

Bush's Global 'Dirty War'

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Global Research, October 03, 2007

consortiumnews.com 1 October 2007

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

George W. Bush has transformed elite units of the U.S. military – including Special Forces and highly trained sniper teams – into “death squads” with a license to kill unarmed targets on the suspicion that they are a threat to American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to evidence from recent court cases.

Though this reality has been the subject of whispers within the U.S. intelligence community for several years, it has now emerged into public view with two attempted prosecutions of American soldiers whose defense attorneys cited “rules of engagement” that permit the killing of suspected insurgents.

One case involved Army sniper Jorge G. Sandoval Jr. who was acquitted by a U.S. military court in Baghdad on Sept. 28 in the murders of two unarmed Iraqi men – one on April 27 and the other on May 11 – because the jury accepted defense arguments that the killings were within the approved rules.

The Sandoval case also revealed a classified program in which the Pentagon's Asymmetric Warfare Group encouraged U.S. military snipers in Iraq to drop “bait” – such as electrical cords and ammunition – and then shoot Iraqis who pick up the items, according to evidence in the Sandoval case. [[Washington Post, Sept. 24, 2007](#)]

(Sandoval was convicted of a lesser charge of planting a coil of copper wire on one of the slain Iraqis. He was sentenced to five months in prison and a reduction in rank but will be eligible to rejoin his unit in as few as 44 days.)

The other recent case of authorized murder of an insurgent suspect surfaced at a military court hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in mid-September. Two U.S. Special Forces soldiers took part in the execution of an Afghani who was suspected of leading an insurgent group.

Though the Afghani, identified as Nawab Buntangyar, responded to questions and offered no resistance when encountered on Oct. 13, 2006, he was shot dead by Master Sgt. Troy Anderson on orders from his superior officer, Capt. Dave Staffel.

According to evidence at the Fort Bragg proceedings, an earlier Army investigation had cleared the two soldiers because they had been operating under “rules of engagement” that empowered them to kill individuals who have been designated “enemy combatants,” even if the targets were unarmed and presented no visible threat.

Yet, whatever the higher-ups approve as “rules of engagement,” the practice of murdering unarmed suspects remains a violation of the laws of war and – theoretically at least – would open up the offending country's chain of command to war-crimes charges.

Troubling Picture

The troubling picture is that the U.S. chain of command, presumably up to President Bush, has authorized loose “rules of engagement” that allow targeted killings – as well as other objectionable tactics including arbitrary arrests, “enhanced interrogations,” kidnappings in third countries with “extraordinary renditions” to countries that torture, secret CIA prisons, detentions without trial, and “reeducation camps” for younger detainees.

The U.S. counterinsurgency and security operations in Iraq and Afghanistan also have been augmented by heavily armed mercenaries, such as the Blackwater “security contractors” who operate outside the law and were accused by Iraqi authorities of killing at least 11 Iraqi civilians in a shooting incident on Sept. 16.

The use of lethal force against unarmed suspects and civilians has a notorious history in irregular warfare especially when an occupying army finds itself confronting an indigenous resistance in which guerrillas and their political supporters blend in with the local population.

In effect, Bush’s “global war on terror” appears to have reestablished what was known during the Vietnam War as Operation Phoenix, a program that assassinated Vietcong cadre, including suspected communist political allies.

Through a classified Pentagon training program known as “Project X,” the lessons of Operation Phoenix from the 1960s were passed on to Third World armies, especially in Latin America allegedly giving a green light to some of the “dirty wars” that swept the region in the following decades. [For details, see [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.](#)]

Bush’s global strategy also has similarities to “Operation Condor” in which South American right-wing military regimes in the 1970s sent assassins on cross-border operations to eliminate “subversives.”

Despite behind-the-scenes support for some of these Latin American “death squads,” the U.S. government presented itself as the great defender of human rights and criticized repressive countries that engaged in extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions.

That gap between American rhetoric and reality widened after 9/11 as Bush waged his “war on terror,” while continuing to impress the American news media with pretty words about his commitment to human rights – as occurred in [his address to the United Nations on Sept. 25.](#)

Under Bush’s remarkable double standards, he has taken the position that he can override both international law and the U.S. Constitution in deciding who gets basic human rights and who doesn’t. He sees himself as the final judge of whether people he deems “bad guys” should live or die, or face indefinite imprisonment and even torture.

Effective Immunity

While such actions by other leaders might provoke demands for an international war-crimes tribunal, there would appear to be no likelihood of that in this case since the offending nation is the United States. Given its “superpower” status, the United States and its senior leadership are effectively beyond the reach of international law.

However, even if the Bush administration can expect a *real-politik* immunity from a war-crimes trial, the brutal tactics of the “global war on terror” – as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan – continue to alienate the Muslim world and undermine much of Bush’s geopolitical strategy.

The ugly image of Americans killing unarmed Iraqis also helps explain the growing hostility of Iraqis toward the presence of U.S. troops.

