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MERCENARY KILLER OR EMBODIED VETERAN? THE CASE OF PAUL SLOUGH AND THE NISOUR SQUARE MASSACRE

Paul Higate

University of Bristol

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School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies

University of Bristol

Working Paper No. 09-11

Paul Higate is Reader in Gender and Security in the School for Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol. He is currently a Fellow of the ESRC/AHRC Global Uncertainties Programme with a project entitled 'Mercenary Masculinities Imagine Security: The case of the Private Military Contractor'.

Mercenary Killer or Embodied Veteran? The Case of Paul Slough and the Nisour Square Massacre

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Abstract

On the 16th September 2007, five employees of the Private Military and Security Company (PMSC) Blackwater shot dead 17 Iraqi citizens in Nisour Square in Baghdad. This notorious incident generated two main explanations for the murders. The first framed the killings as the result of 'cowboy' contractors bent on destruction – the actions of militarised masculinities for whom Iraqi lives meant little. The second, with a focus on the individual principally associated with the massacre, Paul Slough, sought to humanise this U.S Army veteran with a focus on his difficult childhood growing up without a father. Taken together, these oppositional framings turn on a bad man/good man binary through seeking explanation for the shootings in the background of the perpetrator(s) involved. In this article I argue that individual backgrounds that focus on military, militarised masculinities or masculinity more widely, can be usefully complemented with a consideration of the situational aspects of violence. Using the micro-sociologist' Randall Collins' model of the 'forward panic', I show that the Nisour Square massacre may have rather less to do with background than is popularly believed, but rather the situational and interactional dynamics of the incident in question that lead to tragic 'overkill'. This argument is further developed through a focus on military masculine embodiment where it is shown how lethal skill capital – the ability to kill and injure – is lodged deep in the bodies of military personnel. That it may emerge in the form of extreme 'spill-over' violence has important implications for how we think of the nexus linking, in this case, militarised masculinities with responsibility. In sum, and following the political theorist Diana Coole, I argue for a 'phenomenology of responsibility' that steers a careful course between 'paralysing fatalism' on the one hand, and on the other, an 'unrealistic voluntarism' that can over-determine the links between masculinity and violence.

Introduction

In recent years, the exponential growth of the Private Militarised[1] Security (PMS) sector into a multi-billion dollar global industry with a presence on every continent apart from the Antarctic (Singer, 2008) has provoked two main responses. The first is broadly sympathetic and stresses the benefits of the market in regard to the industry's abilities to respond flexibly to rapidly changing security conditions within the context of 'stabilising' post-conflict countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The second response to the burgeoning PMS sector has been one of considerable unease, typically expressed by critical scholars, commentators in the Non Government Organization (NGO) sector, and at the time of writing, the Karzai government in Afghanistan. Here, there is general agreement that a loosening of the state's monopoly on violence is seen as a retrograde step as it unleashes a 'market for force' (Avant, 2005) that thrives on insecurity and its accompanying distortions. In support of this more critically inclined view, private security contractor's[2] perpetration of human rights abuses are frequently invoked, underscoring the belief that the PMS sector – somewhat paradoxically – *exacerbates* the insecurity of host populations. The killing of 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians – including children, men and women by five members of a Blackwater Personal Security Detail (PSD) in Nisour Square in Iraq is a case in point. It is against the immediate backdrop of the Nisour Square massacre that following discussion is set. Its main aim is to go beyond explanations for the killings that focus on the background and pathology of the perpetrators as 'men of a particular kind'. Rather, through foregrounding the most high profile of the perpetrators, Paul Slough, it seeks to complement current explanations with the situational and embodied dimensions of the incident.

The article is organised as follows. First I provide some background to the killings before going on to show how Slough was constructed through a good man/bad man binary as explanation for his role in the massacre. Second, discussion then shifts to theoretical concerns drawing on the work of interactionist sociologist Randall Collins whose model of a 'forward panic' is applied to understanding what happened in Nisour Square. Third, attention turns to a phenomenological sensitivity to the genesis of military embodiment as one way in which to account for the brutality of violence perpetrated more widely in military atrocities. Fourth, the implications of foregrounding military embodiment are then considered in regard to questions of responsibility, with a focus on the relevance of particular forms of habituated social practice. A brief conclusion follows.

Background: The Nisour Square Massacre

> '"Don't shoot please!" Khalaf recalled yelling. But as he stood with his hand raised, Khalaf says, a gunman from the fourth Blackwater vehicle opened fire on the mother gripping her son and shot her dead before Khalaf's and Thiab's eyes. "I saw parts of the woman's head flying in front of me" Khalaf says, so many shots had been fired at the car from "big machine guns" that it exploded, engulfing the bodies inside in flames, melting their flesh into one. "Each of their four vehicles opened heavy fire in all directions, they shot and killed everyone in cars facing them and people standing on the streets," Thiab recalled. "When it was over we were looking around and about fifteen cars had been destroyed, the bodies of the killed were strewn on the pavements and road" (cited in Scahill, 2007: 5).

It is just after midday on the 16th September 2007 in Nisour Square in Baghdad. 17 Iraqi citizens, including children, lie dead and dying amongst the smoking ruins of burning

vehicles ripped apart by large calibre weaponry used by contractors of the U.S Private Militarised Security Company (PMSC), Blackwater.[3] Another 20 are wounded, the screams of onlookers and victim's relatives pierce the cordite-heavy air. It is a scene of utter carnage.

