



Assassination Nation

by

Doug Noble

on

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Fifty Years of US Targeted *Kill Lists*: From the Phoenix Program to Predator Drones

"A broad-gauged program of targeted assassination has now displaced counterinsurgency as the prevailing expression of the American way of war." - *Andrew Bacevich*

This spring the US drone killing program has come out of the closet. Attorney General Eric Holder publicly defended the drone killing of an American citizen, while Obama's counter terrorism czar John Brennan publicly explained and justified the target killing program. And a New York Times article by Jo Becker and Scott Shane chronicled Obama's personal role in vetting a secret "Kill List."



This striking new transparency, the official acknowledgment for the first time of a broad-based US assassination and targeted killing program, has resulted from the unprecedented and controversial visibility of drone warfare. Drones now make news every day, and those of us who have been protesting their use for years have heightened their visibility in the public eye, forcing official acknowledgment and fostering worldwide scrutiny. This new scrutiny focuses not only on drone use but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the targeted killing itself – and the "kill lists" that make them possible.

This new exposure has set off a firestorm of reaction around the globe. Chris Woods of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism told Democracy Now! "The kill list got really heavy coverage ... newspapers have all expressed significant concern about the existence of the kill list, the idea of this level of executive power." A Washington Post editorial noted that "No president has ever relied so extensively on the secret killing of individuals to advance the nation's security goals." Becker and Shane of the Times pronounced Obama's role "without precedent in presidential history, of personally overseeing the shadow war ..." And former president Jimmy Carter insisted, in a recent editorial in The New York Times, "We don't know how many hundreds of innocent civilians have been killed in these (drone) attacks, each one approved by the highest authorities in Washington. This would have been unthinkable in previous times."

Really?

In fact, US assassination and targeted killing, with presidential approval, has been going on covertly for at least half a century. Ironically, all this drone killing now offers us a new opportunity: to pry open the Pandora's box hiding long-held secrets of covert US assassination and targeted killing, and to expose them to the light of day. What we would find is that the only things new in the latest, more publicized revelations about kill lists and assassinations are the use of drones, the president's hands-on approach in vetting targets, and the global scope of the drone killing.

Those of us in the Upstate Coalition to Ground the Drones, Code Pink and other groups protesting US drones for years have correctly focused on the use of drones as illegal, immoral and strategically counterproductive. We have abhorred the schizophrenic ease of remote killing, the uniquely frightening horror of a drone strike, and the unavoidable (even intentional) killing of countless civilian "terrorist suspects" in "signature strikes." We have also warned of the proliferation of drones in countries around the globe and of their procurement by US police forces and border patrols, for surveillance and "non-lethal" targeting.

But drones are not the only, or even the most important, concern. It's the targeted killing itself, past and present. In this article I start to unravel what the latest demands for transparency should lead us to investigate fully: the fifty year history of US assassination and targeted killing that has resulted, quite directly, in the present moment. Those who are mortified by the latest revelations of Obama's kill list have much to learn from a more comprehensive, historical perspective on US killing around the globe. Who knows: Perhaps someone in Congress might even be prodded to do what Senators Fulbright and Church did in years past: hold hearings on this continuing execration taking place in our name. Until then, what follows is an introduction to this ongoing horror story.

Section 1 of this article briefly reviews the lethal history of the US Phoenix Program in Vietnam, the original source of subsequent US counter terrorist tactics and strategies. Section 2 revisits briefly the well-worn history of US kill lists and assassinations in Latin American countries, followed by the somewhat less-well-known history of US kill lists and assassinations in countries on other continents. Section 3 traces the direct legacy of Phoenix, even its explicit resurrection by the key architects of the US targeted killing programs in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in a growing number of "countries we are not at war with."

