

Inside Erik Prince's secret proposal to outsource the war in Afghanistan

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By Josh Rogin

Erik Prince in 2007. (Linda Davidson/The Washington Post)

Businessman and Blackwater founder Erik Prince has been shopping around Washington a [detailed proposal](#) for replacing thousands of American soldiers in Afghanistan with contractors from foreign countries led by a “viceroy” with almost unfettered power over U.S. military and diplomatic policy.

Prince has been [public](#) about the broad outlines of his plan, which is reportedly supported by some senior White House officials, including chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon, but many crucial details have not been brought into public view, until now. Prince has laid out his proposal in a PowerPoint presentation to government officials, lawmakers and congressional officials.

Entitled “A Strategic Economy of Force,” it is nothing less than a plan to change the way Afghanistan is governed, how the war is fought and the very nature of the U.S.-Afghan bilateral relationship.

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Prince's plan is opposed by senior military leaders including national security adviser H.R. McMaster, key lawmakers who have received Prince's brief and senior military officials who have fought in Afghanistan over the past 16 years.

“It's something that would come from a bad soldier of fortune novel,” said Sen. Lindsay O. Graham (R-S.C.) who met with Prince about the proposal. “It's a military-political approach and it would be a disaster on both fronts.”

Prince has described the proposal [in interviews this week](#) as a plan to send 5,500 private military contractors to embed with [Afghan National Security Forces](#) units at the battalion level to fight the Taliban, supported by a 90-plane private air force. Prince presents the plan as an alternative for President Trump to the proposal put forth by his top commander in Afghanistan, [Gen. John Nicholson](#), who has [publicly called for](#) a “few thousand” more U.S. troops to be added to the approximately 8,200 U.S. soldiers there now.

Prince's proposal states that Afghanistan is headed to a complete meltdown and is effectively in “bankruptcy” with the best way forward analogous to a Chapter 11 reorganization. The proposal would “allow for Afghan political decentralization the way it worked for centuries,” the proposal states.

Prince wants Trump to appoint a “trustee” to preside over all U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan with authority over the military commanders, the U.S. ambassadors and even the Afghan military's own decision-making regarding operations, targeting, rules of engagement and internal promotions.

That handover of control to what Prince has called a “viceroy” is a non-starter for many on Capitol Hill, especially

since that person would also control spending and contracting. Graham said that if Trump endorses Prince's proposal, he will fight him at every turn.

"I trust our generals, I don't trust contractors to make our national security policy decisions," said Graham. "It sends the wrong message about the importance of Afghanistan to the United States. The last thing in the world we want to do is contract out our homeland security."

There are signs Trump is open to the idea. For one, Trump disparaged his own generals, including Nicholson, in a July meeting [reported by](#) NBC News. Trump compared his willingness to ignore his generals' advice on Afghanistan to a distorted story about the renovation of Manhattan's '21' Club in the 1980s.

In Prince's proposal, he compares Afghanistan with another Trump renovation project, the redo of the [Wollman Ice Rink](#) in New York's Central Park in the 1980s, which Trump often brags came in ahead of schedule and under budget. The proposal claims Prince's plan would provide "an off ramp to the longest war in American history and a sustainable victory for America."

Several officials briefed on the plan told me that Prince's idea, while possibly appealing on the surface, is problematic for a number of reasons. First, according to the Pentagon, the United States is prohibited by law and policy from employing contractors in a military combat role. Prince has told officials that the legal workaround would be to place the contractor program not under [Title 10 of the U.S. Code](#), which governs overt military operations, but under [Title 50](#), which governs classified operations.

One congressional official briefed by Prince said that placing the contractors under Title 50 would severely compromise their accountability and hinder public congressional oversight. The proposal states that contractors who commit crimes would be tried in Afghanistan under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. But officials said contractors would not be covered by the U.S.-Afghanistan bilateral security agreement and the legal authorities would be unclear.

"The whole concept runs afoul of Afghan sovereignty, which we've said we support for 16 years," the official said. "Accountability is crucial in a war zone. This is not what America is. This is not how America fights."

Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), who was also briefed by Prince, declined to comment on the proposal itself, citing its secrecy. But he defended the use of contractors in general.

"I take exception to anyone who suggests that contractors are not brave and sacrificing a lot for America, whether they are pulling triggers or delivering mail for our soldiers," he told me.

A former senior commander in Afghanistan told me that while contractors are fine for logistics, training, site security and medical services, placing them on the front lines of the battle with the Taliban would be a huge mistake.

"Contracting out engagement with the enemy — hiring mercenaries for offensive operations normally restricted to uniformed military members — strikes me as misguided and dangerous," the former military commander said. "We have repeatedly seen the shortcomings of mercenary forces, and those contemplating this course of action should revisit that history."

Under the Prince proposal, contractors would be embedded inside each of the 91-plus battalions of the Afghan National Army on a long-term basis. Special forces veterans would be recruited from the United States, Britain, France, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Norway, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

The selling point to Trump is a "seamless drawdown" for U.S. and NATO forces, a "no risk method" for bringing home the troops. The proposal states the U.S. military presence could be reduced to about 2,000 within 20 months.

Prince says the plan would cost under \$10 billion a year, less than a quarter of what the United States spends in

Afghanistan now. A representative for Prince declined to say if he or his company, [Frontier Services Group](#), would bid on the contract. Prince told CNN this week that he knows that Trump's top generals are opposed to the plan.

"General McMaster does not like this idea because he is a three star conventional Army general. He's wedded to the idea the U.S. Army's got to solve this," Prince said. "But I think for the president he's got to say, after 16 years, when are we going to try something different?"

The generals are left to argue for something they know is difficult and unpopular — asking the president to add more U.S troops and take ownership of a war he doesn't like. But Prince's proposal is dangerous and unlikely to work. It would feed the Taliban's narrative that Afghanistan is under occupation and that America never cared in the first place.

"What does it do to their morale and mentality if we leave and hand this over to contractors?" one official said. "This hands global jihadism a major victory. The propaganda element is hard to overstate."

Graham said Trump told him personally last month that he would sign off on his generals' Afghanistan plan, before he apparently decided to rethink it. Trump still has time to do the right thing and show that the United States does have the wherewithal to continue trying to stabilize Afghanistan, despite the challenges.

"If the president doesn't have the will to see this through, we're going to lose and another 9/11 will come from Afghanistan," Graham said. "Whether he likes it or not, he's in charge of Afghanistan."