An investigation carried out on the 17th September by the U.S military cast doubt on Blackwater's plea of self defence, that they responded in line with their rules of engagement after coming under attack from small arms fire and a vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).[4] Further details of the shootings emerge. Witnesses describe how members of the team opened fire indiscriminately and with no justification. It was also reported that a Blackwater contractor drew his weapon on a team member in order to stop him firing as the command of 'cease fire' went unheeded (Scahill, 2007: 3-9). Response to the incident was swift with international and local commentators condemning the outrage and calling for PMSC's to be ejected from Iraq.[5] This incident followed numerous others where local people had been shot, injured and sometimes killed by contractors on 'convoy protection' duties as their vehicles 'got too close'.[6] As the sense of shock and trauma was replaced with anger and frustration, explanations for the massacre were demanded. How could so many people have been killed in a shooting spree that lasted a full 15 minutes? What was the reason for the use of disproportionate force or 'overkill' - where quite literally – thousands of rounds of ammunition were expended against unarmed civilians?

Dominant Explanations of the Killings

Media attention quickly focused on Paul Slough, a member of the Blackwater PSD believed to be the first to open fire and the 'main shooter' in the incident (Scahill, 2007: 33). He provided a sworn statement the day after the killings, excerpts of which are included here:

> On 17th[7] September 2007 at approximately 1230 hours, team 23 deployed out of checkpoint 12 in direct support of team 4's return … as our motorcade pulled into the intersection I noticed a white four door sedan driving directly at our motorcade ... I and others were yelling, and using hand signals for the car to stop and the driver looked directly at me and kept moving toward our motorcade ... I again was engaged by small arms fire from the red bus that was stopped at the intersection. I engaged the individuals and stopped the threat. As we were being pulled out of the intersection, I was told "contact left vehicle close" ... As I turned the turret back to my sector, there was a red vehicle backing toward the command vehicle ... At the same moment, I started receiving small arms fire from the shack approximately fifty meters behind the car. I then engaged the individuals where the muzzle flashes came from. A uniformed individual then started pushing the vehicle towards the motorcade and again I shouted and engaged the vehicle until it came to a stop. I was told on our radio that the command vehicle was down, and that we were still taking fire ... As I turned my turret ... there was a man that had his AK oriented to the rear gunner in the follow vehicle.

Slough's statement was thoroughly discredited by both Iraqi witnesses and as indicated, a U.S military investigation, neither of whom could find evidence for the sequence of events outlined here. They concluded that the PSD had not come under attack and that Slough's statement was pure fiction. This finding fuelled the belief – voiced most vociferously by the victim's relatives - that the Blackwater team were 'out of control' and 'bent on destruction'.[8] During the trial of the Blackwater contractors some five months later on the 19th January 2008, *The New York Times* 'Saturday Profile' focused on Paul Slough in an article entitled 'From Texas to Iraq, and Centre of Blackwater Case'.[9] Its aim was to countered Slough's

demonization in the immediate aftermath of the killings through posing the question of how it was a former soldier with an unblemished military record could be involved in this internationally notorious massacre? Excerpts from the *New York Times* article follow:

> '"I went on 20 to 30 missions with Paul. You could always depend on him," said Jeremiah Thompson, recalling his tour of duty with Mr. Slough in Iraq for the Texas National Guard. "He was always careful. He was always professional. I never knew him to break the rules of engagement"
>
> … Described as tall and lean with a carrot-colored beard, he lives with his wife in a well-to-do housing development near Fort Worth …
>
> Several people … said problems with alcohol made it difficult for Mr. Slough's father, Paul Slough Sr., to hold a steady job. (The father has since died.) They said the younger Mr. Slough grew up quickly, juggling schoolwork and a job roping cattle …
>
> Mike Norrell, Mr. Slough's former teacher at Patton Springs School, recalled Mr. Slough as a boy who craved learning. He said that while other students memorized lessons, Mr. Slough questioned everything he read.'

Overall, the article spoke of a young man that, whilst having struggled against the odds, had nevertheless developed into a decent sort. Slough was reliable, professional and physically striking. One comment within the article appeared to deviate from the broader, positive frame:

> ‘Mr. Slough looked like the stereotype of a Blackwater guard: Oakley sunglasses, cargo pants, cropped hair and a chiseled physique …’

That Slough presented a demeanour consonant with that of a hyper-masculine ‘Blackwater guard’ does resonate with some ambiguity, yet was neutralised by subsequent references to the hardship he endured in losing his father. Slough’s bereavement meant that he had necessarily to ‘grow up fast’, and developed into a bright and questioning individual. Another journalistic piece stressed Slough’s status as a ‘decorated military veteran’[10] and in another, as an ‘honorable veteran’.[11] People from Slough’s hometown Dickens, described him as a ‘patriot and a hero … a leader … a hard working and determined teen … courteous … a gentleman … a natural born leader.’[12] Said another,‘I don’t think PJ had a violent bone in his body’.[13] Countering allegations that Slough was an adrenaline junkie or ‘cowboy’ disposed to firing first and asking questions later, one commentator noted that on the contrary, this veteran had displayed considerable courage in embracing the toughest of challenges:

> ‘Mr. Slough had not become some kind of cowboy, high on adrenaline and quick on the trigger … Mr. Slough liked the hardest assignments, which usually meant he served at the rear of their convoys, perched on a Humvee with his finger on the trigger of a .50-caliber machine gun’[14]

