

Whatever Happened to the CIA? Dirty Wars and the Cinema of Self-Indulgence

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Let me begin with some background not covered in the film. Dirty War derives from “La Sale Guerre”, the term the French applied to their counter-terror campaign in Algeria, circa 1954-1961. Algeria wanted independence, and France resisted.

Like subject people everywhere, the Algerians were badly outgunned and resorted to guerrilla tactics including “selective terrorism,” a hallmark of the Viet Minh, who fought the French until 1954, when America claimed Vietnam as its rightful property. Viet Minh tactics were derived largely from Mao’s precepts for fighting a People’s War.

Selective terrorism meant the murder of low-ranking officials – collaborators – who worked closely with the people; policemen, mailmen, teachers, etc. The murders were gruesome – a bullet in the belly or a grenade lobbed into a café – designed to achieve maximum publicity and demonstrate to the people the power of the nationalists to strike crippling blows against their oppressors.

Whether the Great White Fathers are French or American or English, they agree that putting down a People’s War means torturing and slaughtering the people – despite the fact that most people are not engaged in terrorism or guerrilla action and have no blood on their hands.

As John Stockwell taught us years ago, Dirty War means destabilizing a targeted nation through covert methods, the type the CIA has practiced around the world for 66 years. Destabilizing means “hiring agents to tear apart the social and economic fabric of the country.

“What we’re talking about is going in and deliberately creating conditions where the farmer can’t get his produce to market; where children can’t go to school; where women are terrified inside their homes as well as outside; where government administered programs grind to a complete halt; where the hospitals are treating wounded people instead of sick people; where international capital is scared away and the country goes bankrupt.”

Economic warfare – strangling nations like Cuba, Iraq and Iran in Medieval fashion – is a type of Dirty Warfare beloved by the Great White Fathers who control the world’s finances. Though no less deadly than atomic bombs, or firebombing Dresden, it is easier to sell to the bourgeoisie.

You’ll hear no mention of this in Scahill’s film, nor will you hear any references to Phil Agee, or the countless others who have explained Dirty War to each generation of Americans since World War Two.

You will not hear about psychological warfare, the essence of Dirty War.

America's first was terror guru was Ed Lansdale, the advertising executive who made Levi's blue jeans a national craze in the 1930's. He applied his sales skills to propaganda in the OSS and after WW II, concocted a new generation of psywar tactics as an agent of the Office of Policy Coordination assigned to the Philippines under military cover. Lansdale's bottomless black bag of dirty tricks included a "skull squadron" death squad that roamed the countryside, torturing and murdering Communist terrorists.

One of Lansdale's counter-terror "psywar" tactics was to string a captured Communist guerrilla upside down from a tree, stab him in the neck with a stiletto, and drain his blood. The terrorized Commies fled the area and the terrified villagers, who believed in vampires, begged the government for protection.

Lansdale referred to his sadism as "low humor," an excuse borrowed liberally by American officialdom during the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

Lansdale formalized "black propaganda" practices to vilify the Communists: one of his Filipino commando units would dress as rebels and commit atrocities, and then another unit would arrive with cameras to record the staged scenes and chase the "terrorists" away.

Lansdale brought his black propaganda and passion for atrocity to Saigon in 1954, along with a goon squad of Filipinos mercenaries packaged as "Freedom Company."

Under Lansdale's guidance, Freedom Company sent Vietnamese commandoes into North Vietnam, under cover as relief workers, to activate stay-behind agent nets and conduct all manner of sabotage and subversion. Disinformation was a Lansdale specialty, and his agents spread lurid tales of Vietminh soldiers' disemboweling pregnant Catholic women, castrating priests, and sticking bamboo slivers in the ears of children so they could not hear the Word of God.

In the South, with the help of the American media, Lansdale re-branded the heroic Vietminh as the beastly Viet Cong.

Lansdale's greatest innovation, still used today, was to conduct all manner of espionage and terror under cover of "civic action." As a way of attacking Viet Minh agents in the South, Lansdale launched "Operation Brotherhood," a Filipino paramedical team patterned on the typical Special Forces A team. With CIA money, Operation Brotherhood built medical dispensaries that the CIA used as cover for terror operations, as depicted in the book and movie *The Quiet American*.

Levis never went out of fashion, nor did Lansdale's dirty tricks. Think Saddam Hussein killing babies in their incubators. Such disinformation invariably works on an American public looking for any excuse to rationalize its urge for racist genocide.

Think *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* and every Rambo and Bruce Willis film.

