

The CIA: Keepers of the Hit Lists. War Crimes as Policy

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In February the Guardian and BBC Arabic unveiled a documentary exploring the role of retired Colonel James Steele in the recruitment, training and initial deployments of the CIA advised and funded Special Police Commandos in Iraq.

The documentary tells how the Commandos tortured and murdered tens of thousands of Iraqi men and boys. But the Commandos were only one of America's many weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Along with US military forces – which murdered indiscriminately – and various CIA funded death squads – which murdered selectively – and the CIA's rampaging palace guard – the 5,000 man strong Iraq Special Operations Forces – the Commandos were part of a genocidal campaign that killed about 10% of the Sunni Arabs of Iraq by 2008, and drove about half of all Sunnis from their homes.

Including economic sanctions, and a 50 year history of sabotage and subversion, America and its Iraqi collaborators visited far more death and destruction on Iraq than Saddam Hussein and his regime.

For the last few weeks, American pundits have been cataloguing the horrors. They tell how the Bush and Obama regimes, united in the unstated policy of war crimes, probably murdered more than a million Iraqis, displaced around five million, and imprisoned and tortured hundreds of thousands without trial.

A few have further explained that the dictatorial administrative detention laws, torture, and executions that characterize the occupation are still in place under Prime Minister Maliki. The prime minister's office, notably, is where the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Bureau is currently ensconced.

All of this meets the definition of genocide in the Genocide Convention, and violates multiple articles of the Geneva Conventions, which guarantee protection to civilians in time of war. But the responsible Americans have gone unpunished for their war crimes, not least of which was falsifying intelligence about Iraq's non-existent weapon of mass destruction as a pretext for the invasion. British legal advisors repeatedly warned their government that invading Iraq would be a crime of aggression, which they called "one of the most serious offenses under international law."

For anyone familiar with the CIA, this was predictable. But the US Government, through secrecy and censorship, destroyed much of the hard evidence of its war crimes, making it

harder to prove. And the media is content to revise history and focus public attention on front men like Steele, rather than the institutions - in particular the CIA - for whom they work.

History, however, provides contextual evidence that what happened in Iraq amounts to a policy of carefully planned war crimes. Indeed, the CIA modeled the Iraqi Special Police Commandos on the Special Police forces it organized and funded in Vietnam. In November 2000, Counterpunch published an article describing how Congressman Rob Simmons, while serving as a CIA officer in Vietnam, created the Special Intelligence Force Unit (SIFU) on which the Iraqi Special Police Commandos are very likely modeled. This is only one of many historical examples of the CIA's modus operandi.

There are other examples. As we were reminded by the Guardian, Steele headed the U.S. Military Advisor Group in El Salvador (1984-1986), where US advised units were responsible for thousands of cases of torture and extra-judicial killing. They operated in rural and urban areas, but wherever they operated, they were directed against anyone opposing US policy - usually leftists.

The CIA's death squads in El Salvador were periodically moved from one administrative cover to another to confuse investigators. The CIA played this shell game with its Special Police Commandos in Iraq as well, rebranding them as the "National Police" following the exposure of one of their torture centers in November 2005. In its finest Madison Avenue marketing traditions, the CIA renamed the Commandos' predatory Wolf Brigade as the "Freedom Brigade".

In Vietnam, the CIA built an archipelago of secret torture centers to process the hundreds of thousands of detainees kidnapped by its mercenary army of "counter-terror" death squads. All around the world, CIA officers and their Special Forces lackeys teach torture techniques and design the torture centers, often hidden at military posts. This is well known.

Major Joe Blair, the Director of Instruction at the School of the Americas (1986-9), described the training the U.S. gave to Latin American officers as follows: "The doctrine that was taught was that if you want information you use physical abuse...false imprisonment...threats to family members... and killing. If you can't get the information you want, if you can't get that person to shut up or to stop what they're doing, you simply assassinate them, and you assassinate them with one of your death squads."

In 2000, the School of the Americas was rebranded as "WHINSIC", but, as Blair testified at a trial of SOA Watch protesters in 2002, "There are no substantive changes besides the name. They teach the identical courses that I taught, and changed the course names and use the same manuals."