Taken together, these comments constituted an attempt to humanise the contractor with their legitimacy derived from the people that had witnessed Slough growing up and, therefore ‘knew him best’.[15] At the same time, this portrayal should be seen as integral to the broader sense of incredulity engendered amongst his defenders at the veteran’s overnight transformation from ‘regular guy’ to ‘murderer of innocent civilians’. Slough was not some

kind of hyper-masculine killer of the (by now) notorious company Blackwater, rather he was a hapless victim of a challenging mission where it was virtually impossible to 'do the right thing'. Honourable men acted in self defence – as did Slough who was now paying the price for following his rules of engagement. The subtext to this understanding concerned the realities that faced Slough and his team on 16th September, challenges that were beyond the comprehension of most 'ordinary' folk who had never experienced the dangers of an Iraq boiling over with a determined and lethal insurgency. Here was a team of highly trained U.S veterans working in a hostile environment supporting the liberation of the Iraqi people where, some three years earlier, four of their Blackwater colleagues had been lynched by a bloodthirsty mob.[16] In a further grisly twist, their corpses had been defiled, mutilated and dragged through the streets. They were then set-alight. The final act of horrific symbolism – broadcast around the world via the international media – was to hang the contractor's charred remains from a bridge over the Tigris. Like the tragic Blackwater contractors before them, Slough's team had also become ensnared in traffic, and had likely experienced a collective sense of vulnerability and fear at their possible fate, given a visceral reality by the memories of their fallen colleagues.

Presented in ideal-typical terms then, two explanatory narratives can be identified. First was that generated by the industry's detractors where contractors were typically viewed as hyper-masculine 'cowboys', intent on killing and injuring Iraqi's for whom they were believed to have contempt at best, and a racist disregard at worst. Second and to counter this, Slough's defenders sought to underscore his professionalism through invoking his triumph over adversity. He had managed to put behind him a troubled background and now – as was common to all contractors in the Iraqi theatre – had necessarily to operate in a hostile and sometimes murderous context where killing even if accidental, was nonetheless inevitable.

While this second understanding does allude to the structural or contextual exigencies influencing security work in this environment, both narratives rely heavily on a psychologistic or individualistic explanation for the killings. Taken together they are constitutive of a bad guy/good guy binary turning in the former, on an aggressive hyper-militarised masculinity and in the latter, a man who 'did his best'. In this way, the latter seeks a humanisation of Slough evoked through the use of cultural reference points intended to resonate with a U.S audience, and perhaps beyond. What were his experiences of growing up in Dickens and what can be said about his family dynamics, given the early loss of his principal male role model? In presenting Slough in this way there is at one and the same time an attempt to both rehabilitate 'the perpetrator' and dilute his responsibility for the killings.

That both narratives centre on the man behind the incident mirrors dominant explanations for a wide range of violent incidents, from serial killing[17] to that of concern here – a militarised massacre. Individualistic understandings can also be identified in relation to similar incidents, including that of military atrocities where the role of Lieutenant William Calley in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1968 comes to mind. What kind of man could do such a thing? Just how disturbed were his childhood years? What was the relationship between his earlier experiences and the monstrous actions perpetrated on that day? (Belknap, 2002; Scheff, 2006; Collins, 2008: 101).[18] Coverage of the more recent massacre in Haditha during November 2005 evokes similar questions. Who were Corporal Justin Sharratt, Captain Randy Stone, Lance Corporal Stephen Tatum and Staff Sergeant Frank Wuterich? What made these men tick?[19] How can we explain their psychotic tendencies leading to killing and rape? More broadly, high profile cases involving military or militarised killings have sparked debate around soldier's backgrounds and the ways in which their brutal and brutalizing experiences provide for 'spill-over' violence (Baron *et* al, 1988; Melzer, 2002; Harrison, 2003: 79; Amy,

2010). In sum, the causes of violence perpetrated by soldiers and veterans in Nisour Square, My Lai, and Haditha are seen to inhere principally within individual pathology shaped by a misogynistic, hyper-masculine culture. Is it any surprise that individuals trained in violence within a culture of aggression should be disposed to killing and injuring unarmed civilians? Or, to extend this line of thinking into the voluminous literature on men, masculinities and violence, put broadly, there is a tendency to overplay background and masculinised pathology, while underplaying the situational dimensions of violence. Whether through learning, biology/testosterone or a combination thereof, the men/masculinity/violence nexus is often assumed to explain the genesis of violent acts. And though there exists a robust empirical foundation for this understanding since 'violence is dominated by masculine role players in all modern, complex societies' (Bowker, 1998:14), using masculinity, military masculinity or militarised masculinity as unquestioned explanatory variables (Rosen *et* al, 2003; Whitworth, 2004; Jeffreys, 2007)[20] can help to occlude alternative lines of enquiry. [21] These can be opened up by asking questions around women's use of violence, [22] as well as those men with the *same*[23] backgrounds and experiences of perpetrators who do *not* use violence on return from a combat zone, military operations, or as veterans working in militarised roles. What can be said about this largely unacknowledged cohort, members of whom undoubtedly constitute the majority? Why is it their backgrounds and pathologies as masculine men fail to engender violence? In a broader sense, what of the myriad, unconsidered acts of restraint exercised routinely by hyper-masculine soldiers and veterans working in similarly onerous environments?[24] In addressing these questions, it is helpful to complement the extensive literature emphasising background and pathology with a consideration of the very particular *situational* characteristics of violence - a point to which discussion now turns.

Pathways to Violence: Situational Contingencies and Interactional Chains

Taking my analytic cue from the interactionist sociologist Randall Collins, I argue that causes of atrocities, massacres or put differently in regard to the specific case of Nisour Square - 'overkill' - is only *weakly* correlated with pathology, culture or background as typically noted in normative uses of the term 'hyper-masculinity'. Approaches that provide scope for examining the immediate context of violent social practice complement the role and salience of background with the situational construction of actor meaning and subsequent action (Tomsen, 1997: 91). Though discussing the somewhat different case of 'alcohol fuelled violence', the point is well made here:

> 'Unpredictability of drinking violence, as well as the cultural complexity of its significance, will always confound researchers seeking to evolve fully predictive models that *isolate the situational factors characterizing violent venues*' (Tomsen, 1997: 100; *emphasis added*).