Only Americans were fooled by the propaganda, and the Vietnamese quickly caught on. So the CIA in 1956 launched the Denunciation of Communists campaign, which compelled the Vietnamese people to inform on Commies or get tortured and murdered. The campaign was managed by CIA agents who could arrest, confiscate land from, and execute Communists and their sympathizers on the CIA's master list. In determining who was a Communist, the

CIA used a three-part classification system: A for dangerous party members, B for less dangerous party members, and C for loyal citizens.

As happened later in the Phoenix program, the threat of an A or B classification was used to extort innocent civilians, while category A and B offenders were put to work building houses and offices for CIA officers and their lackeys. And, of course, the puppet Vietnamese President used his CIA created, funded and trained security forces to eliminate his political rivals.

As Lansdale confessed, "it became a repressive tool to liquidate any opponent."

"This development was political," Lansdale observes. "My first inkling came when several families appeared at my house one morning to tell me about the arrest at midnight of their men-folk, all of whom were political figures. The arrests had a strange aspect to them, having come when the city was asleep and being made by heavily armed men who were identified as `special police.'""

Lansdale complained, but he was told that a "U.S. policy decision had been made. We Americans were to give what assistance we could to the building of a strong nationalistic party that would support Diem. Since Diem was now the elected president, he needed to have his own party. "

How We Got To Scahill's Dirty War

By 1962, as the US expanded its Dirty Wars in the Far East and South America, the military replaced its Office of Special Operations with an up-dated Special Assistant for Counter-insurgency and Special Activities (SACSA). SACSA assigned unconventional warfare forces to the CIA and regular army commanders, who initially resisted.

The development of psychological warfare and special operations is explained in Michael McClintock's Instruments of Statecraft. For the CIA politics behind it, see Burton Hersh's The Old Boys.

In 1965 Lansdale went back to Vietnam to run the Revolutionary Development Cadre Program as the CIA's "second station" with a staff of CIA officers, Green Beanies, and Daniel Ellsberg. Vietnam was a laboratory and the CIA was experimenting with Pacification, aka "the Other War."

In 1967, the CIA created the Phoenix program to coordinate everyone in its Dirty War. Phoenix combined existing counterinsurgency programs in a concerted effort to neutralize the civilians running the shadow government. Neutralize means to kill, capture, or make to defect. Central to Phoenix was that it targeted civilians. "By analogy," said Ogden Reid, a member of a congressional committee investigating Phoenix in 1971, "if the Union had had a Phoenix program during the Civil War, its targets would have been civilians like Jefferson Davis or the mayor of Macon, Georgia."

Under Phoenix, due process was nonexistent. South Vietnamese civilians whose names appeared on CIA blacklists were kidnapped, tortured, detained without trial, or murdered on the word of an informer. Phoenix managers imposed a quota of 1,800 neutralizations per month on the saps running the program in the field, opening it up to abuses by corrupt security officers, policemen, politicians, and racketeers. One CIA officer described Phoenix as, "A very good blackmail scheme for the central government. `If you don't do what I want,

you're VC.”

Because Phoenix assassinations (totaling 25,000+) were often conducted at night while its victims were home sleeping, Phoenix proponents describe the program as a “scalpel” designed to replace the “bludgeon” of My Lai-style search and destroy operations, air strikes, and artillery barrages that indiscriminately wiped out entire villages and did little to “win the hearts and minds” of the people. But that was just propaganda and Phoenix was, among other things, an instrument of counter-terror – the psywar tactic in which enemy agents were brutally murdered along with their families and neighbors as a means of terrorizing the people into a state of submission. Such horrendous acts were, for propaganda purposes, often made to look as if they had been committed by the enemy.

This practice is at the heart of the film I will be reviewing.

As noted, conventional soldiers hated Phoenix. General Bruce Palmer, commander of the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division in 1968, objected to the “involuntary assignment of U.S. Army officers to the program. I don't believe that people in uniform,” he said, “who are pledged to abide by the Geneva Conventions, should be put in the position of having to break those laws of warfare.”

Palmer's was such a charming sentiment. By 2004, Obama advisor Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, in an article for Small Wars Journal, was calling for a “global Phoenix Program.” Tom Hayden wrote an article for The Nation about Kilcullen in 2008 titled “Reviving Vietnam War Tactics”.

Fact is, Phoenix never went out of fashion. As McClintock notes, “Counterinsurgency and indeed all aspects of special warfare doctrine had developed a reasonable level of political sophistication by the mid-1970s, acknowledging the necessity of combining military and civil initiatives.”

By 1975 SACS had expired, the nation had internalized its humiliating defeat in Vietnam, and the CIA, wounded by the Church Committee hearings, went underground. The age of counter-terror began. Central and South America were the new laboratories. The CIA forged secret alliances with proxy nations like Israel and Taiwan, whose agents taught Latin American landowners how to organize criminals into death squads which murdered and terrorized labor leaders, Human Rights activists, and all other enemies of the Great White Fathers.