General Paul Gorman, who commanded U.S. forces in Central America in the mid-1980's, defined this type of warfare based on war crimes as "a form of warfare repugnant to Americans, a conflict which involves innocents, in which non-combatant casualties may be an explicit object."

Another problem, apart from historical amnesia, is that each war crime is viewed as an isolated incident, and when the dots are connected, the focus is on some shadowy character like Steele. The Guardian made an attempt to connect Steele to Petraeus and Rumsfeld, which again, is commendable. But the fact is that the entire National Security State has

been designed and staffed with right-wing ideologues who support the unstated US policy of war crimes for profit.

We know who these security ideologues are. The problem is, they regularly have lunch with the reporters we trust to nail them to the wall.

For example, on 17 March 2013, CNN talking head Fareed Zakaria had Donald Gregg on his show to discuss North Korea. Zakaria introduced Gregg as President Bush the Superior's national security advisor in the 1980s, but did not mention that Gregg, while a CIA region officer in charge in Vietnam, developed the "repugnant" form of warfare based on war crimes described by General Gorman above, or that he oversaw its application in El Salvador through a back-channel "counter-terror" network.

Gregg's plan, used by Steele in El Salvador and then Iraq, requires US advisers to coordinate civilian security services (like the Iraqi Special Police) with military intelligence and civil affairs units to provide death squads and military units with information on the location of guerrillas, whose hideouts are bombed by U.S. warplanes, then ravaged in My Lai-style cordon and search operations in which counter-terror hit teams hunt enemy cadres in their homes.

In Vietnam, Gregg and his CIA companions - many of whom migrated to El Salvador - put together a chart of VC political cadres from "battered" detainees. They'd force the detainees to point out on a map where their comrades were hiding. Then the CIA officers would take the detainees up in a helicopter to point out the hiding places on the ground. A Special Forces or CIA paramilitary unit would then snatch the cadre and bring them to region's secret torture center, run by a CIA-paid and owned Special Police officer - the kind of guy Steele and before him Congressman Simmons advised.

"We brought guys in from the national prison to flesh out the reports," Gregg told me about one particular operation. "We had guys analyzing reports, marking photographs, putting the pictures together on the wall, and then photographing that. That led to 96 people in the organization. Using military intel, we took photos of the houses where they lived... then took the photos back to the helicopter where we had the 23 people, who were hooded, and they circled the faces of the cadre. "

There's more historical evidence, of course, but this is the plan the CIA exported to El Salvador, and that Steele employed, with some modifications, in Iraq.

After finishing with Gregg, Zakaria took a commercial break and returned with Paul Wolfowitz, Bush the Inferior's Deputy Secretary of Defense and proponent of the Iraq War.

ZAKARIA: "How do you think about as an American policy maker, the issue of - was it worth the price in American lives and treasure? By some estimates \$1 trillion.

WOLFOWITZ: "I would like as much as anyone to be able to say, let's forget about the Persian Gulf. Let's forget about the larger Middle East. But that part of the world isn't leaving us alone. Al Qaeda isn't leaving us alone. Pakistan isn't leaving us alone. I think our interests and our values would be advanced if we stick with it."

Zakaria did not ask Wolfowitz what he meant by "leaving us alone." He simply said, "Paul

Wolfowitz, pleasure to have you on.”

War Criminals Wave Press Passes

Given the history of America’s genocidal wars in Vietnam and Central America, it is unfortunate that the Guardian limited itself to establishing that Steele and his administrative boss, General David Petraeus, and his boss Donald Rumsfeld, underwrote systematic torture and extrajudicial killing.

What needs to be stressed is that thousands of Americans, including political bosses like Wolfowitz, and scores of journalists with access, knew that the CIA-owned Ministry of Interior had more than a dozen secret prisons, and they knew what went on in them – as one Iraqi general told the film-makers, “drilling, murder, torture – the ugliest sorts of torture I’ve ever seen.”