Collins argues that violence is far more difficult to carry out than is commonly believed,[25] and in providing a specific definition of violence[26] notes that individuals' with a diversity of class, race, age and socio-economic backgrounds perpetrate violence. Violence is 'not easy' and does not come automatically - it is 'the exception and not the rule regardless of the underlying conditions and motivations' (Arsovska, 2009: 266). Also, that even when 'violence' is perpetrated (and is documented as such), it may be done so half-heartedly as shown through missed or desultory punches, imprecise use of weapons by highly trained police and military personnel. Thus, for violence to be carried through effectively, individuals and groups have necessarily to find ways round the universal barriers of tension and fear that sets limits on its use. Phenomena that play a role in circumventing the interactional solidarity

characteristic of face-to-face relations that usually serve to limit violence, include audiences who encourage fighters, and situations of sharp power disparity between weak or passive and sometimes cowering victims, where the altogether stronger perpetrator has the interactional advantage. As Collin's puts it:

> 'If we zero in on the situation of interaction – the angry boyfriend with the crying baby, the armed robber squeezing the trigger on the holdup victim, the cop [male or female] beating up the suspect – we can see patterns of confrontation, tension and emotional flow, which are at the heart of the situation where violence is carried out. This is another way of seeing that the background conditions – poverty, race, childhood experiences – are a long way from what is crucial to the dynamics of the violent situation' (Collins, 2008: 2).

Explaining causes of violence in this way counters pathologised understandings of violent individuals, or what Collins notes is the 'dependent variable (in the case of Paul Slough, an aggressive hyper-masculinity) … after the fact', where backgrounds are relentlessly scrutinised for evidence of the violent actor, interpreted to fit the violent act *post facto*.[27]. Rather, consideration might be given, as Katz puts it, to:

> 'the nature of violent behavior as some kind of project. The meaning of conduct is shaped in *interaction* and by the actor's appreciation of conduct as a means of doing something, getting somewhere.' (Katz, 2002: 259; *emphasis added*).

As an alternative to focusing on Slough as either a good man or a bad man, Nisour Square might be more persuasively explained using Collin's model of a forward panic, a theoretical

move drawn from his micro-sociological approach to understanding violence. Forward panics are characterised by patterned interactional chains where tension and fear is translated into extreme violence and senseless overkill, particularly against those who are unable to defend themselves – the hallmark of the Nisour Square massacre.

Nisour Square as Forward Panic

Drawing on the illustrative video-taped beatings of Rodney King by four officers of the Los Angeles Police Department, Collins notes that forward panics occur widely across both civilian and military life (Collins, 2008: 83). He states that:

> 'A forward panic starts with tension and fear … it has a dramatic shape of increasing tension … the tension/fear comes out in an emotional rush … they [the perpetrators] are in an overpowering emotional rhythm, carrying them on to actions that they would normally not approve of in calm reflective moments' (Collins, 2008: 85).

With this in mind, Paul Slough's sworn statement also contained the following lines:

> 'Fearing for my life and the lives of my teammates, I engaged the driver and stopped the threat ...
>
> Fearing for the gunner's life, I engaged the vehicle and stopped the threat ...
>
> Fearing for my life, I engaged the suspect vehicle in order to stop the threat ...
>
> Fearing that it was a vbied, I engaged in order to stop the threat'

Since the veracity of Slough's account was challenged, this particular 'fearing' vocabulary of motive should be treated with considerable caution (Collins, 2008: 337), yet cannot be entirely dismissed in light of the observation that their bodies were trapped and their limbs constrained in the confined space of the easily identifiable Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs). Much like the Marine Lt. Philip Caputo, a soldier desperate to extricate himself from a U.S helicopter touching down in a 'hot landing zone' in Vietnam, similarly Slough and his team experience their SUV's as 'enclosed space … [evoking] a sense of total helplessness … claustrophobia … in the small space: the sense of being trapped and powerless …is unbearable'. As noted in direct regard to contractors working in Iraq:

> 'One of your greatest fears is getting stuck in a traffic jam. A stopped vehicle is a target. Hundreds of insurgents drive the roads looking for "targets of opportunity". This is especially true of stopped vehicles with Americans in them ... It doesn't take long to become exhausted from the intensity of the situation and the adrenaline drain. You cannot allow yourself to be complacent. Complacency is a death knell. There are no naps on this road trip' (Schumacher, 2006: 88)

Adrenaline is starting to surge in the SUVs. The mood in the vehicles is volatile. Fingers seek reassurance in the smooth metal of triggers. An explosion is heard and Slough fires first. He is rapidly followed by the others, some of whom may have mistaken Slough's outgoing rounds as incoming enemy fire. Following their military drills and training, remaining team members' fire in the general direction of the perceived threat and the shooting continues relentlessly. The Blackwater team may 'feel a blind fury [or in this case at least, frustration] toward the forces that have made [them] powerless …' that in turn, is transformed into

> ‘A fierce resolve to fight …but this resolve … cannot be separated from the fear that has aroused it … all a soldier can think about is the moment when he can escape his impotent confinement and release the tension …’ (Collins, 2008: 83-85)

This reading depends on a particular ‘close description’ of the immediate situation where, in this case fear is ‘not in tension’ with rational thought but is a decisive factor in the actions of Slough and his team (Katz, 2002: 26). Moreover, in the course of a forward panic perpetrators are blind to their relative power in the use of violence where weakness of a victim ‘does not matter … even if they [the perpetrators] are explicitly aware of it’ (Collins, 2008: 91). Forward panics involve hot emotions and emotional contagion shaping emergent norms, that in turn mobilise the group through presenting them with an immediate social reality and shared meaning to which they respond in particular ways (Aguirre *et al*, 1998). As Slough opens up with his weapon, the Blackwater team become entrained in the shared interactional solidarity of their firing, as

> ‘…more often the process is group entrainment in a collective emotion … the Bam! Bam! Bam! of the guns is also part of the rhythm they are caught up in … being together [provides for] moods to feed off each other … and keep them locked into their frenzy’ (Collins, 2008: 93).