To compensate for the reduction in size of its paramilitary Special Operations Division, the CIA formed its Office of Terrorism. Meanwhile, the military branches beefed up their terror capabilities, all of which glommed together in December 1980 in the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Steve Emerson chronicles this development in detail in *Secret Warriors* (1988).

JSOC's mission, conducted on the Phoenix model with the CIA, is identifying and destroying terrorists and terror cells worldwide. Paramilitary personnel are often exchanged between JSOC and CIA.

By the early 1980s, CIA and military veterans of the Phoenix program were running counter-insurgency and counter-terror ops worldwide. <http://www.american-buddha.com/phoenixprogepi.htm>

General Paul Gorman, who commanded U.S. forces in Central America in the mid-1980's, defined this advanced form of Dirty War as "a form of warfare repugnant to Americans, a conflict which involves innocents, in which non-combatant casualties may be an explicit object." (Toledo Blade 1 Jan 1987)

All of which brings me to my review.

Dirty Wars

Dirty Wars is a post-modern film by Jeremy Scahill, about himself, starring himself in many poses.

The film owes more to Sergio Leone and Kathryn Bigelow than Constantinos Gavras. Scahill certainly is no Leslie Cockburn: there is no Tony Poe telling how the CIA facilitates heroin shipments; no Richard Secord suing him for unraveling the financial intrigues of the CIA's secret operators. The CIA is rarely mentioned.

There is no reference to the Guerra Sucia in Argentina.

Scahill is no Franz Fanon documenting the devastating psychological effects of racism on society. There are no cameos by Jean Paul Sartre advocating violent retribution on Hollywood, no mingling with the Taliban in their caves as they conspire against their Yankee oppressors at the Sundance Film Festival.

We get the first taste of his self-indulgent idiocy when he says it is "hard to tell" when the Dirty War began. He does tell us, however, that he is on the "front lines" of the war on terror.

Scahill (hereafter JS) brags that he wasn't going to find the front lines in Kabul, although he could have, if he knew where to look. Instead he just looks around furtively on his way to the scene of a war crime. We see a close-up of his face.

The endless close-ups artfully convey the feeling that our hero is utterly alone, on some mythic journey of self-discovery, without a film crew or interpreters. There is no evidence that anyone went to Gardez to make sure everyone was waiting and not toiling in the fields or tending the flocks, or whatever they do. And we'll never find out what the victims do. The stage isn't big enough for JS and anyone else.

This is a major theme throughout the story - JS is doing all this alone and the isolation preys on him. He bears this heavy burden alone, with many soulless looks.

Initially, there is no mention that journalist Jerome Starkey reported what happened in Gardez. JS is too busy establishing himself as the courageous super-sleuth. As we drive along the road, he reminds us how much danger he is in. Two journalists were kidnapped here, he says. This area is "beyond" NATO control. He must get in and out before nightfall or the Taliban will surely kill him like the Capitalist dog he is.

In my drinking days, we referred to this type of behavior as grandiosity. Telling everyone how you defied death, so the guys would talk about your exploits in the bars, and the girls would fall at your feet. For JS, this formula is working - a visit to his Facebook page reveals scores of "Millennial girls" wringing their hands and fretting for his safety as he strides across America's secret battlefields in search of the truth. His carefully crafted Wiki bio

further the legend.

Using the material gathered by Starkey (whom he eventually acknowledges), JS shows that in February 2010, American soldiers murdered five people in Gardez, including two pregnant women, and tried to cover it up by digging the bullets out of the targeted man's body. He interviews the surviving family members. They weep. Violin music plays. They seem more like props than human beings.

JS ingenuously asks various Afghan and American officials, why the cover-up? The officials suggest that the targeted man was working for the Taliban – and if you play that double-game, you risk your family and friends. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff tells JS they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. He says there will be no investigation.

Cut to Capitol Hill where, by his own account, JS has greatness thrust upon him. “It is imperative,” he tells Chairman John Conyers, “that Congress investigates this shadow war to examine its legality.”

What, one wonders, was Conyers thinking? Forty-two years earlier, after hearing testimony from Bart Osborn and Michael Uhl about the Phoenix program, Conyers and three other U.S. representatives stated their belief that “The people of these United States ... have deliberately imposed on the Vietnamese people a system of justice which admittedly denies due process of law In so doing, we appear to have violated the 1949 Geneva Convention for the protection of civilian peoples.”

His testimony, JS tells us, “throws him into the public arena,” ever so reluctantly. He revisits his Blackwater testimony and shows pictures of himself with numerous celebrities on TV.