One point of clarification and definition. It is well known that in recent history the US has orchestrated assassination attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, on major world leaders. Examples include: Lumumba under Eisenhower, Castro and Diem under Kennedy, Gaddhafi under Reagan, Saddam Hussein under Bush, and Allende under Nixon. The term "assassination" is typically restricted to such killings of political leaders, and President Ford's executive order banning



assassination applies only to the assassination of foreign heads of state. The focus of this article is different. Here we discuss the US-generated kill lists used over the last half century, under direct presidential authority, for the targeted killing of thousands of civilians suspected of being or harboring terrorists/ insurgents, from Vietnam to Guatemala, from Indonesia to Iraq, right up to the present day.

The Phoenix Program

The US Phoenix Program was a secret, large scale counter terrorist effort in Vietnam. Developed in 1967 by the CIA, the Phoenix Program, called Phung Hoang by the Vietnamese, aimed a concerted effort to "neutralize" the Vietcong Infrastructure (VCI) consisting of South Vietnamese civilians suspected of supporting North Vietnamese or Viet Cong soldiers. The euphemism "neutralize" meant to kill or detain indefinitely. Then CIA Director William Colby, while insisting in 1971 Congressional hearings that "the Phoenix program is not a program of assassination", nonetheless conceded that Phoenix operations killed over 20,000 people between 1967 and 1972.

Phoenix targeted civilians, not soldiers. Operations were carried out by "hunter-killer teams" consisting both of US Green Berets and Navy Seals and by South Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), units of mercenaries set up for assassination and "counter terror." A Newsweek article in January 1970 described Phoenix as "a highly secret and unconventional operation that counters VC terror with terror of its own." Robert Kaiser of the Washington Post reported Phoenix being called "an instrument of mass political murder...sort of Vietnamese Murder Inc.", designed to terrorize the civilian population into submission."

Until 1970 the computerized VCI blacklist was a unilateral American operation. After the devastating 1968 Tet offensive, South Vietnamese President Thieu declared: "The VCI must be eliminated... and will be defeated by the Phoenix program." Phoenix became a ruthless "bounty hunting" program to eliminate the opposition. The US and South Vietnamese created a list of tens of thousands of suspects for assassination. These names were centralized and distributed to Phoenix coordinators. From 1965-68 U.S. and Saigon intelligence services maintained an active list of Viet Cong cadre marked for assassination. The program for 1969 called for "neutralizing" 1800 a month.

The VCI blacklist became corrupted by officers inserting their personal enemies' names to get even. Due process was nonexistent. Names supplied by anonymous informers showed up on blacklists. CIA Director Colby admitted in 1971 that the blacklists had been "inaccurate." Few senior VCI leaders were caught in the Phoenix net. Instead its victims were typically innocent civilians. A Pentagon-contract study found that, between 1970 and 1971, ninety-seven per cent of the Vietcong targeted by the Phoenix Program were of negligible importance. By 1973, Phoenix generated 300,000 political prisoners in South Vietnam. Military operations such as My Lai used Phoenix intelligence; in fact, the My Lai massacre, hardly an isolated incident, was itself a Phoenix operation.

Apologists have offered rationales for Phoenix that sound eerily similar to those used to defend current drone attacks. Phoenix was typically referred to as a "scalpel" replacing the "bludgeon" of search and destroy, aerial bombardment or artillery barrages. Alternatively, it was called a precision "rifle shot rather than a shotgun approach to target key political leaders ... and activists in VCI." Military historian Dale Andrade explains, "Both SEALS and PRUs killed many VCI guerrillas - that was war. They also inevitably killed innocent civilians - that was regrettable.... but (Phoenix) operations were much more discerning than the massive affairs launched by conventional ...forces. That fact was often lost in the rhetoric of assassination and murder ..."

Phoenix was created, organized, and funded by the CIA. Quotas were set by Americans. Informers were paid with US funds. The national system of identifying suspects, the elaboration of numerical goals and their use as measures of merit, was designed and funded by Americans. One former US Phoenix soldier conceded, "It was "heinous", far worse than the things attributed to it."