Likewise, the composition of and operations of Special Police death squads, an American interviewee said, “were discussed openly, wherever it was, at staff meetings,” and were “common knowledge across Baghdad.”

It is a testament to the power of U.S. “information warfare” that this policy of war crimes comes as a surprise to the general public. Such is the power of National Security State insiders David Corn and Michael Isikoff, who happily turn the policy of calculated war crimes into the “hubris” of a handful of sexy mad patriots whom the Establishment is glad to sacrifice on the pseudo-altar of public theatre.

Certainly people have to be reminded, and the young have to learn, that America’s long-standing policy of war crimes for profit cannot exist without the complicity of the mainstream media, who exploit our natural inclination to believe the best of “our” leaders and especially of our soldiers. As George Orwell wrote in 1945, “The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.”

Belligerent nationalism is often understood as the essence of what it means to be a “patriotic” American, and this veneration for the nation is taught to all budding reporters at journalism schools, along with the Code of Silence. Which is why, when insider Seymour Hersh reported that the CIA and Israel were training U.S. Special Forces assassination teams for deployment in Iraq, on the CIA’s Phoenix program model, he described it in a bloodless manner that made it seem necessary and, at worst, a mistake.

But war crimes are not a mistake; they are a “repugnant” and thoroughly intentional form of warfare.

Hersh quoted a former CIA station chief as saying, “We have to resuscitate Iraqi intelligence, holding our nose, and have Delta and agency shooters break down doors and take them”—the insurgents—“out.”

Hold our noses, Hersh suggested, and commit war crimes. And when Amy Goodman interviewed him about it, she did not ask if what he described constituted a policy of war crimes. And when Zakaria looked at Wolfowitz, he failed to question him about the war crimes he plotted and committed.

All this psychological warfare is waged in the name of morale – to make us, and our

journalists, feel good about our belligerent nationalism – about being complicit in the war crimes perpetrated by the Perles, Frums, and Feiths.

After the CIA death squads eliminated the senior leadership of the Iraqi government, they eliminated “mid-level” Baath Party members, the middle class of Iraq. Cover was provided by Newsweek, which quoted an army officer who said, “The Sunni population is paying no price for the support it is giving to the terrorists. From their point of view, it is cost-free. We have to change that equation.”

How did they do this? In one case, U.S. forces held a general’s three sons as hostages to persuade him to turn himself in. Then, instead of releasing his sons as promised, they staged an elaborate mock execution of his 15-year-old youngest son, before torturing the general himself to death.

All of it covered up. Not one victim featured on TV.

If you were to believe the New York Times – the newspaper of record – it doesn’t know the names of the senior CIA officers in Iraq behind these sorts of barbaric practices. Or publishers and editors may claim that the Intelligence Identity Protection Act prevents them from naming names, but they could easily describe the jobs, and tell us what’s being done. They could finesse the law. But they don’t even do that, and that’s the Big Secret upon which the policy of war crimes utterly depends.

The Times conceals the simple truths that undermine our so-called “democracy.” Truths, like how the CIA nurtured the exile leadership it installed in Iraq, and organized and funded the Ministry of Interior as its private domain, replete with a computerized list of every Iraqi citizen and every detail of their lives.

The Times could at least describe the CIA as “Keeper of the Hit Lists: Blackmail Central.”

But the Times won’t, because it’s a family affair. As we well know, the Iraqi National Congress was headed by Ahmed Chalabi, the CIA-sponsored source on the myth of weapons of mass destruction, hand-delivered to Times reporter Judy Miller, now a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Chalabi’s lies, and Miller’s dutiful reporting of them, were the pretext for the war on Iraq.

What is never mentioned is that the INC was founded and funded by the CIA, and that another of its leaders was the exiled General Hassan al-Naqib, whose son, Falah al-Naqib, then became the CIA’s handpicked Interim Interior Minister in Iraq and appointed his uncle General Thavit to lead the Special Police Commandos.

Times reporters undoubtedly lunch with Uncle Thavit and his CIA case officer.

