

Moving Targets

Will the counter-insurgency plan in Iraq repeat the mistakes of Vietnam?

By [Seymour M. Hersh](#)

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

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Editor's Note

We bring to the attention of our readers this article by Seymour Hersh published in December 2003, which outlines the assassination policy of the Bush administration directed against the military and civilian Iraqi elites.

This policy was not limited to the Baathist political and military leadership. It also consisted in the assassination of intellectuals, scientists and professionals. The ultimate objective is to destroy the Iraqi nation.

There is evidence, according to Hersh, that Israeli intelligence officers were involved in the training of their US counterparts as well as in the manhunts, with Israeli commandos operating inside Iraq.

This article sheds light on a particular feature of the Bush-Cheney assassination rings, which are now the object of debate in the US. The assassination rings are part of a broad foreign policy agenda.. Are they still in operation inside Iraq?

Michel Chossudovsky, Global Research, July 18, 2009

[emphasis added]

The Bush Administration has authorized a major escalation of the Special Forces covert war in Iraq. In interviews over the past month, American officials and former officials said that the main target was a hard-core group of Baathists who are believed to be behind much of the underground insurgency against the soldiers of the United States and its allies. A new Special Forces group, designated Task Force 121, has been assembled from Army Delta Force members, Navy seals, and C.I.A. paramilitary operatives, with many additional personnel ordered to report by January. Its highest priority is the neutralization of the Baathist insurgents, by capture or assassination.

The revitalized Special Forces mission is a policy victory for Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has struggled for two years to get the military leadership to accept the strategy of what he calls "Manhunts"—a phrase that he has used both publicly and in internal Pentagon communications. Rumsfeld has had to change much of the Pentagon's leadership to get his way. "Knocking off two regimes allows us to do extraordinary things," a Pentagon adviser told me, referring to Afghanistan and Iraq.

One step the Pentagon took was to seek active and secret help in the war against the Iraqi

insurgency from Israel, America's closest ally in the Middle East. According to American and Israeli military and intelligence officials, Israeli commandos and intelligence units have been working closely with their American counterparts at the Special Forces training base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and in Israel to help them prepare for operations in Iraq. Israeli commandos are expected to serve as ad-hoc advisers—again, in secret—when full-field operations begin. (Neither the Pentagon nor Israeli diplomats would comment. “No one wants to talk about this,” an Israeli official told me. “It’s incendiary. Both governments have decided at the highest level that it is in their interests to keep a low profile on U.S.-Israeli coöperation” on Iraq.) The critical issue, American and Israeli officials agree, is intelligence. There is much debate about whether targeting a large number of individuals is a practical—or politically effective—way to bring about stability in Iraq, especially given the frequent failure of American forces to obtain consistent and reliable information there.

Americans in the field are trying to solve that problem by developing a new source of information: they plan to assemble teams drawn from the upper ranks of the old Iraqi intelligence services and train them to penetrate the insurgency. The idea is for the infiltrators to provide information about individual insurgents for the Americans to act on. A former C.I.A. station chief described the strategy in simple terms: “U.S. shooters and Iraqi intelligence.” He added, “There are Iraqis in the intelligence business who have a better idea, and we’re tapping into them. We have to resuscitate Iraqi intelligence, holding our nose, and have Delta and agency shooters break down doors and take them”—the insurgents—“out.”

A former intelligence official said that getting inside the Baathist leadership could be compared to “fighting your way into a coconut—you bang away and bang away until you find a soft spot, and then you can clean it out.” An American who has advised the civilian authority in Baghdad said, “The only way we can win is to go unconventional. We’re going to have to play their game. Guerrilla versus guerrilla. Terrorism versus terrorism. We’ve got to scare the Iraqis into submission.”

In Washington, there is now widespread agreement on one point: the need for a new American approach to Iraq. There is also uniform criticism of the military’s current response to the growing American casualty lists. One former Pentagon official who worked extensively with the Special Forces command, and who favors the new military initiative, said, “We’ve got this large conventional force sitting there, and getting their ass shot off, and what we’re doing is counterproductive. We’re sending mixed signals.” The problem with the way the U.S. has been fighting the Baathist leadership, he said, is “(a) we’ve got no intelligence, and (b) we’re too squeamish to operate in this part of the world.” Referring to the American retaliation against a suspected mortar site, the former official said, “Instead of destroying an empty soccer field, why not impress me by sneaking in a sniper team and killing them while they’re setting up a mortar? We do need a more unconventional response, but it’s going to be messy.”

