

# George W. Bush's Thug Nation

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*It's said that over time Presidents – especially two-termers – imbue the nation with their personalities and priorities, for good or ill. If that's true, it could help explain the small-minded mean-spiritedness that seems to be pervading the behavior of the United States these days, both at home and abroad.*

On a global level, the world reads about trigger-happy Blackwater “security contractors” mowing down civilians in Baghdad, the U.S. military killing unarmed people under loose “rules of engagement” in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the CIA “rendering” suspected Islamists to secret prisons or to third-country dungeons where torture is practiced.

Inside the United States, too, a police-state mentality is taking hold. After more than six years of having dissent against President George W. Bush equated with disloyalty, police from Capitol Hill to college campuses are treating vocal disagreement as grounds for violently “taking down” citizens, while bouncers at campaign rallies hustle away prospective hecklers and police preemptively detain protesters or stick them in faraway “free-speech zones.”

On Sept. 17 at a University of Florida public forum with Sen. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, journalism student Andrew Meyer asked an animated question about Kerry's hasty concession after Election 2004.

Meyer then was accosted by several campus police officers who dragged him away and wrestled him to the ground. Despite pleading with police “don't tase me, bro,” Meyer was “tasered” with powerful electric shocks as he screamed in pain. [Watch the YouTube video by clicking [here](#).]

Overseas, it now appears that Bush has authorized “rules of engagement” that have transformed U.S. Special Forces into “death squads,” much like those that roamed Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s identifying “subversives” and murdering them.

According to evidence emerging from a military court hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, U.S. Special Forces are empowered to kill individuals who have been designated “enemy combatants,” even if they are unarmed and present no visible threat.

The hearing involves two Special Forces soldiers who took part in the cold-blooded 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.

## Classified Mission

As described at the hearing, Staffel and 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.

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 major news media has given the case only minor coverage focusing mostly on the 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.”

However, the greater significance of the case is its confirmation that the U.S. chain of command, presumably up to President Bush, has approved standing orders that allow the U.S. military to assassinate suspected militants on sight.

In effect, these orders 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 Pentagon training program known as “Project X,” the lessons of Operation Phoenix from the 1960s were passed on to Third World armies in Latin America and elsewhere, 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.](#)]

## Blackwater Killings

Besides the periodic controversies over U.S. military killings of unarmed Iraqis and Afghans, the Bush administration also is facing a challenge from the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki over the U.S. Embassy’s reliance on Blackwater security contractors despite their reputation as crude and murderous bullies.

On Sept. 16, Blackwater gunmen accompanying a U.S. diplomatic convoy apparently sensed an ambush and opened fire, spraying a busy Baghdad square with bullets. Eyewitness accounts, including from an Iraqi police officer, indicated that the Blackwater team apparently overreacted to a car moving into the square and killed at least 11 people.

“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. We have seen what they do in the streets. When they’re not shooting, they’re throwing water bottles at people and calling them names. If you are terrifying a child or an elderly woman, or you are killing an innocent civilian who is riding in his car, isn’t that terrorism?” [[Washington Post, Sept. 20, 2007](#)]

The highhandedness of the Blackwater mercenaries on the streets of Baghdad or the contempt for traditional rules of war in the hills of Afghanistan also resonate back to the marble chambers and well-appointed salons of Washington, where swaggering tough-guyism reigns from the Oval Office to the TV talk shows to Georgetown dinner parties.

Inside the Beltway, it seems there’s little political mileage in standing up for traditional American values, such as the rule of law or even the Founders’ historic concept of inalienable rights for all mankind.

On Sept. 19, Senate Republicans blocked an up-or-down vote on a bill seeking to restore *habeas corpus* rights against arbitrary imprisonment for people whom Bush unilaterally has designated “unlawful enemy combatants.”

Bush’s supporters portrayed those who favored *habeas corpus* restoration as impractical coddlers of America’s enemies.

“This is purely a matter of congressional policy and national policy on how we want to conduct warfare now and in the future,” said Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Alabama. “Are we going to do it in a way that allows those we capture to sue us?”

The Republicans also prevented a direct vote on a plan to grant longer home leaves to U.S. troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Those two factors – obedience to Bush’s claim of unlimited power as he wages his “war on terror” and refusal to relieve some of the pressure on American troops facing repeated deployments to the front lines – are almost certain to keep making matters worse.

The mix of tired and desperate soldiers operating in an environment in which every person on the street is viewed as a potential suicide bomber is a formula for continued abuses, endless slaughter and deepening hatreds.

Back home, Americans who ask too many annoying questions or don’t demonstrate the right attitude toward government leaders can expect to encounter the hostility of an incipient police state, a thug nation that reflects the pugnacious arrogance and the contempt for dissent that is the stock and trade of the nation’s current two-term President.

[For more on how Bush rules, see our new book, [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#).]

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