payoff collection efforts against some of America's most implacable enemies for fear that his involvement could, given the political climate, result in their compromise.

He is incredulous that U.S. officials seem willing, in effect, to cut off their nose to spite their face. "I've been overtly and covertly serving America since I started in the armed services," Prince observes. After 12 years building the company, he says he intends to turn it over to its employees and a board, and exit defense contracting altogether.

First, Prince claims the Obama Administration pulled the plug "two months ago." It's unclear whether that's supposed to be two months before the publication date of this story (January 2010), today's publication of it, or the interview trips vaguely placed sometime in fall. But whichever it is, it's long after Leon Panetta is said to have pulled the plug on June 23 or 24. In fact, two months before the time this was written would put it well after the time the NYT and WaPo first broke this story in August.

And yet the discussion of shutting the program down is not in the past tense. His handlers may be wondering whether Prince "is" a liability. He wonders why they "would" shut it down, because

his involvement “could” result in the program’s compromise. He says he’s done with Blackwater, but he’s not talking about a program that is done. Yet.

And here’s one other fascinating detail. By my count, “CIA” is referred to around 35 times in this article. “Special Ops” or “Special Forces” are referred to just three times—though all in context to Prince’s most recent operations.

Compare that to the news revealed in the most recent story on Blackwater’s role in intelligence programs, by Jeremy Scahill.

At a covert forward operating base run by the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, members of an elite division of Blackwater are at the center of a secret program in which they plan targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, “snatch and grabs” of high-value targets and other sensitive action inside and outside Pakistan, an investigation by *The Nation* has found. The Blackwater operatives also assist in gathering intelligence and help direct a secret US military drone bombing campaign that runs parallel to the well-documented CIA predator strikes, according to a well-placed source within the US military intelligence apparatus.

The source, who has worked on covert US military programs for years, including in Afghanistan and Pakistan, has direct knowledge of Blackwater’s involvement. He spoke to *The Nation* on condition of anonymity because the program is classified. The source said that the program is so “compartmentalized” that senior figures within the Obama administration and the US military chain of command may not be aware of its existence.

In other words, Prince claims he's revealing "exactly what he has been doing." But he's revealing only those details purportedly contracted via CIA (though, again, the Ghadiyah operation involved Special Forces). He's not revealing what he's been doing with JSOC. And he's sure as hell not describing what he's been doing for the Pakistani government.

After reading Scahill's story, I asked, "Where does Blackwater play in the CIA-DNI conflict?" After reading this story, I'm wondering even more.

(Image credit: Spy vs. Spy Danger! Intrigue! Stupidity! by Antonio Prohias via Amazon.com)