

Mercenaries and assassins: The real face of Obama's "good war"

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Reports that mercenaries employed by the notorious Blackwater-Xe military contracting firm participated in CIA assassinations in Iraq and Afghanistan have further exposed the real character of so-called "good war" that is being escalated by the Obama administration.

Citing former employees of the firm and US intelligence agents, the *New York Times* reported Friday that Blackwater gunmen, ostensibly contracted as security guards, "participated in some of the CIA's most sensitive activities—clandestine raids with agency officers against people suspected of being insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan and the transporting of detainees."

These "snatch and grab" operations—many of them involving killings of individuals suspected of participating in the resistance to US occupation—"occurred on an almost nightly basis during the height of the Iraqi insurgency from 2004 to 2006, with Blackwater employees playing central roles," the *Times* reports.

Both the *Times* and the *Washington Post* quoted unnamed intelligence officials and ex-Blackwater operatives as asserting that the involvement of the company's mercenaries in assassinations and abductions was not planned. Rather, they claimed, it was a matter of the division of labor between CIA operatives and private guards supposedly hired for the purpose of protecting them becoming "blurred."

According to the *Times*, the Blackwater guards "were supposed to only provide perimeter security during raids, leaving it up to CIA officers and Special Operations military personnel to capture or kill suspected insurgents." The newspaper added, "But in the chaos of operations, the roles of Blackwater, CIA and military personnel sometimes merged."

The pretense that armed Blackwater contractors, most of them former US Special Operations troops themselves, would be used merely as security guards for CIA personnel is absurd on its face. Whatever justification was given for the contract, the "skill set" that Blackwater offered was precisely that of highly trained assassins.

A spokesman for Blackwater-Xe responded to the press reports by insisting that there was never any contract for the firm to participate in raids with CIA or Special Forces troops "in Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else." He added: "Any

allegation to the contrary by any news organization would be false."

The absence of a contract spelling out Blackwater's role in assassination missions is hardly surprising, given that the mercenary outfit's chief attraction for the CIA is precisely its ability to act without regard to any government oversight or regard for civil or military law. As the *Post* put it, citing a retired intelligence officer, "For government employees, working with contractors offered ways to circumvent red tape."

Blackwater's role as an extra-legal extension of the Central Intelligence Agency tasked with dirty operations with which the CIA did not want its employees directly associated is more than evident.

An article published in the current (January) edition of *Vanity Fair*, written by Adam Ciralsky, a former CIA attorney, cites intelligence sources in reporting that Eric Prince, the multi-millionaire Republican founder-owner of Blackwater, was not merely a private contractor, but a "full-blown asset" recruited by the agency precisely for such operations.

The central role played by Blackwater in the CIA's activities became increasingly clear as key agency officials left the CIA and took up positions in Blackwater's management. These included J. Cofer Black, the former head of the agency's Counter Terrorism Center, Enrique Prado, the center's former chief of operations, and Rob Richer, formerly the second-in-command of the CIA's clandestine service.

In Iraq, Blackwater's employees acted with complete impunity, killing large numbers of civilians without being held to account by either the Iraqi regime or US military commanders. The scope of this violence came to public attention in September 2007, when a convoy of Blackwater operatives stopped in Baghdad's Nisour Square and without provocation opened fire on unarmed civilians, killing 17 Iraqis.

Six of the Blackwater mercenaries have been charged by federal prosecutors with voluntary manslaughter over the killings. One of them has pled guilty and is expected to testify against the others in a trial starting in February.

Meanwhile, the company is being sued in separate civil cases brought on behalf of 70 Iraqis over killings by the firm's employees in Iraq. Two ex-employees of Blackwater have filed affidavits in these cases charging that company head Prince

may have either murdered or ordered the murders of individuals cooperating with the Justice Department's investigation of the firm.

Friday's report in the *Times* follows a series of revelations that have surfaced since last June, when CIA Director Leon Panetta briefed Congressional intelligence committees about a covert assassination program involving Blackwater, which he claimed to have only just discovered and terminated. Panetta asserted that the program had never been implemented. Until then, it had been kept secret from Congress, reportedly on the orders of former vice president Dick Cheney.

It was subsequently revealed that employees of Blackwater, since renamed Xe Services in an attempt to shed the firm's infamous reputation, were actively involved in an ongoing assassination program on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, carried out by means of Predator drones. The Blackwater mercenaries were assembling and loading the 500 pound bombs and Hellfire missiles used to carry out so-called "targeted killings," which have taken the lives of hundreds of civilians. In addition, they provided security for the drone bases and according to some reports, participated in intelligence operations that determined the targets for the attacks.

There have been at least 65 such aerial assassination strikes in Pakistan since August 2008, with a reported death toll of over 625 people. Some estimates put the number killed at over 1,000, many of them women and children. Most of these attacks have taken place since the Obama administration took office.

In addition to the more than 30,000 additional US troops being sent into Afghanistan, Obama has authorized the CIA to dramatically escalate the drone attacks. US officials have also warned the Pakistani government that these attacks are to be extended beyond the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan into Baluchistan, and potentially against the crowded city of Quetta, where Afghan Taliban leaders have reportedly taken refuge.

It is far from clear, based on the *Times* report, to what extent Blackwater's role in targeted assassinations, both from the air and on the ground, is continuing. Since 2001, the firm has netted over \$1.5 billion in government contracts, providing armed mercenaries for the CIA, the State Department and the Pentagon.

One thing is certain, assassinations of the kind involving Blackwater mercenaries are going to be carried out on a far greater scale as part of Obama's escalation of the US war in Afghanistan.

These plans were hinted at by Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus during his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday. "There's no question you've got to kill or capture those bad guys that are not reconcilable," Petraeus told the senators. "And we are intending to do that."

The general continued, "In fact, we actually will be

increasing our counterterrorist component of the overall strategy." He said that additional "national mission force elements" will be arriving in Afghanistan by next spring.

The "elements" cited by Petraeus include Special Operations units like the Army's classified Delta Force, as well as CIA hit squads and, in all probability, mercenary forces like those fielded by Blackwater.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, tapped by Obama to direct the Afghan war, was previously the head of the super-secret Joint Special Operations Command, which consists of such special forces troops and assassination squads. Petraeus said that McChrystal could brief members of the Senate committee on this element of the Obama surge in a closed session.

It is noteworthy that the controversy in the major media is centered on whether the use of Blackwater mercenaries to hunt down and murder individuals suspected of opposing the US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan represented an illegitimate use of private contractors in carrying out a core government function.

The murders themselves are not an issue. In 1976, President Gerald Ford issued an executive order barring the CIA from directly carrying out assassinations or contracting them out to others. The decision followed a wave of public outrage over a series of revelations of CIA assassination plots around the globe that earned the agency the epithet "Murder, Inc."

In 2001, President George W. Bush overturned Ford's ruling, issuing his own intelligence finding that such restrictions no longer applied in the "global war on terrorism." The Democrats offered no objections, and the media has treated it entirely as a matter of course, while blacking out any serious reporting on the resulting carnage and victims.

As with every other essential question, President Barack Obama has adopted Bush's policy. "Targeted assassinations," extraordinary rendition, the use of mercenaries, all of the sordid crimes carried out under the Bush administration continue. These brutal methods are about to be unleashed with redoubled force against the peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan as Obama oversees new war crimes.



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