Inside the Pentagon, it is now understood that simply bringing in or killing Saddam Hussein and his immediate circle—those who appeared in the Bush Administration’s famed “deck of cards”—will not stop the insurgency. The new Special Forces operation is aimed instead at the broad middle of the Baathist underground. But many of the officials I spoke to were skeptical of the Administration’s plans. Many of them fear that the proposed operation—called “preëmptive manhunting” by one Pentagon adviser—has the potential to turn into another Phoenix Program. Phoenix was the code name for a counter-insurgency program that the U.S. adopted during the Vietnam War, in which Special Forces teams were

sent out to capture or assassinate Vietnamese believed to be working with or sympathetic to the Vietcong. In choosing targets, the Americans relied on information supplied by South Vietnamese Army officers and village chiefs. The operation got out of control. According to official South Vietnamese statistics, Phoenix claimed nearly forty-one thousand victims between 1968 and 1972; the U.S. counted more than twenty thousand in the same time span. Some of those assassinated had nothing to do with the war against America but were targeted because of private grievances. William E. Colby, the C.I.A. officer who took charge of the Phoenix Program in 1968 (he eventually became C.I.A. director), later acknowledged to Congress that “a lot of things were done that should not have been done.”

The former Special Forces official warned that the problem with head-hunting is that you have to be sure “you’re hunting the right heads.” Speaking of the now coöperative former Iraqi intelligence officials, he said, “These guys have their own agenda. Will we be doing hits on grudges? When you set up host-nation elements”—units composed of Iraqis, rather than Americans—“it’s hard not to have them going off to do what they want to do. You have to keep them on a short leash.”

The former official says that the Baathist leadership apparently relies on “face-to-face communications” in planning terrorist attacks. This makes the insurgents less vulnerable to one of the Army’s most secret Special Forces units, known as Grey Fox, which has particular expertise in interception and other technical means of intelligence-gathering. “These guys are too smart to touch cell phones or radio,” the former official said. “It’s all going to succeed or fail spectacularly based on human intelligence.”

A former C.I.A. official with extensive Middle East experience identified one of the key players on the new American-Iraqi intelligence team as Farouq Hijazi, a Saddam loyalist who served for many years as the director of external operations for the Mukhabarat, the Iraqi intelligence service. He has been in custody since late April. The C.I.A. man said that over the past few months Hijazi “has cut a deal,” and American officials “are using him to reactivate the old Iraqi intelligence network.” He added, “My Iraqi friends say he will honor the deal—but only to the letter, and not to the spirit.” He said that although the Mukhabarat was a good security service, capable, in particular, of protecting Saddam Hussein from overthrow or assassination, it was “a lousy intelligence service.”

The official went on, “It’s not the way we usually play ball, but if you see a couple of your guys get blown away it changes things. We did the American things—and we’ve been the nice guy. Now we’re going to be the bad guy, and being the bad guy works.”

Told of such comments, the Pentagon adviser, who is an expert on unconventional war, expressed dismay. “There are people saying all sorts of wild things about Manhunts,” he said. “But they aren’t at the policy level. It’s not a no-holds policy, and it shouldn’t be. I’m as tough as anybody, but we’re also a democratic society, and we don’t fight terror with terror. There will be a lot of close controls—do’s and don’ts and rules of engagement.” The adviser added, “The problem is that we’ve not penetrated the bad guys. The Baath Party is run like a cell system. It’s like penetrating the Vietcong—we never could do it.”

The rising star in Rumsfeld’s Pentagon is Stephen Cambone, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, who has been deeply involved in developing the new Special Forces approach. Cambone, who earned a doctorate in political science from Claremont Graduate University in 1982, served as staff director for a 1998 committee, headed by Rumsfeld, that

warned in its report of an emerging ballistic-missile threat to the United States and argued that intelligence agencies should be willing to go beyond the data at hand in their analyses. Cambone, in his confirmation hearings, in February, told the Senate that consumers of intelligence assessments must ask questions of the analysts—"how they arrived at those conclusions and what the sources of the information were." This approach was championed by Rumsfeld. It came under attack, however, when the Administration's predictions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and the potential for insurgency failed to be realized, and the Pentagon civilians were widely accused of politicizing intelligence. (A month after the fall of Baghdad, Cambone was the first senior Pentagon official to publicly claim, wrongly, as it turned out, that a captured Iraqi military truck might be a mobile biological-weapons laboratory.)

Cambone also shares Rumsfeld's views on how to fight terrorism. They both believe that the United States needs to become far more proactive in combatting terrorism, searching for terrorist leaders around the world and eliminating them. And Cambone, like Rumsfeld, has been frustrated by the reluctance of the military leadership to embrace the manhunting mission. Since his confirmation, he has been seeking operational authority over Special Forces. "Rumsfeld's been looking for somebody to have all the answers, and Steve is the guy," a former high-level Pentagon official told me. "He has more direct access to Rummy than anyone else."

