

CIA's Global Shadow War: Hiring Private Mercenaries And Former Guantanamo Inmates

How the CIA Bungled the War on Terror

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Hollywood Without the Happy Ending

Call it the Jason Bourne strategy.

Think of it as the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) plunge into Hollywood — or into the absurd. As recent revelations have made clear, that Agency's moves couldn't be have been more far-fetched or more real. In its post-9/11 global shadow war, it has employed both private contractors and some of the world's most notorious prisoners in ways that leave the latest episode of the Bourne films in the dust: hired gunmen trained to kill as well as former inmates who cashed in on the notoriety of having worn an orange jumpsuit in the world's most infamous jail.

The first group of undercover agents were recruited by private companies from the Army Special Forces and the Navy SEALs and then repurposed to the CIA at handsome salaries averaging around \$140,000 a year; the second crew was recruited from the prison cells at Guantanamo Bay and paid out of a secret multimillion dollar slush fund called "the Pledge."

Last month, the Associated Press revealed that the CIA had selected a few dozen men from among the hundreds of terror suspects being held at Guantanamo and [trained them to be double agents](#) at a cluster of eight cottages in a program dubbed "Penny Lane." (Yes, indeed, the name was taken from the Beatles song, as was ["Strawberry Fields," a Guantanamo program that involved torturing "high-value" detainees.](#)) These men were then returned to what the Bush administration liked to call the "global battlefield," where their mission was to befriend members of al-Qaeda and supply targeting information for the Agency's drone assassination program.

Such a secret double-agent program, while colorful and remarkably unsuccessful, should have surprised no one. After all, plea bargaining or persuading criminals to snitch on their associates — a [tactic frowned upon by international legal experts](#) — is widely used in the U.S. police and legal system. Over the last year or so, however, a trickle of information about the other secret program has come to light and it opens an astonishing new window into the privatization of U.S. intelligence.

Hollywood in Langley

In July 2010, at his confirmation hearings for the post of the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper [explained the use of private contractors in the intelligence community](#): "In

the immediate aftermath of the Cold War... we were under a congressional mandate to reduce the community by on the order of 20%... Then 9/11 occurred... With the gusher... of funding that has accrued particularly from supplemental or overseas contingency operations funding, which, of course, is one year at a time, it is very difficult to hire government employees one year at a time. So the obvious outlet for that has been the growth of contractors.”

Thousands of “Green Badges” were hired via companies like [Booz Allen Hamilton](#) and [Qinetiq](#) to work at CIA and National Security Agency (NSA) offices around the world, among the regular staff who wore blue badges. Many of them — like Edward Snowden — performed specialist tasks in information technology meant to augment the effectiveness of government employees.

Then the CIA decided that there was no aspect of secret war which couldn’t be corporatized. So they set up a unit of private contractors as covert agents, green-lighting them to carry guns and be sent into U.S. war zones at a moment’s notice. This elite James Bond-like unit of armed bodyguards and super-fixers was given the anodyne name Global Response Staff (GRS).

Among the 125 employees of this unit, from the Army Special Forces via private contractors came Raymond Davis and Dane Paresi; from the Navy SEALs Glen Doherty, Jeremy Wise, and Tyrone Woods. All five would soon be in the anything-but-covert headlines of newspapers across the world. These men — no women have yet been named — were deployed on three- to four-month missions accompanying CIA analysts into the field.

Davis was assigned to Lahore, Pakistan; Doherty and Woods to Benghazi, Libya; Paresi and Wise to Khost, Afghanistan. As GRS expanded, other contractors went to Djibouti, Lebanon, and Yemen, among other countries, according to a [Washington Post profile of the unit](#).

From early on, its work wasn’t exactly a paragon of secrecy. By 2005, for instance, former Special Forces personnel had already begun [openly discussing jobs in the unit at online forums](#). Their descriptions sounded like something directly out of a Hollywood thriller. The Post portrayed the focus of GRS personnel more mundanely as “designed to stay in the shadows, training teams to work undercover and provide an unobtrusive layer of security for CIA officers in high-risk outposts.”

“They don’t learn languages, they’re not meeting foreign nationals, and they’re not writing up intelligence reports,” a former U.S. intelligence official told that paper. “Their main tasks are to map escape routes from meeting places, pat down informants, and provide an ‘envelope’ of security... if push comes to shove, you’re going to have to shoot.”

