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Why General Petraeus' Assassination Inc. Threatens Us All

by Fred Branfman

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The truth that many Americans find hard to take is that that mass U.S. assassination on a scale unequalled in world history lies at the heart of America's military strategy in the Muslim world, a policy both illegal and never seriously debated by Congress or the American people. Conducting assassination operations throughout the 1.3 billion-strong Muslim world will inevitably increase the murder of civilians and thus create exponentially more "enemies," as Gen. McChrystal suggests—posing a major long-term threat to U.S. national security. This mass assassination program, sold as defending Americans, is actually endangering us all. Those responsible for it, primarily General Petraeus, are recklessly seeking short-term tactical advantage while making an enormous long-term strategic error that could lead to countless American deaths in the years and decades to come. General Petraeus must be replaced, and the U.S. military's policy of direct and mass assassination of Muslims ended.

The U.S. has conducted assassination programs in the Third World for decades, but the actual killing—though directed and financed by the C.I.A.—has been largely left to local paramilitary and police forces. This has now has changed dramatically.

What is unprecedented today is the vast number of Americans directly assassinating Muslims—through greatly expanded U.S. military Special Operations teams, U.S. drone strikes and private espionage networks run by former CIA assassins and torturers. Most

significant is the expanding geographic scope of their killing. While CENTCOM Commander from October 2008 until July 2010, General Petraeus received secret and unprecedented permission to unilaterally engage in operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, former Russian Republics, Yemen, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, the Horn of Africa, and wherever else he deems necessary.

Never before has a nation unleashed so many assassins in so many foreign nations around the world (9,000 [Special Operations](#) soldiers are based in Iraq and Afghanistan alone) as well as implemented a policy that can be best described as unprecedented, remote-control, large-scale "mechanized assassination." As the *N.Y. Times* noted in December 2009: "For the first time in history, a civilian intelligence agency is using robots to carry out a military mission, selecting people for killing in a country where the United States is not officially at war."

This combination of human and technological murder amounts to a worldwide "Assassination Inc." that is unique in human affairs.

The increasing shift to direct U.S. assassination began on Petraeus's watch in Iraq, where targeted assassination was considered by many within the military to be more important than the "surge." The killing of Al Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was considered a major triumph that significantly reduced the level of violence. As Bob Woodward reported in *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008*:

"Beginning in about May 2006, the U.S. military and the U.S. intelligence agencies launched a series of top secret operations that enabled them to locate, target and kill key individuals in extremist groups. A number of authoritative sources say these covert activities had a far-reaching effect on the violence and were very possibly the biggest factor in reducing it. Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) responsible for hunting al Qaeda in Iraq, (conducted) lightning-quick and sometimes concurrent operations When I later asked the president (Bush) about this, he offered a simple answer: 'JSOC is awesome.'" [Emphasis added.]

Woodward's finding that many "authoritative sources" believed assassination more important than the surge is buttressed by Petraeus' appointment of McChrystal to lead U.S. forces in Afghanistan. McChrystal's major qualification for the post was clearly his perceived expertise in assassination while heading JSOC from 2003-'08 (where he also conducted extensive torture at "[Camp Nama](#)" at Baghdad International Airport, successfully excluding even the Red Cross).

Another key reason for the increased reliance on assassination is that Petraeus' announced counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan obviously cannot work. It is absurd to believe that the corrupt warlords and cronies who make up the "Afghan government" can be transformed into the viable entity upon which his strategy publicly claims to depend—particularly within the next year which President Obama has set as a deadline

before beginning to withdraw U.S. troops. Petraeus is instead largely relying on mass assassination to try and eliminate the Taliban, both within Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The centrality of assassination to U.S. war plans is revealed by the fact that it was at the heart of the Obama review of Afghan policy last fall. The dovish Biden position called for relying primarily on assassination, while the hawkish McChrystal stance embraced both assassination and more troops. No other options were seriously considered.

A third factor behind the shift to mass assassination is that Petraeus and the U.S. military are also determined to attack jihadi forces in nations where the U.S. is not at war, and which are not prepared to openly invite in U.S. forces. As the *N.Y. Times* reported on [May 24](#), "General Petraeus (has argued) that troops need to operate beyond Iraq and Afghanistan to better fight militant groups."

The most significant aspect of this new and expanded assassination policy is President Obama's authorizing clandestine U.S. military personnel to conduct it. The *N.Y. Times* [has also reported](#):

In roughly a dozen countries—from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet republics crippled by ethnic and religious strife—the United States has significantly increased military and intelligence operations, pursuing the enemy using robotic drones and commando teams, paying contractors to spy and training local operatives to chase terrorists (Military) Special Operations troops under secret "Execute Orders" have conducted spying missions that were once the preserve of civilian intelligence agencies.