While the Bush administration has touted the supposed improved security created by the “surge” of additional U.S. troops into Iraq, a major poll found Iraqis increasingly object to the American occupation.

A [survey of more than 2,000 Iraqis](#) by the BBC, ABC News and the Japanese news agency, NHK, discovered mounting opposition to the U.S. occupation and increasing blame put on American forces for Iraq’s security problems.

Eighty-five percent of those polled said they had little or no confidence in American and British occupation forces, up from 82 percent in February, when the “surge” began. Only 18 percent said they thought the coalition forces had done a good job, down from 24 percent in February. Forty-seven percent said occupying forces should leave now, up from 35 percent.

The number of Iraqis who feel the U.S. invasion was wrong also jumped 10 percentage points to 63 percent in August compared to 53 percent in February. The new survey found 57 percent of Iraqis supporting attacks on U.S. troops, up from 51 percent in February and 17 percent in 2004.

As for the surge itself, 70 percent said it had made the security situation worse with only 18 percent citing any improvement.

Regarding social and economic conditions, the poll also revealed a dismal outlook:

Only 8 percent of Iraqis now rate their supply of electricity as good, down from 46 percent in 2005. Only 25 percent were satisfied with the availability of clean water compared to 58 percent two years ago, helping to explain the outbreak of cholera from northern Iraq to Baghdad.

Only 32 percent of Iraqis called medical care adequate compared to 62 percent in 2005. Satisfaction with schools fell to 51 percent from 74 percent in 2005. Satisfaction with family economic situations also was down to 37 percent from 70 percent two years ago.

Blackwater Mercenaries

Little wonder that the unpopular Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has sought to make an issue over the trigger-happy tendencies of Blackwater mercenaries who provide security for U.S. embassy personnel and other American VIPs.

On Sept. 16, Blackwater gunmen accompanying a U.S. diplomatic convoy apparently sensed an ambush and opened fire, spraying a Baghdad square with bullets. Eyewitness accounts indicated that the Blackwater team apparently overreacted to a car, containing a son and his mother, moving into the square and killed about 17 people, including those in the car.

(Earlier accounts erroneously reported that a child also died in the car and put the total death toll lower, at between 8 and 11. Though at least one child did die in the incident, there was no child in the car, according to a detailed investigation by [the New York Times](#) published on Oct. 3.)

“Blackwater has no respect for the Iraqi people,” an Iraqi Interior Ministry official told the Washington Post. “They consider Iraqis like animals, although actually I think they may have more respect for animals.” [[Washington Post, Sept. 20, 2007](#)]

Iraqis have objected to other disregard of innocent life by American troops, such as the killing of two dozen Iraqis in Haditha on Nov. 19, 2005, after one Marine died from an improvised explosive device.

According to published accounts of U.S. military investigations, the dead Marine’s comrades retaliated by pulling five men from a cab and shooting them, and entering two homes where civilians, including women and children, were slaughtered.

The Marines then tried to cover up the killings by claiming that the civilian deaths were caused by the original explosion or a subsequent firefight, according to investigations by the U.S. military and human rights groups.

One of the accused Marines, Sgt. Frank Wuterich, gave his account of the Haditha killings in an interview with [CBS’s “60 Minutes,”](#) including an admission that his squad tossed a grenade into one of the residences without knowing who was inside.

“Frank, help me understand,” asked interviewer Scott Pelley. “You’re in a residence, how do you crack a door open and roll a grenade into a room?”

“At that point, you can’t hesitate to make a decision,” Wuterich answered. “Hesitation equals being killed, either yourself or your men.”

“But when you roll a grenade in a room through the crack in the door, that’s not positive identification, that’s taking a chance on anything that could be behind that door,” Pelley said.

“Well, that’s what we do. That’s how our training goes,” Wuterich said.

Who’s at Fault?

Four Marines were singled out for courts martial over the Haditha killings though some legal analysts believe the case could be jeopardized by the loose “rules of engagement” that let U.S. troops kill Iraqis when a threat is detected.

Nevertheless, as in earlier killings of Iraqi civilians – or the sexual and other abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison – punishments are likely to stop at the level of rank-and-file soldiers with higher-ups avoiding accountability.

In large part, the lack of high-level accountability stems from the fact that the key instigator of both the illegal invasion of Iraq and the harsh tactics employed in the “war on terror” is President Bush.

Not only did he order an aggressive war – a concept condemned by World War II’s

Nuremberg Tribunal as “the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole” – but Bush pumped U.S. troops full of false propaganda by linking Iraq with the 9/11 attacks.

Bush’s subliminal connections between the Iraq War and 9/11 continued years after U.S. intelligence dismissed any linkage. For instance, on June 18, 2005, more than two years into the Iraq War, Bush told the American people that “we went to war because we were attacked” on 9/11.

Bush’s rhetorical excesses, though primarily designed to build and maintain a political consensus behind the war at home, had the predictable effect of turning loose a revenge-seeking and heavily armed U.S. military force on the Iraqi population.