In the ensuing years, GRS embedded itself in the Agency, becoming essential to its work. Today, new CIA agents and analysts going into danger zones are trained to work with such bodyguards. In addition, GRS teams are now loaned out to other outfits like the NSA for tasks like installing spy equipment in war zones.

The CIA’s Private Contractors (Don’t) Save the Day

Recently these men, the spearhead of the CIA’s post-9/11 contractor war, have been making it into the news with startling regularity. Unlike their Hollywood cousins, however, the news they have made has all been bad. Those weapons they’re packing and the derring-do that is

supposed to go with them have repeatedly led not to breathtaking getaways and shootouts, but to disaster. Jason Bourne, of course, wins the day; they don't.

Take [Dane Paresi](#) and [Jeremy Wise](#). In 2009, not long after Paresi left the Army Special Forces and Wise the Navy SEALs, they were hired by [Xe Services](#) (the former Blackwater) to work for GRS and assigned to [Camp Chapman, a CIA base](#) in Khost, Afghanistan. On December 30, 2009, [Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi](#), a Jordanian doctor who had been recruited by the CIA to infiltrate al-Qaeda, was invited to a meeting at the base after spending several months in Pakistan's tribal borderlands. Invited as well were several senior CIA staff members from Kabul who hoped Balawi might help them target Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda's number two man, who also hailed from Jordan.

Details of what happened are still sketchy, but the GRS men clearly failed to fulfill their security mission. Somehow Balawi, who turned out to be not a double but a triple agent, made it onto the closed base with a bomb and [blew himself up](#), killing not just Paresi and Wise but also seven CIA staff officers, including Jennifer Matthews, the base chief.

Thirteen months later, in January 2011, another GRS contractor, [Raymond Davis](#), decided to shoot his way out of what he considered a difficult situation in Lahore, Pakistan. The Army Special Forces veteran had also worked for Blackwater, although at the time of the shootings he was employed by Hyperion Protective Services, LLC.

Assigned to work at a CIA safe house in Lahore to support agents tracking al-Qaeda in Pakistan, Davis had apparently spent days photographing local military installations like the headquarters of the paramilitary Frontier Corps. On January 27th, his car was stopped and he claims that he was confronted by two young men, Faizan Haider and Faheem Shamshad. Davis proceeded to shoot both of them dead, and then take pictures of their bodies, before radioing back to the safe house for help. When a backup vehicle arrived, it compounded the disaster by driving at high speed the wrong way down a street and killing a passing motorcyclist.

Davis was later caught by two traffic wardens, taken to a police station, and jailed. A furor ensued, involving both countries and an indignant Pakistani media. The U.S. embassy, which initially claimed he was a consular official before the [Guardian broke the news that he was a CIA contractor](#), finally pressured the Pakistani government into releasing him, but only after agreeing to pay out \$2.34 million in compensation to the families of those he killed.

A year and a half later, two more GRS contractors made front-page news under the worst of circumstances. Former Navy SEALs [Glen Doherty](#) and [Tyrone Woods](#) had been assigned to a [CIA base in Benghazi, Libya](#), where the Agency was attempting to track a developing North African al-Qaeda movement and recover heavy weapons, including Stinger missiles, that had been looted from state arsenals in the wake of an U.S.-NATO intervention which led to the fall of the autocrat Muammar Qaddafi.

On September 11, 2012, U.S. [Ambassador Christopher Stevens was staying at a nearby diplomatic compound](#) when it came under attack. Militants entered the buildings and set them on fire. A CIA team, including Doherty, rushed to the rescue, although ultimately, unlike Hollywood's action teams, they did not save Stevens or the day. In fact, several hours later, the [militants raided the CIA base](#), killing both Doherty and Woods.

The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight

The disastrous denouements to these three incidents, as well as the [deaths of four GRS contractors](#) — more than a quarter of CIA casualties since the War on Terror was launched — raise a series of questions: Is this yet another example of the way the privatization of war and intelligence doesn't work? And is the answer to bring such jobs back in-house? Or does the Hollywood-style skullduggery (gone repeatedly wrong) hint at a larger problem? Is the present intelligence system, in fact, out of control and, despite a [combined budget of \\$52.6 billion a year](#), simply incapable of delivering anything like the “security” promised, leaving the various spy agencies, including the CIA, increasingly desperate to prove that they can “defeat” terrorism?