Particularly extraordinary is the fact that these vastly expanded military assassination teams are not subject to serious civilian control. As the *N.Y. Times* [has also reported](#), Petraeus in September 2009 secretly expanded a worldwide force of assassins answerable only to the military, without oversight by not only Congress but the president himself:

The top American commander in the Middle East has ordered a broad expansion of clandestine military activity in an effort to disrupt militant groups or counter threats in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and other countries in the region, according to defense officials and military documents. The secret directive, signed in September by Gen. David H. Petraeus, authorizes the sending of American Special Operations troops to both friendly and hostile nations in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Horn of Africa. **Unlike covert actions undertaken by the C.I.A., such clandestine activity does not require the president's approval or regular reports to Congress.** [Emphasis added]

Although sold to the American public and Congress as targeted, selective assassination aimed only at a handful of "high value" insurgent leaders, the program has in fact already expanded far beyond that. As personnel and aircraft devoted to assassination exponentially increase, so too do the numbers of people they murder, both "insurgents" and civilians.

While it is reasonable to assume that expanding the number of Special Operations commandos to its present worldwide level of 13,000 will result in increasing assassinations, the secrecy of their operations makes it impossible to know how many they have murdered, how many of those are civilians, and the effectiveness of their operations. It is not known, for example, how many people U.S. military assassins murder directly, and how many they kill indirectly by identifying them for drone strikes. Much of their activity is conducted, for example, in North Waziristan in northwest Pakistan which, as the *N.Y. Times* reported on April 4 "is virtually sealed from the outside world."

More information, however, has emerged about the parallel and unprecedented mass mechanized assassinations being carried out by the C.I.A. drone programs. It is clear that they have already expanded far beyond the official cover story of targeting only "high-level insurgent leaders," and are killing increasing numbers of people.

The CIA, of course, is no novice at assassination. Former CIA Director William Colby's Operation Phoenix program in South Vietnam gave South Vietnamese police quotas of the number of civilians to be murdered on a weekly and monthly basis, eventually killing 20-50,000 people. CIA operatives such as Latin American Station Chief Duane "Dewey" Clarridge also established, trained and operated local paramilitary and death squads throughout Central and Latin America that brutally tortured and murdered tens of thousands of civilians, most notably in El Salvador where CIA-trained and -directed killers murdered Archbishop Romero and countless other Salvadorans.

But the present CIA assassination program in Pakistan and elsewhere is different not only because it is Americans who are themselves the assassins, but because of the unprecedented act of conducting mechanized mass assassination from the air. The CIA, as Nick Turse has reported for TomDispatch.com, is exponentially increasing its drone assassination program:

"(Drone) Reapers flew 25,391 hours (in 2009). This year, the air force projects that the combined flight hours of all its drones will exceed 250,000 hours. More flight time will, undoubtedly, mean more killing."

There were already signs in 2009, when drone strikes were a fraction of what they are now, that they were striking large numbers of civilians and proving militarily and politically counterproductive. Most Pakistanis believe it is largely civilians who are being killed, and anti-American hatred is growing accordingly. A Gallup poll conducted in July 2009, based on 2,500 face-to-face interviews, found that "only 9 percent of Pakistanis supported the drone strikes." A Global Research study documented the drone murder of 123 civilians in January 2010 alone.

A particularly significant indication of the drone strikes' military ineffectiveness has come from Colonel David Kilcullen, a key Petraeus advisor in Iraq, who testified to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on May 23, 2009, that, "Since 2006, we've killed 14

senior Al Qaeda leaders using drone strikes; in the same time period, we've killed 700 Pakistani civilians in the same area. We need to call off the drones."

Kilcullen's testimony was ignored, however, and as drone strikes have not only been continued but exponentially increased, there are increasing signs that they have vastly increased the scope of the killing far beyond the claimed "high-level insurgent leaders." The *N.Y. Times* reported on [Aug. 14](#):

[The CIA has] broadened its drone campaign beyond selective strikes against Qaeda leaders and now regularly obliterates suspected enemy compounds and logistics convoys, just as the military would grind down an enemy force.

Reuters [reported on May 5](#) that:

The CIA received approval to target a wider range of targets in Pakistan's tribal areas, including low-level fighters whose identities may not be known, U.S. officials said on Wednesday. Former intelligence officials acknowledged that in many, if not most cases, the CIA had little information about the foot soldiers killed in the strikes.

What this means is clear: the CIA is assassinating an expanding number of "low-level" people, labeling them as "fighters," but has little if any idea of who they really are. The history of such mechanized campaigns from the air, such as Laos where I have studied the U.S. 1964-'73 air war intensively, is that increased warfare from the air inevitably becomes increasingly indiscriminate, destroying civilian and military targets alike. As the drone program continues to expand, it will inevitably wind up killing more civilians—and, if McChrystal is right, exponentially create more people committed to killing Americans.