Kill Lists from Phoenix to Latin America

The US intelligence community formalized the lessons of the Phoenix Program in Vietnam



by commissioning Project X, the Army's top-secret program for transmitting Vietnam's lessons to South America. By the mid-1970s, the Project X materials were going to armies all over the world. These were textbooks for global counterinsurgency and terror warfare. These included a murder manual, "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare", which openly instructed in the assassination of public officials, and was distributed to the Nicaraguan Contras. Another manual, "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual", was used widely in Honduran counterterrorism efforts.

Use of the Project X material was temporarily suspended by Congress and the Carter administration for probable human rights violations, but the program was restored by the Reagan administration in 1982. By the mid-1980s, according to one detailed history, "counterguerrilla operations in Colombia and Central America would thus bear an eerie but explicable resemblance to South Vietnam."

What follows is a brief sketch of the widespread application of US-promulgated Phoenix-derived reigns of terror, kill lists, and death squads throughout Latin America and beyond. Much of this is familiar territory to many activists and scholars, and is merely the tip of the iceberg, but it merits review as a backdrop for the current context of kill lists and targeted assassination.

US KILL LISTS AND ASSASSINATION IN LATIN AMERICA

The U.S. Army's School of Americas (SOA), started in 1946, trained mass murderers and orchestrated coups in Peru, Panama, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. The SOA trained more than 61,000 Latin American officers implicated in widespread slaughter of civilian populations across Latin America. From 1966-1976 the SOA trained hundreds of Latin American officers in Phoenix-derived methods. Between 1989-1991 the SOA issued almost 700 copies of Project X handbooks to at least ten Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Honduras. In 2001, SOA was renamed Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC), but peace activists know it as School of Assassins.

The CIA trained assassination groups such as Halcones in Mexico, the Mano Blanca in Guatemala, and the Escuadron de la Muerte in Brazil. In South America, in 1970-79, Operation Condor, the code-name for collection, exchange and storage of intelligence, was established among intelligence services in South America to eradicate Marxist activities. Operation Condor promoted joint operations including assassination against targets in member countries. In Central America, the CIA-supported death toll under the Reagan presidency alone exceeded 150,000. The CIA set up Ansesal and other networks of terror in El Salvador, Guatemala (Ansegat) and pre-Sandinista Nicaragua (Ansenic).

Honduran death squads were active through the 1980s, the most infamous of which was Battalion 3-16, which assassinated hundreds of people, including teachers, politicians, and union leaders. Battalion 316 received substantial CIA support and training, and at least 19 members graduated from the School of the Americas.

In Colombia, about 20,000 people were killed since 1986 and much of U.S. aid for counternarcotics was diverted to what Amnesty International labeled "one of the worst killing fields." The US State Department also supported the Colombian army in creating a database of subversives, terrorists and drug dealers.

In Bolivia, Amnesty International reported that from 1966-68 between 3,000 and 8,000 people were killed by death squads. The CIA supplied names of U.S. and other foreign missionaries and progressive priests.

In Ecuador, the CIA maintained what was called the lynx list, aka the subversive control watch list of the most important left-wing activists to arrest. In Uruguay. Every CIA station maintained a subversive control watch list of most important left wing activists. From 1970-72 the CIA helped set up the Department of Information and Intelligence (DII), which served as a cover for death squads, and also co-ordinated meetings between Brazilian and Uruguayan death squads.



In Nicaragua, the US provided illegal funds to the Contras, and Marine intelligence helped maintain a list of civilians marked for assassination when Contra forces entered the country.

In Chile, 1970-73, CIA-created unions organized CIA-financed strikes leading to Allende's overthrow and subsequent suicide. By late 1971 the CIA was involved in the preparation of lists of nearly 20,000 middle-level leaders of people's organizations, scheduled to be assassinated after the Pinochet coup.