Take, for example, the slew of documents [Edward Snowden](#) — another private contractor who at one point worked for the CIA — released about [secret NSA programs](#) attempting to suck up global communications at previously unimaginable rates. There have been howls of outrage across the planet, including from [spied-upon heads of state](#). Those denouncing such blatant invasions of privacy have regularly raised the fear that we might be witnessing the rise of a secret-police-like urge to clamp down on dissent everywhere.

But as with the CIA, there may be another explanation: desperation. Top intelligence officials, fearing that they will be seen as having done a poor job, are possessed by an ever greater urge to prove their self-worth by driving the intelligence community to ever more (rather than less) of the same.

As Jeremy Bash, chief of staff to Leon Panetta, the former CIA director and defense secretary, told MSNBC: [“If you're looking for a needle in the haystack, you need a haystack.”](#) It's true that, while the various intelligence agencies and the CIA may not succeed when it comes to the needles, they have proven effective indeed when it comes to creating haystacks.

In the case of the NSA, the Obama administration's efforts to prove that its humongous data haul had any effect on foiling terrorist plots — at one point, they claimed [54 such plots foiled](#) — has had a quality of genuine pathos to it. The [claims have proven so thin](#) that administration and intelligence officials have struggled to convince even those in Congress who support the programs, let alone the rest of the world, that it has done much more than gather and store staggering reams of information on almost everyone to no particular purpose whatsoever. Similarly, the FBI has made a point of trumpeting every “terrorist” arrest it has made, most of which, on closer scrutiny, [turn out to be of gullible Muslims, framed by planted evidence](#) in plots often essentially engineered by FBI informants.

Despite stunning investments of funds and the copious hiring of private contractors, when it comes to ineptitude the CIA is giving the FBI and NSA a run for their money. In fact, both of its recently revealed high-profile programs — GRS and the Guantanamo double agents — have proven dismal failures, yielding little if anything of value. The Associated Press account of Penny Lane, the only description of that program thus far, notes, for instance, that [al-Qaeda never trusted the former Guantanamo Bay detainees](#) released into their midst and that, after millions of dollars were fruitlessly spent, the program was canceled as a failure in 2006.

If you could find a phrase that was the polar opposite of “more bang for your buck,” all of these efforts would qualify. In the case of the CIA, keep in mind as well that you're talking about an agency which has for years conducted [drone assassination campaigns in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia](#). Hundreds of innocent men, women, and children have been killed

along with numerous al-Qaeda types and “suspected militants,” and yet — many experts believe — these campaigns have functioned not as an air war on, but for, terror. In [Yemen, as an example, the tiny al-Qaeda outfit that existed when the drone campaign began in 2002 has grown exponentially.](#)

So what about the Jason Bourne-like contractors working for GRS who turned out to be the gang that couldn’t shoot straight? How successful have they been in helping the CIA sniff out al-Qaeda globally? It’s a good guess, based on what we already know, that their record would be no better than that of the rest of the CIA.

One hint, when it comes to GRS-assisted operations, may be found in documents revealed in 2010 by WikiLeaks about joint [CIA-Special Operations hunter-killer programs in Afghanistan like Task Force 373](#). We don’t actually know if any GRS employees were involved with those operations, but it’s notable that one of Task Force 373’s principal bases was in Khost, where Paresi and Wise were assisting the CIA in drone-targeting operations. The evidence from the WikiLeaks documents suggests that, as with GRS missions, those hunter-killer teams regularly botched their jobs by killing civilians and stoking local unrest.

At the time, Matthew Hoh, a former Marine and State Department contractor who often worked with Task Force 373 as well as other Special Operations Forces “capture/kill” programs in Afghanistan and Iraq, told me: “We are killing the wrong people, the mid-level Taliban who are only fighting us because we are in their valleys. If we were not there, they would not be fighting the U.S.”

As details of programs like Penny Lane and GRS tumble out into the open, shedding light on how the CIA has fought its secret war, it is becoming clearer that the full story of the Agency’s failures, and the larger failures of U.S. intelligence and its paramilitarized, privatized sidekicks has yet to be told.

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