

America's Death Squads Inc.

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The US Central Intelligence Agency contracted the now notorious private security firm Blackwater for a secret program of “targeted killings” against alleged Al Qaeda operatives, according to media reports Thursday.

The agency essentially was attempting to subcontract state assassinations to a private company employing mercenaries.

In June, current CIA Director Leon Panetta briefed leading members of congressional intelligence committees on the program and said he ordered it terminated. The existence of the assassination program had been kept secret from Congress, apparently on the orders of former Vice President Dick Cheney. Panetta said he learned of it only after six months as the agency's chief.

According to the New York Times, which broke the story of Blackwater's involvement, the arrangement was never formalized with a contract. Instead a “gentlemen's agreement” was worked out between top Bush administration and CIA officials and Blackwater founder and owner Erik Prince.

Under Prince, a former Navy Seal, Blackwater (now renamed Xe Services) has taken in billions from the US government to field mercenaries (most of them ex-US military special operations personnel) in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The name Blackwater became infamous in the wake of a series of incidents involving the use of excessive and often gratuitous force by its operatives against Iraqi civilians. These culminated in the September 2007 Nisour Square shooting spree in which Blackwater gunmen killed 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians in Baghdad.

The massacre was the inevitable end product of a system in which mercenary security contractors are able to kill with complete impunity, restrained neither by the laws of the country that they occupy nor by the code of military justice. This itself is only one reflection of the predatory and illegal character of the war as a whole.

Prince has the most intimate connections with the Republican right. His sister is a former head of the Michigan Republican Party. He is one of the principals in a foundation that is a major funder of right-wing Christian fundamentalist organizations like Focus on the Family.

While these Republican connections were seen by many as key to Blackwater's success, both the Pentagon and the State Department continue to award Prince's company contracts under the Obama administration.

In a court case brought on behalf of Iraqi victims of the Nisour Square massacre, two former Blackwater employees have submitted sworn statements charging, among other things, “that Mr. Prince and his employees murdered, or had murdered, one or more persons who have provided information, or who were planning to provide information, to the federal authorities about the ongoing criminal conduct” of the company. Both men said that they feared for their own lives.

The Washington Post quoted an unnamed former CIA official who said that under the assassination program Blackwater personnel spent a great deal of time conducting “simulated missions that often involved kidnapping.”

The revelations about Blackwater’s involvement in the CIA assassination program raise a host of questions. Why has it been kept secret from the American public even after CIA Director Panetta briefed Congress on the program more than two months ago? Did Panetta conceal the information from Congress, or did the members of the intelligence committees keep their mouths shut after learning of this potentially criminal conspiracy?

More fundamentally, the CIA-Blackwater deal testifies to the profound and continuing degeneration of democracy in the United States.

It is one more piece of evidence—as if more were needed—that the Bush administration was a criminal regime that operated in open defiance of the US law and the Constitution, directing assassinations and torture from the White House.

Yet no one has been held accountable. The Obama administration covers for the criminal practices of its predecessor, while continuing the wars of aggression which are the gravest of these crimes.

The Obama White House and the Democratic-led Congress are in continuous retreat before the pressure of the military and intelligence complex—a state within the state—to halt any investigations, much less prosecutions, of the crimes of the Bush administration.

This campaign was evident again on Thursday, when former CIA director Michael Hayden flatly defended Blackwater, saying that the agency needed to make use of the company’s “very discreet skill sets.”

What emerges even more clearly from these latest revelations is the picture of a government in which individuals such as Prince, and his counterparts within the military and intelligence agencies, exercise extraordinary and unaccountable power.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA earned the epithet “Murder, Inc.” for its involvement in series of assassinations and assassination attempts against foreign leaders, ranging from Patrice Lumumba in the Congo to Cuba’s Fidel Castro.

What is revealed in the CIA-Blackwater deal, however, is even more sinister. The agency was contracting death squads composed of mercenaries organized by a right-wing figure with intimate connections to the Republican Party.

There is a real danger that the same forces that have been allowed to kill and torture with impunity in Iraq and Afghanistan will be turned against militant workers and others challenging the interests of the ruling elite and the profit system in the United States itself. In short, death squad violence utilized by American imperialism from El Salvador to Iraq can

be brought home.

Indeed, Blackwater has already deployed its highly trained killers in domestic operations. In 2005, hundreds of the company's mercenaries carrying automatic weapons were sent into the streets of Katrina-stricken New Orleans.

The use of these elements comes together with the continuation of domestic spying and the implementation of a system of "preventive detention" allowing the indefinite imprisonment of enemies of the state without charges or trials. The scaffolding of dictatorship has been erected in the US.

This trend continues unabated under the Obama administration. The policy is dictated by class interests and the nature of the crisis confronting US and world capitalism. The unprecedented level of social inequality dividing America's financial aristocracy from working people is fundamentally incompatible with democracy.

These grave threats to democratic rights can be defeated—and top government officials brought to account for their crimes—only by means of political struggle by the working class mobilized in its own party fighting for the socialist transformation of society.

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