Numerous moral, legal and ethical objections have been raised to this program of mass assassination. Philip Alston, the United Nations special representative on extrajudicial executions, [has stated](#) that "this strongly asserted but ill-defined license to kill without accountability is not an entitlement which the United States or other states can have without doing grave damage to the rules designed to protect the right to life and prevent extrajudicial executions."

The notion that a handful of U.S. military and CIA officials have the right to unilaterally and secretly murder anyone they choose in any nation on earth, without even outside knowledge let alone oversight, is deeply troubling to anyone with a conscience, belief in democracy, or respect for international law. It was precisely such behavior that made the Gestapo and Soviet secret police symbols of evil. Since the U.S. Congress has never reined in an Executive Branch that has routinely ignored international law since 1945, however, it is likely that the question of whether this program will be continued will be determined by its perceived effectiveness, not its morality.

The evidence is mounting that U.S. assassinations are so ineffective they are actually strengthening anti-American forces in Pakistan. Bruce Reidel, a counterinsurgency expert

who coordinated [the Afghan review for President Obama](#), said: "The pressure we've put on (jihadist forces) in the past year has also drawn them together, meaning that the network of alliances is growing stronger not weaker."

Reidel's striking conclusion that jihadi forces in Pakistan are stronger after six years of drone airstrikes the CIA claims are weakening them, is echoed by numerous other reports indicating that General Petraeus' strategy of using military force against Al Qaeda, Afghan and local insurgent forces in Pakistan [has pushed them further east](#) from isolated northwest areas into major cities like Karachi, where they operate freely and work together far more closely than before. The general's miscalculations regarding Pakistan are reason enough for him to be replaced.

In the long run, General Petraeus' strategy of expanding both ground and mechanized assassination throughout the 1.3 billion-strong Muslim world is likely to do the greatest disservice to his country's interests. It is true that U.S. leaders have used local forces to assassinate tens of thousands since 1945 and that while these programs were largely ineffectual, they did not lead to attacks on American soil.

But 9/11 has changed the calculus. It is clear that in today's wired and globalized world, marked by large-scale immigration, cheap telecommunications and airline travel, where crude technologies like car bombs or IEDs can be as easily detonated in New York as in Kandahar, and where America's enemies are growing increasingly technologically sophisticated even as nuclear weapons proliferate and become miniaturized, it is the height of folly to foment geometrically growing anti-American hatred in the volatile Muslim world.

A growing number of military and counterinsurgency experts support Colonel Kilcullen's belief that these assassination programs abroad are not protecting Americans at home. Both the "Underwear" and the "Times Square" bombers attributed their attempts to blow up Americans to their anger at the drone strikes. While Americans were saved by their incompetence, the U.S. may not be so lucky the next time, and the time after that. One thing is crystal clear: inflaming anti-American hatred throughout the Muslim world can only exponentially increase the numbers of those committed to killing Americans.

Such fears are increasing in Washington, as the *N.Y. Times* reported [in the wake of the Times Square bombing](#):

A new, and disturbing, question is being raised in Washington: Have the stepped-up attacks in Pakistan—notably the Predator drone strikes—actually made Americans less safe? Are they inspiring more attacks on America than they prevent? As one American intelligence official said, "Those attacks (on two Pakistani Taliban leaders) have made it personal for the Pakistani Taliban—so it's no wonder they are beginning to think about how they can strike back at targets here."

As General Petraeus and the U.S. military "make it personal" to increasing number of people throughout the Muslim world, they are recklessly sowing a whirlwind for which

many of us, our children and grandchildren may well pay with our lives for decades to come.

It is difficult for most Americans to grasp the fact that their leaders' incompetence—Republican and Democrat, civilian and military—poses one of the single greatest threats to their own safety. But only when Americans do so will there be any hope of making America more secure in the dangerous years to come.

A clear place to begin protecting America is to abandon the assassination approach to war, ditch General Petraeus, end the military and CIA's focus on worldwide and mechanized mass assassination, and halt its reckless expansion of U.S. war-making into nuclear-armed Pakistan and so much more of the Muslim world.

Final Note: Duane 'Dewey' Clarridge: The True Face of U.S. Policy Toward the Muslim World

"We'll intervene whenever we decide it's in our national security interest. And if you don't like it, lump it. Get used to it, world!" -- Duane Clarridge, interviewed by John Pilger in "The War on Democracy"

As the [N.Y. Times](#) reported, Clarridge is presently advising CIA assassination efforts in Pakistan. ("Duane R. Clarridge, a profane former C.I.A. officer who ran operations in Central America and was indicted in the Iran-contra scandal, turned up this year helping run a Pentagon-financed private spying operation in Pakistan.") Watch an extraordinary three-minute video interview with Clarridge [[link below](#)] that reveals the true face of U.S. policy in the Muslim world.