

Stability, progress in Iraq remains uncertain

Blackwater Worldwide

► Formerly Blackwater USA, Blackwater Worldwide is a private security firm operating in Iraq.

► On Sept. 16, Blackwater employees were involved in a firefight in Baghdad that killed 11 Iraqis.

► In the following days, the Iraqi government threatened to expel the company. Its security operations in Iraq have resumed.

► The incident prompted investigations by multiple U.S. government agencies.

► An Oct. 1 congressional report found that Blackwater has been involved in at least 195 shootings in Iraq from 2005 through the second week of September 2007. Contractors fired first in more than 80 percent of those incidents.

BY REBECCA PUTTERMAN
ASSISTANT STATE & NATIONAL EDITOR

Though 2007 began with a hopeful Democratic majority in the U.S. Congress pushing for an end to the war in Iraq, a political stalemate thwarted all attempts at setting a withdrawal timetable.

Gen. David Petraeus, commanding general of the multinational force in Iraq, testified before Congress in September, offering evidence of increased security in Iraq. Yet the year closed with the highest death toll since 2004, with about 900 American casualties and more than 18,000 Iraqi civilians dead, although the Iraqi government lists the number significantly higher.

Democratic presidential candidates continue to compete for the strongest anti-war credentials, but many of the political battles fought in early 2007 are now obsolete.

The push for a timetable for troop withdrawal ended in a veto

in early May, and the ensuing compromise between the Bush White House and congressional Democrats yielded a spending bill with political benchmarks for the Iraqi government that have been mostly ignored in recent months.

"Everyone was expecting them to get the troops out of Iraq almost instantly, and they couldn't do that," said George Drometer, co-president of UNC Young Democrats.

As the year wound down, the news from Iraq continued to be mixed. In September Gen. Petraeus' optimistic report to Congress coincided with an international outcry concerning allegations that the N.C.-based private military firm Blackwater USA murdered 11 innocent Iraqi civilians.

The controversy sparked a reassessment of how the government should oversee private contractors in military operations.

U.S. Rep. David Price, D-N.C.,

pushed legislation through the House to hold employees of firms like Blackwater accountable for their actions in civilian court.

"This is about the rule of law," said Price spokesman Paul Cox in September. "And if someone commits a criminal act and they're working on behalf of the American government, they should be held accountable."

In sharp contrast to the Blackwater incident, Gen. Petraeus' report painted a picture of success.

The report claimed that Bush's January surge of 30,000 additional ground troops had improved the situation in Iraq, citing encouraging factors such as increased security in Baghdad and the growing "Awakening" movement, an effort to pit Sunni groups against al-Qaida.

However, the relative peace has done little to alter the gridlocked operations of the Iraqi government.

"Gen. Petraeus is doing a very, very tremendous job and is in the right direction, but he needs time and he needs support," said Abdul Sattar Jawad, an English profes-

sor at Harvard who fled his home country of Iraq in 2005.

"The main problem he faces there is the arrogant, hardline, sectarian government which is unwilling to reconcile," Jawad said, expressing disappointment with the apparent abandonment of political progress benchmarks.

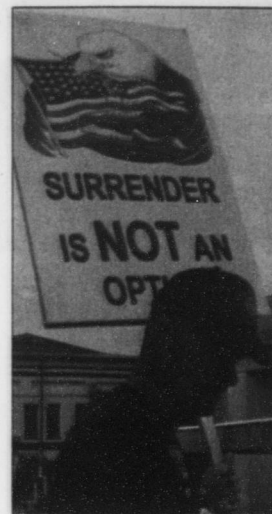
One of the most important benchmarks yet to be met involves laws that would implement equal distribution of oil revenue between Iraq's ethnic groups.

Jawad said the benchmarks are the pillars of a truly representative government in Iraq.

"We need a representative government now, and we need the United States to come back again and stay to its promise about the benchmarks," he said.

"This government is dysfunctional, and it is useless — we are squandering blood and treasure with them. Nothing will be achieved but failure."

Contact the State & National Editor at stntdesk@unc.edu.



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A veteran protests an anti-war rally in Smithfield on Oct. 27. View a story on the year's war activism at dailytarheel.com.

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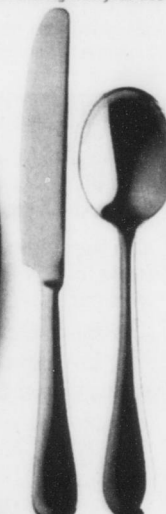
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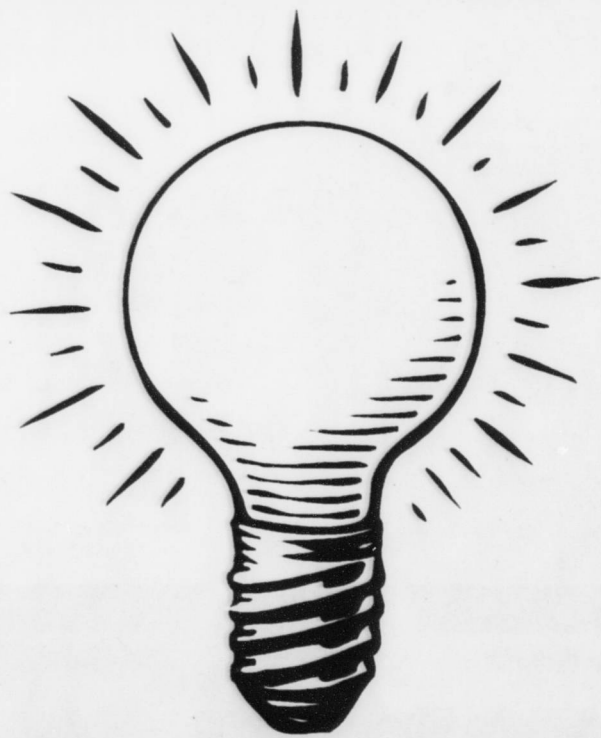


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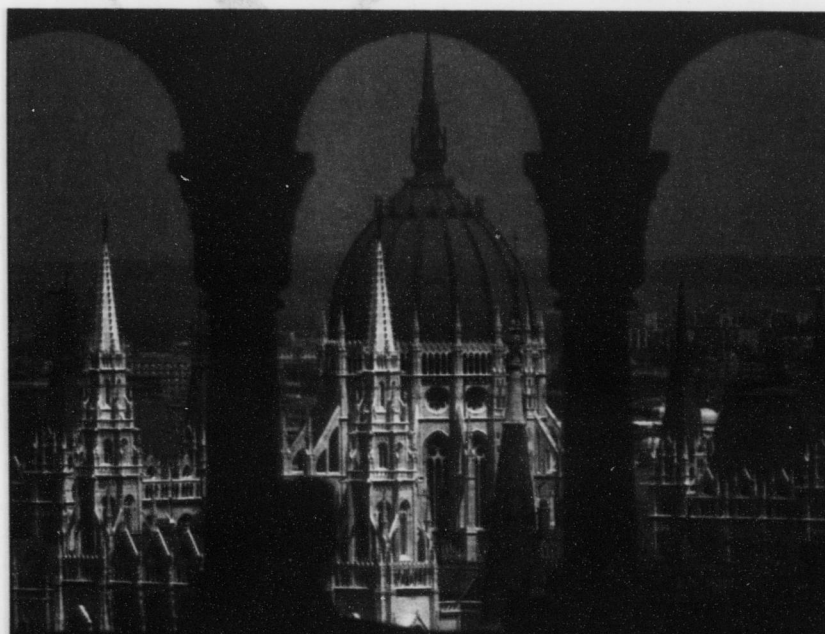
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