B-takes of Scahill walking among the common folk in Brooklyn, plotting his next move. Haunted by the horror of Gardez, he files FOIA requests and discovers that William McRaven is head of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). He's stunned. He's been a national security reporter for over a decade, and he's never heard of JSOC before. It's covert. The story has been hidden in the shadows, he says.

This was the turning point of the film for me. For a National Security correspondent, this is an admission akin to a botanist saying he'd never heard of flowers. It's an admission that fairly sums up the sorry state of reporting in America today. Has JS ever read a book?

JS discovers that Gardez is not an isolated incident, and that JSOC rampages across Afghanistan with “unprecedented authority.” He talks to a former JSOC soldier about its activities in Iraq, where it had hit lists and conducted night raids. This revelation, and the fact that McRaven took responsibility for Gardez, leads JS to conclude that JSOC is responsible for Gardez. It certainly wasn't Congress, which according to JS, has no control over JSOC. JSOC money comes from rich donors.

JS learns that JSOC is not only in Afghanistan, but that it operates worldwide, and that its hit lists get bigger all the time. And we hear, for the first time, the catchy phrase, “the world is a battlefield.”

At this point JS decides, with the help of The Nation brain trust, to investigate JSOC in Yemen where CIA drones are wiping out people by the score.

B-take of JS sipping tea thoughtfully. He's going to talk to the most powerful man in South

Yemen. We view of scene of a drone strike: 46 killed, including five pregnant women. A woman in a black veil says her entire family, save one daughter, were wiped out. Violin music. But there's no cover-up here. In fact, Obama personally kept the journalist in prison who reported the strike.

What will Obama do to JS?

Once again, we fear for JS. Luckily he lives to talk to Rachel Maddow and Morning Joe. The greatness thrust upon him forces him onto TV shows everywhere. There he is with Amy Goodman!

More close-ups. We count the pores on his nose, the hairs in his eyebrows. We feel the fear. He gets a strange call. Someone tells him JSOC tortures people without telling the CIA or regular army, which are too busy torturing people to care.

As he studies the hit lists, he comes across radical America Muslim, Anwar al-Awlaki. After talking to Tony Schaffer, he realizes JSOC targets Muslims and that is why, along with the US invasion of Iraq, Awlaki is pissed off. Awlaki is an American but is inciting people to revolution in Yemen, so Yemen allows the CIA to kill him.

Note - the CIA is mentioned maybe twice in the film. Apparently it is so covert it escaped his notice.

We see JS in an exotic location. An airplane lands. JS is back in the USA. He's been traumatized by what he's seen. He tells anyone who will listen that the US cannot kill its way to peace, as if peace is the objective. The war on terror, he concludes, is creating enemies, which of course is the objective.

Before the American people can rally to JS's clarion call, Obama sends some guys to kill Osama bin Laden. This is too much of a coincidence to ignore. Was it done to subvert his investigation? In any event, McRaven and JSOC are now heroes. He meets a knowledgeable person who tells him the Dirty War will go on forever. He tells us about signature strikes that kill people randomly (but not that the CIA conducts them) and that the war on terror is out of control.

Pictures of JS pointing to countries on a map where JSOC operates. He decides to visit Somalia, where JSOC is snatching bodies and taking them to ships in the Arabian Sea, and outsourcing its Dirty War to mercenaries. He visits mercenaries wearing camo fatigues. There are no other journalists here, it is too dangerous. Someone hands JS a flak jacket. Someone tells him they bury traitors alive. The tension soars. He's surrounded by armed men. There's a gunshot. He ducks behind sandbags.

We wonder who arranged for JS to meet these guys? Where did he get an interpreter? What's the quid pro quo?

JS goes to a hospital morgue and look at a mutilated body. After which he wants to go home. But he learns that Awlaki's son has been killed and reluctantly he returns to Yemen.

I liked this part of the film. It seemed genuine. We see home videos of Awlaki's son doing youthful happy things. JS tries to understand why the US would deliberately kill a 16 year old kid? Which is a good question. Perhaps America is ruled by a murderous Cult of Death.

We see pictures of young girls smiling, and we revert back to the contrived scenes and monologue that drag the documentary down into gratuitous self-promotion. JS says he never had any idea where the story would lead, as if all this happened magically, like a rabbit pulled out of a hat.

He asks what will happen to us.

The film ends and I wonder what he could have produced if he hadn't melodramatized and spent so much time and film on close-ups. I wonder what he could have done if he'd read a few history books.

Ultimately, the film is so devoid of historical context, and so contrived, as to render it a work of art, rather than political commentary. And as art, it is pure self-indulgence.

And in this sense, it is a perfect slice of modern American life.

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