The Times doesn’t explain the CIA’s precious methods of dominance: that any American working for the Interior Ministry, or prime minister’s office, was reporting to a publicly acknowledged administrative boss, usually in the military or State Department, and secretly to a CIA case officer, his operational boss. Or that every unit in the Special Commandos had a CIA case officer handing out hit lists to its American “Special Police Transition Team”. Up to forty-five Americans, mostly Special Forces, worked with each Iraqi unit. These teams were in round-the-clock communication with their CIA bosses via the Special Police Command Center, and there is no record of the Special Police ever conducting operations without U.S. supervision, even as they massacred tens of thousands of people.

Every militia and Iraqi Special Forces unit had a CIA case officer doing likewise. Every Iraqi politician and ministry officer has a CIA case officer too. And Times reporters drink with these advisors inside the Green Zone. It's the secret that enables atrocity.

American journalists do not report the truth. Consider their deference to the Interior Ministry's CIA advisor Steven Casteel after his Special Police Commandos launched their reign of terror in Baghdad. Hersh's sanitized reports of a Phoenix-style terror campaign in Iraq were conveniently forgotten and instead they regurgitated Casteel's black propaganda - that all atrocities were either rumor or innuendo or perpetrated by "insurgents in stolen police uniforms."

Forget about what Hersh said about "mistakes." Such an explanation was as ludicrous as General Petraeus claiming that the Iraqis formed the Special Police Commandos on "their own initiative."

Knight Ridder did not mention that Casteel had managed DEA operations in Latin America and been the DEA's Chief of Intelligence before being sent to Iraq, or that the CIA has controlled the DEA's overseas targeting for 40 years, on a purely political basis. Casteel had served as a CIA lackey in Latin America, attacking left wing drug traffickers and letting right wing traffickers flourish, supporting the CIA sponsored Los Pepes-AUC death squads who were responsible for about 75% of civilian deaths in the Colombian civil war over the next 10 years.

To its credit, Knight Ridder did investigate Commando atrocities, and might have uncovered the whole story, except that its Iraqi reporter, Yasser Salihee, was shot and killed by an American sniper in June 2005. And while it had sufficient evidence to debunk Casteel's cover story, it instead blamed the abuses on infiltration of the good guy Commandos by bad guy "Shiite militias".

After the exposure of the al-Jadiriya torture center, journalists reported that heads would roll. But a major CIA asset, Deputy Interior Minister Adnan al-Asadi, maintained command of the National (formerly Special) Police, undermining the reforms promised by the new Interior Minister, Jawad al-Bulani.

Asadi remains in that position, his forces embedded and deeply implicated in persistent human rights abuses in Iraq, where prisons are still rife with rape, torture, executions (judicial and extra-judicial) and disappearances. During Arab Spring demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Baghdad in March 2011, demonstrators spotted Asadi on a rooftop directing snipers as they shot peaceful protesters in the square below.

The Guardian and the BBC made a good start, but US journalists need to break the Code of Silence and launch an ongoing investigation into the full extent of U.S. command and control of the Special Police Commandos and all the other death squads and torture centers the United States brought to Iraq. The investigation must seriously examine the roles of the CIA and of US Special Forces, including the secret Joint Special Operations Command and the "Nightstalkers" who worked with the Wolf Brigade in 2005. The investigation must lead to accountability for each and every war crime committed.

American journalists were glad to demonize Saddam Hussein for his war crimes - real and imagined. Now they need to identify and humanize the up to 1,800 dead bodies that piled up every month in Baghdad, and to follow up with Iraqi human rights groups like the

Organization for Follow-Up and Monitoring, who matched 92% of the bodies of execution victims with names and descriptions of people detained by US-led Interior Ministry forces.

America's ruling National Security State, under the Obama regime, has expanded, through the CIA, "covert" paramilitary operations from 60 countries in 2008 to 120 nations. If we are ever to have a whiff of true democracy, we need our journalists to reveal the extent to which the CIA commands and controls these operations, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we need them to explain, on a daily basis, how the National Security State corrupts intelligence and "news" for the same racist imperial purposes that have defined US foreign policy since the Vietnam War.

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