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Assassination as Foreign Policy

By William Pfaff, Tribune Media Services,

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Following the Second World War, people who had been involved with the American, British and other Allies' "Jedburgh" teams supporting the European Resistance just before the Normandy landings, and the work of the British Special Operations Executive and the American Office of Strategic Services in Asia, were among those planning for the eventuality of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.

We know now that this invasion never was a serious risk, either while Stalin was alive or after his death in 1953, but it was a threat that preoccupied governments in the West. Before the creation of NATO, a rudimentary "stay-behind" network of Europeans was developed to provide the nucleus for resistance following such an invasion. This was the work of the U.S. State Department-controlled Office of Policy Coordination, predecessor to the CIA, and British Intelligence's MI9 department, which had run underground networks during the war. The U.S. part of the project was later assigned to the Defense Department. The operation was called "Gladio" (a Roman short sword) and remained secret until 1990. (In Italy and certain other countries, it had been corrupted by acquiring a right-wing conspiratorial political character.)

The American Army, traditionally hostile to "special" or "elite" units, was in 1952 persuaded to develop a force that in wartime would sustain these stay-behind networks by parachuting in small units ("A Teams") of American soldiers to provide them with tactical advice, leadership, arms, tactical training and medical services. These were the original "green berets," making up

the 10th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg. After the East German workers' riots in 1953, the unit was split and one part moved to Germany, leaving the rest at Fort Bragg to become the 77th Special Forces Group, a support and training element for the 10th. It, in turn, created Army Reserve units, one of them near New York City, where I lived.

At the time I was a young and highly romantic American veteran of the Korean War, where I had planned to become a hero.

This plan did not work out, but, still influenced by having read too much T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia"), this new Special Forces detachment in the Army Reserve was just what I had been waiting for.

I signed up, and subsequently spent a couple of years of summer vacations at Fort Bragg, and weekends during the rest of the year attending not very inspiring training sessions at a New Jersey armory. Then I told myself to grow up -- I was not a potential hero and had more interesting things to do with my life. So I resigned from the Army Reserve.

I am writing about this because I want to describe Special Forces during those years. We conceived of ourselves as potential liberators of a Soviet-conquered Europe, supporting Europe's guerilla resistance. (That was to change with the Vietnam deployment in the 1960s, when Special Forces were given the mission of chasing guerillas down and killing them.) We were bound by the laws of war and were expected (if only for our own protection under the Geneva Conventions) to operate in military uniform while carrying military identification.

We've come a long way since -- both Army Special Forces and the United States' idea of its mission in the world. Today, Special Forces have been grouped with the Army's Delta Force, Rangers (specialized light infantry), the Navy's SEALs and the Marine Corps' Special Operations units, plus some air units, in something called U.S. Special Operations Command, which, according to the Washington Post, was deployed in 75 countries last year, and expects to be operating in 120 countries by the end of this year.

According to a report by Nick Turse, an editor of the website TomDispatch.com and editor of the book "The Case for Withdrawal from Afghanistan" (Verso Books), the current mission of Special Operations Command includes counterterrorism raids, long-range reconnaissance, intelligence analysis, foreign troop training and weapons of mass destruction counter-proliferation operations.

It also does assassinations. According to John Nagl, a former advisor to Gen. David Petraeus, the Command includes a clandestine sub-unit operating under White House authority, which is "an almost industrial-scale counterterrorism killing machine." This unit was responsible for killing Osama bin Laden.

None of this is likely to be news to anyone who follows American policy. I bring it up to challenge such a program and policy, not simply out of considerations for national and individual morality, but for political and military policy reasons.

The global security domination program that the U.S. has followed since 2003 expresses a militarism, ruthlessness and disregard of international law that now characterizes the Pentagon. In the absence of resistance by the American political class, this has bestowed upon the American nation an identity that 19th century Prussia once possessed -- the nation that was owned by its army. This is what Dwight Eisenhower warned against.

As many of us have argued, global domination is a political policy that cannot possibly succeed. The world is not open to domination by a single state. The effort to establish it will destroy the United States itself. The reasons are evident in history. The danger was there in 1960, when Dwight Eisenhower left office, and in 1963 when Lyndon Johnson became president and discovered what the United States had been doing in the Caribbean. He exclaimed that the Kennedy administration and the CIA had been "running a goddamned Murder Incorporated down there!" (This is from "Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964" Simon & Schuster, 1998, edited by Michael R. Beschloss).

A global policy of assassination of what are conceived to be America's enemies endlessly creates, motivates and augments the number and determination of those enemies. It defeats itself. It is an assault upon the most powerful force in modern history, nationalism, which is composed of religion and culture, and incorporates a people's moral identity and sense of destiny.