As Cambone's influence has increased, that of Douglas Feith, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy, has diminished. In September, 2001, Feith set up a special unit known as the Office of Special Plans. The office, directed by civilians who, like Feith, had neoconservative views, played a major role in the intelligence and planning leading up to the March invasion of Iraq. "There is finger-pointing going on," a prominent Republican lobbyist explained. "And the neocons are in retreat."

One of the key planners of the Special Forces offensive is Lieutenant General William (Jerry) Boykin, Cambone's military assistant. After a meeting with Rumsfeld early last summer—they got along "like two old warriors," the Pentagon consultant said—Boykin postponed his retirement, which had been planned for June, and took the Pentagon job, which brought him a third star. In that post, the Pentagon adviser told me, Boykin has been "an important piece" of the planned escalation. In October, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Boykin, while giving Sunday-morning talks in uniform to church groups, had repeatedly equated the Muslim world with Satan. Last June, according to the paper, he told a congregation in Oregon that "Satan wants to destroy this nation, he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army." Boykin praised President Bush as a "man who prays in the Oval Office," and declared that Bush was "not elected" President but "appointed by God." The Muslim world hates America, he said, "because we are a nation of believers."

There were calls in the press and from Congress for Boykin's dismissal, but Rumsfeld made it clear that he wanted to keep his man in the job. Initially, he responded to the *Times* report by praising the General's "outstanding record" and telling journalists that he had neither seen the text of Boykin's statements nor watched the videotape that had been made of one of his presentations. "There are a lot of things that are said by people in the military, or in civilian life, or in the Congress, or in the executive branch that are their views," he said. "We're a free people. And that's the wonderful thing about our country." He added, with regard to the tape, "I just simply can't comment on what he said, because I haven't seen it." Four days later, Rumsfeld said that he had viewed the tape. "It had a lot of very difficult-to-

understand words with subtitles which I was not able to verify," he said at a news conference, according to the official transcript. "So I remain inexpert"—the transcript notes that he "chuckles" at that moment—"on precisely what he said." Boykin's comments are now under official review.

Boykin has been involved in other controversies as well. He was the Army combat commander in Mogadishu in 1993, when eighteen Americans were slain during the disastrous mission made famous by Mark Bowden's book "Black Hawk Down." Earlier that year, Boykin, a colonel at the time, led an eight-man Delta Force that was assigned to help a Colombian police unit track down the notorious drug dealer Pablo Escobar. Boykin's team was barred by law from providing any lethal assistance without Presidential approval, but there was suspicion in the Pentagon that it was planning to take part in the assassination of Escobar, with the support of American Embassy officials in Colombia. The book "Killing Pablo," an account, also by Mark Bowden, of the hunt for Escobar, describes how senior officials in the Pentagon's chain of command became convinced that Boykin, with the knowledge of his Special Forces superiors, had exceeded his authority and intended to violate the law. They wanted Boykin's unit pulled out. It wasn't. Escobar was shot dead on the roof of a barrio apartment building in Medellín. The Colombian police were credited with getting their man, but, Bowden wrote, "within the special ops community . . . Pablo's death was regarded as a successful mission for Delta, and legend has it that its operators were in on the kill."

"That's what those guys did," a retired general who monitored Boykin's operations in Colombia told me. "I've seen pictures of Escobar's body that you don't get from a long-range telescope lens. They were taken by guys on the assault team." (Bush Administration officials in the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon, including General Boykin, did not respond to requests for comment.)

Morris Busby, who was the American Ambassador to Colombia in 1993 (he is now retired), vigorously defended Boykin. "I think the world of Jerry Boykin, and have the utmost respect for him. I've known him for fifteen years and spent hours and hours with the guy, and never heard him mention religion or God." The retired general also praised Boykin as "one of those guys you'd love to have in a war because he's not afraid to die." But, he added, "when you get to three stars you've got to think through what you're doing." Referring to Boykin and others involved in the Special Forces planning, he added, "These guys are going to get a bunch of guys killed and then give them a bunch of medals."

The American-Israeli liaison on Iraq amounts to a tutorial on how to dismantle an insurgency. One former Israeli military-intelligence officer summarized the core lesson this way: "How to do targeted killing, which is very relevant to the success of the war, and what the United States is going to have to do." He told me that the Americans were being urged to emulate the Israeli Army's small commando units, known as Mist'aravim, which operate undercover inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "They can approach a house and pounce," the former officer said. In the Israeli view, he added, the Special Forces units must learn "how to maintain a network of informants." Such a network, he said, has made it possible for Israel to penetrate the West Bank and Gaza Strip organizations controlled by groups such as Hamas, and to assassinate or capture potential suicide bombers along with many of the people who recruit and train them.