The violence has an immanence all of its own and appears both irrational and morally reprehensible to stunned and bewildered onlookers. The defining feature of a forward panic is overkill and the use of force ‘far beyond what is needed’ and firing ‘far more bullets than is necessary’ (Collins, 2008: 94). Witness the Blackwater team’s shooting of individuals in the back, the killing of children, cars riddled with ‘30 or even 40 bullets’ some of which were attempting to remove themselves from the scene and posed no obvious threat. In other situations of forward panic the killing and violence is senseless: animals are slaughtered,

children, women and men raped and sometimes tortured.[28] Collins notes that individuals and groups experiencing the hot emotional rush of a forward panic undergo a changed state - 'we did not feel anything … we were past feeling anything for ourselves' said one soldier recounting his experience of Vietnam and concomitant devastation of a village and its people (Collins, 2008: 87). The soldier believed that his men were experiencing a kind of 'madness' that in turn meant that 'some of us had a difficult time believing that we were the ones who had caused all that destruction' (cited in Collins, 2008: 87). During forward panics, individuals and groups experience an 'altered state of consciousness' born of an 'alien self' where (in this case), soldiers 'go into the emotional tunnel of violent attack, then back out of it at the end … in the aftermath they treat their own behaviour as if it were a separate reality' (Collins, 2008: 87/88). More widely, those perpetrating violence of various kinds – including domestic violence for example – talk of an 'unreal' state of mind where violence is perpetrated 'as if on auto-pilot'. Taken from a local newspaper in the UK, an exemplary instance of disproportionate and brutal violence with gendered overtones is noted here:

> A … man beat up his girlfriend in a drunken row … [he] told police a red mist[29] came down when the woman scratched his face. [The] Court was told he threw two beer bottles at her and punched her in the face, knocking her unconscious. He then subjected her to a sustained kicking, including repeatedly between the legs, dragged her outside, and left her naked and unconscious on her own doorstep in the cold for about 15 minutes[30]

Or, an incident of 'racial abuse' carried out by a male and a female police officer in Seattle in May 2010:

> Police in the United States have been plunged into a race row over a video showing two officers attacking and racially abusing an innocent. In the video, a male and female officer are seen taking turns to stamp on the suspected armed robber's head as he lies face down on the pavement[31]

A further aspect of forward panic of particular salience invoking the broader situational context for Nisour Square, is the nature of the guerrilla war in both Iraq and Afghanistan where there is a:

> 'hidden enemy and strong suspicions that the normal surrounding and civilian population are a cover for sudden attacks … [these factors can lead to] a frenzied rush of destruction' (Collins, 2008: 88).

As Mark Hulkower, Slough's defence lawyer argued 'security contractors in Iraq work in "an extraordinarily challenging environment", where the enemy does not wear uniforms, unless disguised as Iraqi soldiers or police to exploit civilians.'[32]

Clearly then, attempts to explain the Nisour Square killings need to be cognizant of a pathway of factors crystallizing in a particular place and at a specific moment. Whether or not Slough's father 'drunk too much' is by and large inconsequential. Rather, the interactional chain giving rise to this particular incident is comprised of a complex of situational and other factors, including it is argued here, the expectations of the Blackwater PSD and their professional culture. Previous incidents of a similar kind – although of a different scale – point to Blackwater's culture of licence where over-response may have become ingrained practice in the 'security work' of these men,[33] particularly given the anomalous legal status of the PMS industry in Iraq at the time.

However, while the explanatory model of the forward panic affords an enhanced sensitivity to the situational factors leading to violence, the most striking aspect of military or militarised violence as indicated, is that it often involves extreme brutality as noted here in the illustrative example of domestic violence where:

> 'Soldiers terrorise their partners in unique ways reminding the women of the sniper and bare handed skills they acquire in training … [they] are more likely to use weapons ... [and] strangle their wives until unconscious' (Ellison and Lutz, 2003: 2).

At one level this observation is unsurprising, but at another it invites further consideration of Collins forward panic framework where, hitherto soldier's and veteran's bodies have remained absently present. While it is acknowledged that 'forward panic is not simply a physiological process' as it is also shaped by adrenalin-arousal factors leading to unpredictable actions (Collins 2008: 92), a focus on the embodied realm of situational practice can illuminate the specific impact of the military or militarised body. The question of proficiency is highly salient in the case of soldiers who – as they roar down the tunnel of forward panic – take with them bodies trained in violence. If it is indeed the 'changed state' of the 'alien other' engendered through the situational contingencies of the tunnel that provide for the pre-reflective unleashing of violence, then how are we to understand the processes by which this disposition is lodged deep in the soldierly body? What is it about soldierly bodies that seem to provide for extreme levels of violence?

Colonizing the Pre-Reflective: Crafting Bodies for Violence

As Ken Plummer notes:

> ‘Lived life is a dialectical compound of self and society and the organic matrix of body and mind … we must acknowledge that experiencing individuals can never be isolated from their functioning bodies and their constraining social worlds – there is no room for a bodiless idealism or a mindless materialism. Body, mind, context, society – *all* are in constant engagement with each other and *all* need to be taken into account’ (Plummer, 1983: 54; *original emphasis*).