Little wonder that [a poll](#) of 944 U.S. military personnel in Iraq – taken in January and February 2006 – found that 85 percent believed the U.S. mission in Iraq was mainly “to retaliate for Saddam’s role in the 9/11 attacks.” Seventy-seven percent said a chief war goal was “to stop Saddam from protecting al-Qaeda in Iraq.”

In that context, many Americans sympathize with the individual U.S. soldiers who have to make split-second life-or-death decisions while thinking they are operating under legitimate rules of engagement that allow killing perceived enemies even if they are unarmed and showing no aggressive intent.

‘Salvador Option’

By early 2005, as the Iraqi insurgency grew, an increasingly frustrated Bush administration reportedly debated a “Salvador option” for Iraq, an apparent reference to the “death squad” operations that decimated the ranks of perceived leftists who were opposed to El Salvador’s right-wing military junta in the early 1980s.

According to Newsweek magazine, President Bush was contemplating the adoption of that brutal “still-secret strategy” of the Reagan administration as a way to get a handle on the spiraling violence in Iraq.

“Many U.S. conservatives consider the policy [in El Salvador] to have been a success – despite the deaths of innocent civilians,” Newsweek wrote.

The magazine also noted that many of Bush’s advisers were leading figures in the Central American operations of the 1980s, including Elliott Abrams, who is now an architect of Middle East policy on the National Security Council.

In Guatemala, about 200,000 people perished, including what a truth commission later termed a genocide against Mayan Indians in the Guatemalan highlands. In El Salvador, about 70,000 died including massacres of whole villages, such as the slaughter committed by a U.S.-trained battalion against hundreds of men, women and children near the town of El Mozote in 1981.

The Reagan administration’s “Salvador option” also had a domestic component, the so-called “perception management” operation that employed sophisticated propaganda to manipulate the fears of the American people while hiding the ugly reality of the wars.

[For details about how these strategies worked and the role of George H.W. Bush, see

Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#). For more on the Salvador option, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Bush's Death Squads](#)," Jan. 11, 2005.]

In the Iraqi-sniper case, Army sniper Sandoval admitted killing an Iraqi man near the town of Iskandariya on April 27 after a skirmish with insurgents. Sandoval testified that his team leader, Staff Sgt. Michael A. Hensley, ordered him to kill a man cutting grass with a rusty scythe because he was suspected of being an insurgent posing as a farmer.

The second killing occurred on May 11 when a man walked into a concealed location where Sandoval, Hensley and other snipers were hiding. After the Iraqi was detained, another sniper, Sgt. Evan Vela, was ordered to shoot the man in the head by Hensley and did so, according to Vela's testimony at Sandoval's court martial.

Sandoval was acquitted of murder charges because a military jury concluded that his actions were within the rules of engagement. Hensley is to go on trial in a few weeks.

Regarding the Afghanistan case, Special Forces Capt. Staffel and Sgt. Anderson were leading a team of Afghan soldiers when an informant told them where a suspected insurgent leader was hiding. The U.S.-led contingent found a man believed to be Nawab Buntangyar walking outside his compound near the village of Hasan Kheyl.

While the Americans kept their distance out of fear the suspect might be wearing a suicide vest, the man was questioned about his name and the Americans checked his description against a list from the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Afghanistan, known as "the kill-or-capture list."

Concluding that the man was insurgent leader Nawab Buntangyar, Staffel gave the order to shoot, and Anderson – from a distance of about 100 yards away – fired a bullet through the man's head, killing him instantly.

'Classified Mission'

The soldiers viewed the killing as "a textbook example of a classified mission completed in accordance with the American rules of engagement," the International Herald Tribune reported. "The men said such rules allowed them to kill Buntangyar, whom the American military had designated a terrorist cell leader, once they positively identified him."

Staffel's civilian lawyer Mark Waple said the Army's Criminal Investigation Command concluded in April that the shooting was "justifiable homicide," but a two-star general in Afghanistan instigated a murder charge against the two men. That case, however, has floundered over accusations that the charge was improperly filed. [[IHT, Sept. 17, 2007](#)]

The U.S. news media has given the Fort Bragg case only minor coverage concentrating mostly on legal sparring. The New York Times' inside-the-paper, below-the-fold headline on Sept. 19 was "Green Beret Hearing Focuses on How Charges Came About."

The Washington Post did publish a front-page story on the "bait" aspect of the Sandoval case – when family members of U.S. soldiers implicated in the killings came forward with evidence of high-level encouragement of the snipers – but the U.S. news media has treated the story mostly as a minor event and has drawn no larger implications.

The greater significance of the cases is that they confirm the long-whispered allegations

that the U.S. chain of command has approved standing orders that give the U.S. military broad discretion to kill suspected militants on sight.

The “global war on terror” appears to have morphed into a global “dirty war” with George W. Bush in ultimate command.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq and Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth' are also available there. Or go to Amazon.com.

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