On the other hand, the former officer said, "Israel has, in many ways, been too successful, and has killed or captured so many mid-ranking facilitators on the operational level in the

West Bank that Hamas now consists largely of isolated cells that carry out terrorist attacks against Israel on their own.” He went on, “There is no central control over many of the suicide bombers. We’re trying to tell the Americans that they don’t want to eliminate the center. The key is not to have freelancers out there.”

Many regional experts, Americans and others, are convinced that the Baathists are still firmly in charge of the insurgency, although they are thought to have little direct connection with Saddam Hussein. An American military analyst who works with the American-led Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad told me he has concluded that “mid-ranking Baathists who were muzzled by the patrimonial nature of Saddam’s system have now, with the disappearance of the high-ranking members, risen to control the insurgency.” He added that after the American attack and several weeks “of being like deer in headlights,” these Baathists had become organized, and were directing and leading operations against Americans. During an interview in Washington, a senior Arab diplomat noted, “We do not believe that the resistance is loyal to Saddam. Yes, the Baathists have reorganized, not for political reasons but because of the terrible decisions made by Jerry Bremer”—the director of the C.P.A. “The Iraqis really want to make you pay the price,” the diplomat said. “Killing Saddam will not end it.”

Similarly, a Middle Eastern businessman who has advised senior Bush Administration officials told me that the reorganized Baath Party is “extremely active, working underground with permanent internal communications. And without Saddam.” Baath party leaders, he added, expect Saddam to issue a public statement of self-criticism, “telling of his mistakes and his excesses,” including his reliance on his sons.

There is disagreement, inevitably, on the extent of Baathist control. The former Israeli military-intelligence officer said, “Most of the firepower comes from the Baathists, and they know where the weapons are kept. But many of the shooters are ethnic and tribal. Iraq is very factionalized now, and within the Sunni community factionalism goes deep.” He added, “Unless you settle this, any effort at reconstruction in the center is hopeless.”

The American military analyst agreed that the current emphasis on Baathist control “overlooks the nationalist and tribal angle.” For example, he said, the anti-coalition forces in Falluja, a major center of opposition, are “driven primarily by the sheikhs and mosques, Islam, clerics, and nationalism.” The region, he went on, contains “tens of thousands of unemployed former military officers and enlistees who hang around the coffee shops and restaurants of their relatives; they plot, plan, and give and receive instructions; at night they go out on their missions.”

This military analyst, like many officials I spoke to, also raised questions about the military’s more conventional tactics—the aggressive program, code-named Iron Hammer, of bombings, nighttime raids, and mass arrests aimed at trouble spots in Sunni-dominated central Iraq. The insurgents, he told me, had already developed a response. “Their S.O.P.”—standard operating procedure—“now is to go further out, or even to other towns, so that American retribution does not fall on their locale. Instead, the Americans take it out on the city where the incident happened, and in the process they succeed in making more enemies.”

The brazen Iraqi attacks on two separate American convoys in Samarra, on November 30th, provided further evidence of the diversity of the opposition to the occupation. Samarra has been a center of intense anti-Saddam feelings, according to Ahmed S. Hashim, an expert on

terrorism who is a professor of strategic studies at the U.S. Naval War College. In an essay published in August by the Middle East Institute, Hashim wrote, "Many Samarra natives—who had served with distinction in the Baath Party and the armed forces—were purged or executed during the course of the three decades of rule by Saddam and his cronies from the rival town of Tikrit." He went on, "The type of U.S. force structure in Iraq—heavy armored and mechanized units—and the psychological disposition of these forces which have been in Iraq for months is simply not conducive to the successful waging of counter-insurgency warfare."

The majority of the Bush Administration's manhunting missions remain classified, but one earlier mission, in Afghanistan, had mixed results at best. Last November, an Al Qaeda leader named Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi was killed when an unmanned Predator reconnaissance aircraft fired a Hellfire missile at his automobile in Yemen. Five passengers in the automobile were also killed, and it was subsequently reported that two previous Predator missions in Yemen had been called off at the last moment when it was learned that the occupants of suspect vehicles were local Bedouins, and not Al Qaeda members.