Or as Benton put it some decades ago:

> ‘The task for any proposed realignment of the human social sciences … can now be seen as one of providing conceptual room for organic, bodily and environmental aspects and dimensions of human social life’ (Benton, 1991: 25).

Phenomenological perspectives see the body and mind as seamless entities, where the body is understood as the medium by which everyday social life is realised through the practical consciousness nested in the pre-reflective realm (Giddens, 1984; Crossley, 1995; Katz, 2002; Coole, 2005, 2007; Hockey, 2009). Bodies are more than abstract appendages to social practice or benign, passive entities that provide a home to cognition. Rather they can be said to ‘have a life of their own’ with their sentience going beyond the component elements of the blood, flesh, tissue, bone and skin of which they are comprised. Spontaneously returning a wave of the hand to a known (or indeed, unknown) person represents a mundane example of the practical body in pre-reflective social action. Invoking the theoretical understanding of Merleau-Ponty, the sociologist Crossley (1995: 53) argues that:

> ‘Our principle relation to our world is not a matter of “I think” … but rather “I can” … the “I” is misleading in this phrase because it suggests … the reflective and

> reflexive subject … but the "can" clearly conveys … understanding that our primary relation to our environment consists in *practical competence*' (*emphasis added*).

The things we label body and mind are more appropriately conceived of as undifferentiated entities, cultural phenomena that are two sides of the same coin (Csordas, 1993: 140; Hockey, 2002).

Given my argument that pre-reflective aspects of embodied trajectory can rise to the surface in the tunnel of forward panic, what can be said of Slough's skill sets put to such devastating use in Nisour Square? As a further strand of his defence intended to underscore military professionalism, he writes:

> I joined the United Sates[34] Army in Aug, 1999 and completed my service in Aug 2002. During boot camp ... I received extensive training in both rifles and machineguns. After boot camp, I attended Advanced Infantry Training where I received even more in depth training with firearms to include fire and movement, target recognition and training on Military Operations in Urban Terrain … I have successfully completed all qualification courses required by the U.S. Department of State to carry the M4 rifle, Glock 9mm pistol, M3203 grenade launcher, M249 machinegun, M240 Machinegun, Remington 870 shotgun, and have had familiaization instructions on the AK47.

If we are to believe that the Blackwater contractors sensed that 'contact' had been initiated at Nisour Square, whether through small-arms fire or a distant explosion, the PSD probably experienced a 'stress, intensity and speed [of their own movements] …via a vast surge of collective energy' (Hockey, 2009: 482) and in turn, rapidly carried out collective weapon drill. This drill represents a key aspect of their collective 'somatic mode of attention', an

embodied state of readiness applicable across social practice more widely,[35] but with particular salience to military and former combat trained individuals who have distinct ways in which they 'objectify their bodies' in relation to one another (Csordas, 1993: 138). Somatic modes of attention are argued to be culturally elaborated ways of attending to one's own body and those of others in close proximity in ways that underscore the intersubjectivity of bodies in time and space (Csordas, 1993:139). As Hockey notes in his embodied sensitivity to infantryman training in the British Army, training 'drills'

> 'Consist of programmed repetitive actions, designed to effect particular bodily practices … there are drills for … weapons handling … [and] for the use of the bayonet on the enemy' (Hockey, 2002: 156).

Military training seeks to reconfigure the individual's somatic memory, to foster a 'practical mastery' (Hockey, 2002: 158) of specific social practices – including the ability to kill (in some branches), with one's 'bare hands'.[36] It will be recalled that Slough's reference to corporeal transformation foregrounded haptic[37] expertise in relation to a wide range of weaponry. Ultimately, these abilities penetrate the very being of those involved through the pre-reflective realm by remaking the mind-body nexus. Though these pre-reflective embodied skill capitals may lie at the heart of combat effectiveness, the extremes of violence liberated in the tunnel of forward panic can lead to uncontained levels of spill-over violence in the case of soldiers and veterans, a concern now taken up in relation to questions of responsibility and habituated social practice.

Discussion: Situating Military Embodied Responsibility

Human agents' openness to habituated practice comes into sharpest focus for those who have been immersed into the embodied regimes of military life where the most intense and protracted of corporeal regimes can be found. As Shilling puts it in a general sense:

> 'Habits seep into the furthest recesses of the body. They have a structural basis in the nervous system, shape the selections our senses make, condition our preferences, predate and provide a basis for our deliberative orientations to the environment, direct our muscular responses, and structure our identities' (Shilling, 2008: 13).

Underscoring the tenacity of embodied military acumen in regard to Special Force soldiers murder of four spouses/partners at Fort Bragg in 2002, a U.S Army Colonel tells Oprah Winfrey that:

> 'If you're on a battlefield ... one second in the middle of the night ... [there is] movement in a shadow and if you don't move instantaneously, you're dead, and those are the kind of reactions you bring home. You bring that kind of violence home, and ... it takes time for that to kind of settle out.'[38]

The Colonel's focus on reaction is important here since habituated response is central to effectiveness on the battlefield. Delving deeper into the 'force of habit' to which we routinely refer, it is argued in phenomenological terms that 'in habitual life – in bodily intentionality – it is *not* the case that I *first* get the "thing" and *then* pass an interpretive judgment; rather, it is only *as* already interpreted' (Russon, 1994: 299; emphasis in original). That bodies are irremediably in the world and engaged in a relentless dialectic of pre-reflective meaning-making and allied response shaped by unspoken habit (Katz, 2002), is of central concern

here. Etched deep into the somatic memory, embodied habits (Joas and Kilpinen, 2006: 324-325) can lie dormant in the individual for decades as noted in the case of the 'old soldier who cannot stop himself saluting if anyone shouts "Attention!"' (Campbell, 1996: 167). As Campbell notes in regard to habit 'every single deliberate, freely-chosen [or coerced] ... action contains the potential to become the first step in the construction of an unconsidered and automatic, habitual routine of conduct' (Campbell 1996:163). In respect of British army infantrymen, Hockey argues that:

> 'Fighting practices are learnt … and the practical intelligence they instil in the body comes sharply into play in extreme situations … it is this practical intelligence which allows the infantryman to … destroy others' (Hockey, 2002: 158).

