

Washington's Death Squads

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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In a lengthy article published Sunday, the New York Times provided a glimpse into the criminal and grisly methods employed by Seal Team 6, a secret unit within the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

The unit was made famous by the phony accounts of its assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, cover stories that were blown last month by veteran journalist [Seymour Hersh](#), who exposed the operation as the cold-blooded murder of an unarmed and decrepit individual who had been fingered by Pakistani intelligence.

What the *Times* account makes clear—whatever the newspaper's intentions and its undoubted vetting of its material with the Pentagon and the White House—is that in the pursuit of its global interests, the United States government has become ever more dependent upon the murderous operations of secret death squads.

The newspaper quotes a Pentagon spokesman as saying that the number of missions carried out by Seal Team 6 and other special operations units has risen to the “tens of thousands” since 2001. The victims killed by Seal Team 6, whose very existence the US military refuses to acknowledge, number in the thousands, the vast majority of them unidentified individuals with no link to any plot or threat against the US itself.

The report says the secretive unit has grown to 1,800 personnel and boasts a “ballooning” budget and an ever-expanding remit. It details Seal Team 6's exploits in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2008, when it carried out continuous night raids, killing, on average, 15 individuals each night and frequently as many as 25, while in most cases finding no one identified as a target.

Neither those hunted nor the many more who were killed posed any threat to the American people. They were targeted because they were identified as potential impediments to US policy, specifically to Washington's attempt to prop up the corrupt and unpopular regime under Hamid Karzai that the US installed in Kabul.

The *Times* provides a sanitized account of one of these raids, carried out on December 27, 2009, as part of the Obama administration's Afghan “surge,” in which the American military death squad murdered eight schoolboys—ages 11 to 17—along with a 12-year-old shepherd boy and an Afghan farmer.

At the time, a local school principal recounted the massacre:

“First, the foreign troops entered the guest room and shot two of them. Then

they entered another room and handcuffed the seven students. Then they killed them. Abdul Khaliq [the farmer] heard shooting and came outside. When they saw him, they shot him as well.”

Describing this period, a Seal Team 6 former officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, stated, “These killing fests had become routine.”

The *Times* reports that in Afghanistan, the Team 6 operatives “engaged in combat so intimate that they have emerged soaked in blood that was not their own.” It adds, “At times, Seals cut off fingers or patches of scalp from dead militants for DNA analysis.”

What is described here are not the actions of rogue soldiers or a band of lawless mercenaries, but rather a unit that is touted as the most elite within the US armed forces. Its methods and its crimes are the methods and crimes of the US government, the Obama administration and America’s capitalist ruling establishment.

The unit is given what amounts to blanket immunity for its crimes, with investigations of its activities almost invariably going no further than JSOC, itself a secretive command dedicated to “counter-insurgency” methods that routinely translate into war crimes.

Civilian officials at the Pentagon give these operations a wide berth, and, as Harold Koh, the State Department official who drafted pseudo-legal rationales for the Obama administration’s drone assassination program, told the *Times*, “This is an area where Congress notoriously doesn’t want to know too much.”

The Obama administration’s reliance upon these operations has become so pervasive that former US senator from Nebraska Robert Kerrey told the *Times*, “They have become sort of a 1-800 number anytime somebody wants something done.” [Kerrey](#) knows whereof he speaks, having participated as a Navy Seal in war crimes in Vietnam as part of the infamous Operation Phoenix program of torture, massacres and mass assassinations that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women and children—the program on which much of today’s operations is modeled.

To the extent that the *Times* piece expresses any reservations concerning the operations of Team 6 and similar units, it is in regard to their efficacy. The newspaper complains that the wall of secrecy that surrounds this death squad operation makes it difficult “to fully assess its record and the consequences of its actions.”

Left unexplored is the far more significant question of what the ever-growing reliance on death squads, “kill lists” and assassinations says about the nature of the American government itself. The use of such methods is not new, and Vietnam was by no means exceptional.

In El Salvador, Washington trained and equipped death squads that carried out horrific violence against that country’s civilian population, accounting for a large share of the 75,000 people killed in the attempt to crush resistance to the US-backed dictatorship. This bloodbath is now touted within the Pentagon as a counterinsurgency success story.

But now these methods have become institutionalized as never before. They are the preferred method of the White House and Washington’s massive military and intelligence apparatus for the elimination of perceived enemies anywhere on the planet.

War crimes abroad go hand-in-hand with a frontal assault on democratic rights within the United States itself. Unprecedented levels of social inequality and a ruling capitalist oligarchy that is determined to reverse its economic decline at the expense of the working class are wholly incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

This already finds expression in the militarization of the police in the US and the routine use of violence and deadly force against the most oppressed layers of the population. How long will it be before units like Seal Team 6 are given "kill lists" of enemies of the state to be hunted down not in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq or Yemen, but rather at workplaces and homes within the United States itself?

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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