Since then, an adviser to the Special Forces command has told me, infighting among the various senior military commands has made it difficult for Special Forces teams on alert to take immediate advantage of time-sensitive intelligence. Rumsfeld repeatedly criticized Air Force General Charles Holland, a four-star Special Forces commander who has just retired, for his reluctance to authorize commando raids without specific, or "actionable," intelligence. Rumsfeld has also made a systematic effort to appoint Special Forces advocates to the top military jobs. Another former Special Forces commander, Army General Peter Schoomaker, was brought out of retirement in July and named Army Chief of Staff. The new civilian Assistant Secretary for Special Operations in the Pentagon is Thomas O'Connell, an Army veteran who served in the Phoenix program in Vietnam, and who, in the early eighties, ran Grey Fox, the Army's secret commando unit.

Early in November, the *Times* reported the existence of Task Force 121, and said that it was authorized to take action throughout the region, if necessary, in pursuit of Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and other terrorists. (The task force is commanded by Air Force Brigadier General Lyle Koenig, an experienced Special Forces helicopter pilot.) At that point, the former Special Forces official told me, the troops were "chasing the deck of cards. Their job was to find Saddam, period." Other Special Forces, in Afghanistan, were targeting what is known as the A.Q.S.L., the Al Qaeda Senior Leadership List.

The task force's search for Saddam was, from the beginning, daunting. According to Scott Ritter, a former United Nations weapons inspector, it may have been fatally flawed as well. From 1994 to 1998, Ritter directed a special U.N. unit that eavesdropped on many of Saddam Hussein's private telephone communications. "The high-profile guys around Saddam were the *murafaqin*, his most loyal companions, who could stand next to him carrying a gun," Ritter told me. "But now he's gone to a different tier—the tribes. He has released the men from his most sensitive units and let them go back to their tribes, and we don't know where they are. The manifests of those units are gone; they've all been destroyed." Ritter added, "Guys like Farouq Hijazi can deliver some of the Baath Party cells, and he knows where some of the intelligence people are. But he can't get us into the tribal hierarchy." The task force, in any event, has shifted its focus from the hunt for Saddam as it is increasingly distracted by the spreading guerrilla war.

In addition to the Special Forces initiative, the military is also exploring other approaches to

suppressing the insurgency. The *Washington Post* reported last week that the American authorities in Baghdad had agreed, with some reluctance, to the formation of an Iraqi-led counter-terrorism militia composed of troops from the nation's five largest political parties. The paramilitary unit, totalling some eight hundred troops or so, would "identify and pursue insurgents" who had eluded arrest, the newspaper said. The group's initial missions would be monitored and approved by American commanders, but eventually it would operate independently.

Task Force 121's next major problem may prove to be Iran. There is a debate going on inside the Administration about American and Israeli intelligence that suggests that the Shiite-dominated Iranian government may be actively aiding the Sunni-led insurgency in Iraq—"pulling the strings on the puppet," as one former intelligence official put it. Many in the intelligence community are skeptical of this analysis—the Pentagon adviser compared it to "the Chalabi stuff," referring to now discredited prewar intelligence on W.M.D. supplied by Iraqi defectors. But I was told by several officials that the intelligence was considered to be highly reliable by civilians in the Defense Department. A former intelligence official said that one possible response under consideration was for the United States to train and equip an Iraqi force capable of staging cross-border raids. The American goal, he said, would be to "make the cost of supporting the Baathists so dear that the Iranians would back off," adding, "If it begins to look like another Iran-Iraq war, that's another story."

The requirement that America's Special Forces units operate in secrecy, a former senior coalition adviser in Baghdad told me, has provided an additional incentive for increasing their presence in Iraq. The Special Forces in-country numbers are not generally included in troop totals. Bush and Rumsfeld have insisted that more American troops are not needed, but that position was challenged by many senior military officers in private conversations with me. "You need more people," the former adviser, a retired admiral, said. "But you can't add them, because Rummy's taken a position. So you invent a force that won't be counted."

At present, there is no legislation that requires the President to notify Congress before authorizing an overseas Special Forces mission. The Special Forces have been expanded enormously in the Bush Administration. The 2004 Pentagon budget provides more than six and a half billion dollars for their activities—a thirty-four-per-cent increase over 2003. A recent congressional study put the number of active and reserve Special Forces troops at forty-seven thousand, and has suggested that the appropriate House and Senate committees needed to debate the "proper overall role" of Special Forces in the global war on terrorism.

The former intelligence official depicted the Delta and seal teams as "force multipliers"—small units that can do the work of much larger ones and thereby increase the power of the operation as a whole. He also implicitly recognized that such operations would become more and more common; when Special Forces target the Baathists, he said, "it's technically not assassination—it's normal combat operations."

[emphasis added]

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