Thus, it can be argued that military training fosters a 'conservative agency ... by perpetuating embodied rituals that act as a reservoir of sedimented memories in order to lend coherence to social life' (Coole, 2005: 130). The implication of learning drills of various kinds is considerable for soldiers in particular since they chime with the general openness individuals have for unreflective, habitual practice where 'immediate performing has the form of compulsion [and actors are] *called upon to respond to the situation* in a specific way' (Russon, 1994: 299; emphasis in original).

Given the centrality of habit to social practice, it is argued that what is needed is a 'phenomenology of responsibility' (Russon, 1994: 298) that avoids the binary framing of unrealistic voluntarism on the one hand and paralysing fatalism on the other (Coole, 2005: 125). Untimely, brutal and 'exceptional deaths' (Murji, 1998: 72-73) demand perpetrators be held to account for their actions. And, responsibility for the use of weapons and 'bare hands' against unarmed, weaker others is surely to be found in the intent of individuals and groups

that perpetrate such atrocities. Yet, responsibility can be seen as a social construct[39] that resonates most strongly with the realms of law and justice. Some legal/social systems have no concept of individual responsibility, but rather assign misdeeds to the collective – for example, the clan, family and so on (Melton, 1995). In other contexts, misdeeds are framed as taboo violation to be expunged ritually. Criminal justice systems of relevance to the current discussion depend on an individual perpetrator – Slough - who can be found to have responsibility. The wellspring of this responsibility is typically considered to be the mind, within the context of rational actors constructed through notions of 'premeditation', 'mental' function, 'deliberation', 'intent' and - in respect of defence for murder – 'insanity' and 'diminished responsibility'.[40] This is the (male) actor 'at the heart of modern understandings of autonomy, freedom, subjectivity and responsibility' against which the political phenomenologist Diana Coole argues (2005: 124).With its roots in the modernist and masculinist *episteme*, criminal justice's Cartesian mind-body dualism constitutes the actor as a voluntaristic decision maker whose ideas of agency have fused 'phenomenal processes – such as consciousness, meaning-generation … reflexivity, will' into the 'unified … figure of the ontological individual' (Coole, 2005: 128). Whilst this conception of agency resonates with the subject of law in the developed polities, the model does in a limited way recognise perpetrator's emotional 'state' where affect is argued to influence culpability (Finkel and Parrott, 2006). In recognising that individuals may act 'better than they know how' (Giddens, 1984) in respect of their embodied, emotional realm – ie 'crimes of passion' - thinking in these terms remains wedded to the rational actor model where 'emotion' and 'irrationality' are conflated - particularly in the case of women (Showalter, 1998). A different approach – as indicated – would be to embody the actor in ways that acknowledge the body's sentience, as an 'unfinished project' (Shilling, 1997), the capacities of which depend on pre-reflection. Taken from a phenomenological perspective, this would be to acknowledge that we both

'have' and 'are' bodies (Morgan and Scott, 1993), and that these bodies demonstrate a proclivity towards particular social accomplishments nested in their corporal trajectories (Nettleton and Watson, 1998), in this case its military and militarised pathway. Rather than beginning with the mind as locus of rationality, our starting point would be the 'perceptual, corporeal lifeworld ... where the practical intelligence of bodies condemns them to meaning' (Coole, 2005: 128, 129). In turn this leads me to suggest that whether or not the Blackwater veterans at Nisour Square should be punished falls outside of a sociological remit, though it could be argued either way. The Blackwater PSD were responding to situational and interactional forces within the context of a well-honed proficiency in violence unleashed inappropriately and with devastating consequences through a changed state in the tunnel of forward panic. Framed in these terms, the perpetrators might not be seen as the autonomous decision making agents constructed in law, or the wider political context where in Iraq (for example), the struggle to 'win hearts and minds' calls for responsibility – and perhaps socially at least, deserves a perpetrator who can be held to account.

Conclusion

Informed by interactional perspectives on violence and a recognition of the embodied groundings of social life, I have argued that current explanations for the killings in Nisour Square as inhering in the good guy/bad guy dichotomy are unsatisfactory as they tend to neglect the situational and practical accomplishments of particular bodies trained in specific ways. It was also argued that military or militarised bodies' proficiency in violence can help to explain their tendency towards brutality in the tunnel of forward panic. Seen in this way, the problem turns on both responsibility and the dangers of lodging lethal skill capital in bodies. Embodying violence can have far-reaching unintended effects,[41] the likes of which

are borne most heavily by military and militarised masculinities trained and mobilised in the interests of state power.

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[1] I prefer the word 'militarised' to 'military' (as in Private Military Security), since it is more attuned to the core beliefs shaping social practice in the industry (see Enloe, 2002:23-24 on 'core militaristic beliefs').

[2] Abbreviated to 'contractors' in the remainder of the article.

[3] In an attempt to shake-off its deteriorating image, the company changed its name to *Xe Services* in 2009.

[4] See: http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN0439965120071005 accessed 11th November 2010.

[5] See: http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/09/17/iraq.main/index.html accessed 11th November 2010.

[6] See: http://www.alternet.org/world/148594/wikileaks_iraq_war_logs_reveal_private_military_contractors_killing_with_impunity/ accessed 11th November 2010.

