

The Death of Hugo Chavez. Executive Orders to “Assassinate Foreign Leaders” Emanate Directly from the US President

The Revocation of Executive Order 12333 which banned the CIA from conducting “targeted assassinations”

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Was the president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez Frias the object of a targeted assassination by the Obama administration?

When addressing this question, it is worth recalling that in the immediate wake of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush restored the sordid practices of the CIA by revoking a ban initially enacted in 1976 by President Ford under Executive Order 11905. The latter stated: “*Prohibition on Assassination*. No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination.”

President Gerald Ford had issued EO 11905 in response to the findings of the 1975 Interim Report of the [US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, entitled *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*](#).

This Select Committee was led by Senator Frank Church.

The “Church Committee” Interim Report, focused on alleged plots to kill:

- Patrice Lumumba (Congo)
- Fidel Castro (Cuba)
- Rafael Trujillo (Dominican Republic)
- Ngo Dinh Diem (Vietnam)
- Rene Schneider (Chile)

President Jimmy Carter renewed the ban with Executive Order 12306: “*Prohibition on Assassination*. No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination” .

In December 1981, Ronald Reagan signed Executive Order 12333 which confirmed the ban initially enacted by President Gerald Ford pursuant to the 1975 Interim Report of the Church Committee: “No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination.”

The October 2001 revocation of Reagan’s 1981 Executive Order 12333 by President George W. Bush is of crucial significance. It initiates a transition in post-911 procedures pertaining

to extrajudicial assassinations. It provides a green light to the US president to “lawfully” order the assassination of foreign leaders of “rogue states”.

Although couched in the framework of post 9/11 counter terrorism doctrine, the revocation of EO 12333 gives *carte blanche* to the US Head of State. In this context, the CIA would receive orders to assassinate foreign leaders directly from the US President:

...The Bush administration has concluded that executive orders banning assassination **do not prevent the president from lawfully singling out a terrorist [or foreign leader of a rogue state] for death by covert action...** Bush’s directive broadens the class of potential targets beyond bin Laden and his immediate circle of operational planners, and also beyond the present boundaries of the fight in Afghanistan, officials said. **But it also holds the potential to target violence more narrowly than its precedents of the past 25 years because previous findings did not permit explicit planning for the death of an individual ... [I]nside the CIA and elsewhere in government,... much of the debate turns on the scope of a targeted killing campaign. ...**

...The CIA’s Directorate of Operations, which runs the clandestine service, is mindful of a traumatizing past in which **assassination attempts in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East** were blamed on rogue agents when they failed. **The agency is determined to leave no room this time for “plausible denial” of responsibility on the part of the president and the agency’s top management. That does not mean that operations will be publicly proclaimed, one source said, but that the paper trail inside government must begin undeniably with “the political leadership.”**

...**“The important thing is that the accountability chain is clear,”** said John C. Gannon, who retired in June as deputy director of central intelligence,... **“I would want the president’s guidance to be as clear as it could be, including the names of individuals... With explicit authority, he said, “I think the case officers are capable [of targeted killing] and would follow instructions, and would, I think, have the capability of succeeding.”**

National security officials noted that the White House and at least three executive departments already maintain lists in which terrorists are singled out by name... One view, apparently a minority position but one expressed in private recently by two senior managers in the Directorate of Operations, is that the clandestine service should target not only commanders but also financiers of al Qaeda. “You have to go after the Gucci guys, the guys who write the checks,” said one person reflecting that view. It is easier to find financiers, he said, and killing them would have dramatic impact because they are not commonly prepared to die for their cause... Rep. Robert L. Barr Jr. (R-Ga.)... said fundraisers are legitimate targets for death. “Under traditional terms of war, those who assist belligerents are belligerents,” he said....

If Bush has drawn up such a list, it is among the most closely held secrets of government. It could not be learned whether names have been proposed to him by the clandestine service, or whether he has signed orders that would amount to individual death warrants ...

(Washington Post, 29 October 2001, emphasis added)

American public opinion is led to believe that a policy of “targeted assassinations” in time of war is necessary to “fight evil” and uphold democracy.

Washington had hinted at the time of the revocation of EO 12333 that it is not only Al Qaeda which was being targeted, foreign leaders in “rogue States” or countries “which harbor international terrorism” could also be the object of “targeted assassinations.”

The revocation of EO 12333 in 2001 has laid the foundations for the establishment of broad procedures, which more recently have resulted under the Obama administration, in the endorsement by the US Congress of targeted assassinations of both foreigners and US citizens. These procedures *de facto* also encompass the targeted assassination of foreign heads of state.

Foreign leaders who are “disliked” by Washington can be targeted. What is at stake is the outright criminalization of US foreign policy in derogation of international law.

With regard to President Chavez, it is important to emphasize that there are clearly defined procedures pertaining to the “lawful” assassination of foreign heads of State by the US government, allegedly on national security grounds.

There are secret lists of names as confirmed by US government sources.

The orders carried out by the CIA to kill a foreign leader emanate from the US president.

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