

Blackwater's Owner Has Spies for Hire

Ex-U.S. Operatives Dot Firm's Roster

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First it became a brand name in security for its work in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now it's taking on intelligence.

The Prince Group, the holding company that owns Blackwater Worldwide, has been building an operation that will sniff out intelligence about natural disasters, business-friendly governments, overseas regulations and global political developments for clients in industry and government.

The operation, Total Intelligence Solutions, has assembled a roster of former spooks — high-ranking figures from agencies such as the CIA and defense intelligence — that mirrors the slate of former military officials who run Blackwater. Its chairman is Cofer Black, the former head of counterterrorism at CIA known for his leading role in many of the agency's more controversial programs, including the rendition and interrogation of al-Qaeda suspects and the detention of some of them in secret prisons overseas.

Its chief executive is Robert Richer, a former CIA associate deputy director of operations who was heavily involved in running the agency's role in the Iraq war.

Total Intelligence Solutions is one of a growing number of companies that offer intelligence services such as risk analysis to companies and governments. Because of its roster and its ties to owner Erik Prince, the multimillionaire former Navy SEAL, the company's thrust into this world highlights the blurring of lines between government, industry and activities formerly reserved for agents operating in the shadows.

Richer, for instance, once served as the chief of the CIA's Near East division and is said to have ties to King Abdullah of Jordan. The CIA had spent millions helping train Jordan's intelligence service in exchange for information. Now Jordan has hired Blackwater to train its special forces.

"Cofer can open doors," said Richer, who served 22 years at the CIA. "I can open doors. We can generally get in to see who we need to see. We don't help pay bribes. We do everything within the law, but we can deal with the right minister or person."

Total Intel, as the company is known, is bringing "the skills traditionally honed by CIA operatives directly to the board room," Black said. Black had a 28-year career with the CIA.

"They have the skills and background to do anything anyone wants," said RJ Hillhouse, who writes a national security blog called The Spy Who Billed Me. "There's no oversight. They're an independent company offering freelance espionage services. They're rent-a-spies."

The heart of Total Intel operations is a suite on the ninth floor of an office tower in Ballston, patterned after the CIA counterterrorist center Black once ran, with analysts sitting at cubicles in the center of the room and glass offices of senior executives on the perimeter.

A handful of analysts in their 20s and 30s sit hunched over Macintosh computers, scanning Web sites, databases, newspapers and chat rooms. The lights are dimmed. Three large-screen TVs play in the background, one tuned to al-Jazeera.

The room, called the Global Fusion Center, is staffed around the clock, as analysts search for warnings on everything from terrorist plots on radical Islamic Web sites to possible political upheavals in Asia, labor strikes in South America and Europe, and economic upheavals that could affect a company's business.

"We're not a private detective," Black said. "We provide intelligence to our clients. It's not about taking pictures. It's business intelligence. We collect all information that's publicly available. This is a completely legal enterprise. We break no laws. We don't go anywhere near breaking laws. We don't have to."

Total Intel was launched in February by Prince, who a decade ago opened a law enforcement training center in Moyock, N.C., that has since grown into a half-billion-dollar business called Blackwater Worldwide. Prince has nine other companies and subsidiaries in his Prince Group empire, offering a broad range of security and training services. (One, Blackwater Security Consulting, is under scrutiny because of a Sept. 16 shooting incident in Iraq that involved some of its armed guards and in which 17 Iraqi civilians were killed.) Prince built Total Intel by buying two companies owned by Matt Devost, the Terrorism Research Center and Technical Defense, and merging them with Black's consulting group, the Black Group. Devost, a cyber security and risk management expert, is now president of Total Intel.

Devost runs day-to-day operations, overseeing 65 full-time employees. At the Global Fusion Center, young analysts monitor activities in more than 60 countries. They include a 25-year-old Fulbright scholar fluent in Arabic and another person with a master's degree in international affairs, focused on the Middle East, who tracks the oil industry and security in Saudi Arabia.

Black and Richer spend much of their time traveling. They won't say where. It's a CIA thing. Black called at midnight recently to talk about Total Intel from "somewhere in the Middle East."

"I don't spend a lot of time telling people where I am as part of my business," he said. "I am discreet in where I go and who I see. I spend most of my time dealing with senior people in governments, making connections."

Black, who also serves as vice chairman of Blackwater Worldwide, said he also does "a lot more mundane things like go to conferences and trade shows," looking for business opportunities. "I'm going to have to go," he said. "My guy is motioning for me. I have to go meet people."

Who?

People.

Government people? Business people?

All kinds.

The company won't reveal its financial information, the names of its customers or other details of its business. Even looking at an analyst's screen at its Global Fusion Center wasn't allowed.

"No, no," Richer said, putting his hands up. "There may be customers' names on there. We don't want you to see."

In their conference room overlooking the Global Fusion Center, Total Intel executives fired off a list of some of their work. Are some recent bombings at major cities in India isolated incidents or should you pull your personnel out? What are the political developments in Pakistan going to mean for your business? Is your company popping up on jihadist Web sites? There's been crime recently in the ports of Mexico, possibly by rogue police officers. Is the government going to be able to ensure safety?

Since 2000, the Terrorism Research Center portion of the company has done \$1.5 million worth of contracts with the government, mainly from agencies like the Army, Navy, Air Force, Customs and the U.S. Special Operations Command buying its data subscription or other services.

To Black and Richer, one of the most surprising things about being in the private sector is finding that much of the information they once considered top secret is publicly available. The trick, Richer said, is knowing where to look.

"In a classified area, there's an assumption that if it is open, it can't be as good as if you stole it," Richer said. "I'm seeing that at least 80 percent of what we stole was open."

As he's no longer with the CIA, Richer said he's found that people are more willing to share information. He said a military general in a country he would not name told him of the country's plan to build its next strike fighter. "I listened," Richer said.

"We talked business and where we could help him understand markets and things like that." At the end of the conversation, Richer said, he asked the man, "Isn't that classified? Why are you telling me this?"

Richer said the man answered, "If I tell it to an embassy official I've created espionage. You're a business partner."

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