[7] The spelling and typographical errors made by Slough remain as per the original document (including the incorrect date).

[8] See: http://www.pacificfreepress.com/news/1/5493-i-am-allawi-blackwaters-last-nisour-square-ghost.html accessed 17th December 2010.

[9] See: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/us/19slough.html accessed 11th November 2010.

[10] See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8436780 accessed 11th November 2010.

[11] See: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1092493/Five-Blackwater-security-guards-indicted-shooting-17-Iraqi-civilians.html accessed 11th November 2010.

[12] See http://lubbockonline.com/stories/051808/loc_280231460.shtml accessed 11th November 2010.

[13] See: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/us/19slough.html accessed 11th November 2010.
[14] See: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/us/19slough.html?pagewanted=2&fta=y accessed 11th November 2010.

[15] The Blackwater contractors have not been prosecuted for the killings. See: http://community.livejournal.com/ontd_political/7112331.html accessed 16 November 2010.

[16] See: http://articles.cnn.com/2009-03-31/us/blackwater.falluja.anniversary_1_blackwater-jerry-zovko-falluja?_s=PM:US accessed 11th November 2010.

[17] Illustrative in the British context is the 'Yorkshire Ripper' Peter Sutcliffe, whose background and 'pathology' was endlessly discussed in the popular media for a considerable period after his imprisonment for murdering 13 women.

[18] Also: see http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901624,00.html accessed 11th November 2010.

[19] For an illustrative case focusing on the actions of Wuterich, see: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/03/15/60minutes/main2574973_page3.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody accessed 11th November 2010.

[20] Though there can be little doubt that particular branches of armed forces' foster misogynistic and aggressive hyper-masculinity, yet these co-exist alongside a plurality of military masculinities (Morgan, 1987, 1994, Higate, 2003; Hutchings, 2008). The question however, concerns the extent to which hyper-masculinity has a causal role in the violence discussed here, as well as the brutality of violence perpetrated by military and militarised masculinities – a point taken up later in the article.

[21] A related question is raised by Stephen Tomsen who questions the implied causal links between excessive alcohol intake and violence when he states: 'Plenty of very drunk patrons did not get involved in arguments and fights'. (Tomsen, 1997: 94).

[22] Ongoing research into the Democratic Republic of Congo's national army found that female service members framed themselves as considerably more violent than their male peers, including their self-reported role in sexualised violence (personal communication Dr Maria Baaz-Eriksson).

[23] Of course, it could be argued that no two individuals can have 'the same experience', yet background is often invoked at a high level of generality, for example in the current examples 'soldiers' and 'veterans', identities that are seen to contain the generative seeds of violence.

[24] The 'politics of restraint' in the PMS industry is taken up elsewhere by the author (2011).

[25] For example, Collin's identifies the significant gap between empirically observed violence and so-called 'entertainment violence', the latter of which is accorded significant influence in shaping perception since, not least, directly observed violence is rare.

[26] Collins definition of violence is absolutely central to the line of argument developed here. His concern is with 'physical violence … which has a clear core referent', to be distinguished from that of 'symbolic violence' that lacks the 'situational contingencies' of the former (Collins, 2008: 24).

[27] These processes are akin to a schema, the most influential sociological analysis of which is to be found in Smith's discussion of a 'mentally ill' female (Smith, 1978).

[28] For an illustrative historical account, see Lord (1925).

[29] Though again, we should treat such statements with caution and might want to consider them as particular vocabularies of motive framed by appeals to a weakened sense of agency. As Collin's states: 'Motives are a category of folk cognition used by participants for explaining events to themselves, and by outsiders such as news reporters … and officials for the purpose of settling on a public account of why an incident of violence happened' (Collins, 2008: 337).

[30] See: http://www.thisisdevon.co.uk/news/Judge-jails-man-red-mist-assault-girlfriend/article-2205819-detail/article.html accessed 17th November 2010.

[31] See: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1275818/Uproar-U-S-police-officer-caught-video-stamping-innocent-Mexicans-head.html#ixzz18Mf6BUe2 accessed 17th December 2010.

[32] See: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/19/us/19slough.html?_r=1&pagewanted=2 accessed 6th January 2010.
[33] I would like to thank Professor Tony King for drawing this to my attention.

[34] In line with earlier practice, the account is reproduced here complete with its typographical and grammatical errors.

[35] Crossing a busy road requires that (civilian) pedestrians' routinely adopt a specific somatic mode of attention designed to mitigate the very real threat of injury and even death.

[36] Though there is considerable complexity here in regard to soldiers who (1) resist the corporeal regimes imposed upon them, and (2) bring with them civilian bodies of great variability and similarly diverse capacities for transformation. On resistance see Hockey, 1986 and Kirke, 2010. On soldiers 'too fat to fight' see: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/15/AR2010061502306.html?wprss=rss_health accessed 17th November 2010.

[37] The word haptic relates to the sense of touch.

[38] See: http://www.aaconsult.com/lariam/lariam_news_21.html accessed 17th November 2010.
[39] I would like to acknowledge the co-operation of Professor Randall Collins on this key point via email correspondence.

[40] However, whilst sensitive to the 'sexual politics of Pre-Menstrual Tension' (Laws, 1983), it is worth considering that the 'changed state' argued to be characteristic of PMT has at times been used in defence of those accused of murder and other criminal acts. Here a particular form of embodiment is mobilised to inflect perpetrator responsibility. See, for example: Horney, 1978; Taylor and Dalton, 1982; Harry and Balcer, 2006.

[41] Although, anecdotally those prone to reflecting on their capacity for extreme violence may actually exercise *greater* restraint in its use.