In Haiti, U.S. officials with CIA backgrounds in Phoenix-like program activities coordinated with the Ton-Ton Macoute, "Baby Doc" Duvalier's private death squad, responsible for killing at least 3,000 people.

For over thirty years the US military and the CIA helped organize, train, and fund death squad activity in El Salvador. From 1980-93, at least 63,000 Salvadoran civilians were killed, mostly by the government directly supported by the U.S. The CIA routinely supplied ANSESAL, the security forces, and the general staff with electronic, photographic, and personal surveillance of suspected dissidents and Salvadorans abroad who were later assassinated by death squads. US military involvement in El Salvador allowed "the lessons learned in Vietnam to be put into practice ... assisting an allied country in counterinsurgency operations."

In Guatemala, as early as 1954, the U.S. Ambassador, after the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of the Arbenz government, gave to the new Armas government lists of radical opponents to be assassinated. Years later, throughout Guatemala's 36-year civil war, Washington continuously supported the Guatemalan military's excesses against civilians, which killed 200,000 people.

US Assassination Programs Exported to Other Countries

In Indonesia, 1965-66, the US embassy and the CIA provided the Indonesian military with lists of the names of PKI militants, which were used by Suharto to crush the PKI regime. This resulted in "one of the worst episodes of mass murder of the twentieth century", with estimates as high as one million deaths.

In Thailand, in 1976, the new junta used CIA-trained forces to crush student demonstrators during coup; two right-wing terrorist squads suspected for assassinations tied directly to CIA operations.

In Iran, the CIA launched a coup installing the shah in power and helped establish the lethal secret police unit SAVAK. The CIA and SAVAK then exchanged intelligence, including information and arrest lists on the communist Tudeh party. Years later, in 1983, the CIA gave the Khomeini government a list of USSR KGB agents and collaborators operating in Iran, which the Khomeini regime used to execute 200 suspects and close down the communist Tudeh party.

In the Philippines, in 1986, Reagan increased CIA involvement in Philippine counterinsurgency operations, carried out by more than 50 death squads. In 2001, before 9/11, the Bush administration sent a unit of SOF to the Philippines "to help train Philippine counter terrorist forces fighting against Muslim separatists" within groups like Abu Sayyaf. After 9/11 US-Filipino cooperation was stepped up and the ongoing separatist conflict was cast, to the benefit of both sides, as "the second front in the war on terror." In Feb, 2012, a US drone strike targeting leaders of Abu Sayyaf and other separatist groups killed 15 people, the first use of killer drones in Southeast Asia.

A "global Phoenix Program": drone targets worldwide

"A global Phoenix program ... would provide a useful start point" for "a new strategic approach to the Global War on Terrorism." – *David Kilcullen*

IRAQ

Despite the US-perpetrated counter terrorist slaughter in Latin America and elsewhere in the 1970s-1990s, the US Special Forces debacle in Mogadishu in 1993, popularized in the film Black

Hawk Down, severely impacted US willingness to use Special Forces in counter terrorist missions for the next decade. But then, after 9/11, things changed drastically. On September 17, 2001, President Bush signed a secret Presidential finding authorizing the C.I.A. to create paramilitary teams to hunt, capture, detain, or kill designated terrorists almost anywhere in the world. The pressure from the White House, in particular from Vice-President Dick Cheney, was intense, and in the scramble, a search of the C.I.A.'s archives turned up – the Phoenix Program.

In July , 2002, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sent an order for a plan to make sure that special forces could be authorized to use lethal force *in minutes and hours, not days and weeks.*" Rumsfeld prompted Bush to authorize the military to "find and finish" terrorist targets. Here he was referring to "the F3EA targeting cycle" used in anti-infrastructure operations by Special Operations Forces. F3EA, an abbreviation of find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, utilizes comprehensive intelligence to "find a target amidst civilian clutter and fix his exact location ... enabling surgical finish operations... to catch a fleeting target."

Lt General William (Jerry) Boykin, Delta commander in Mogadishu, deputy undersecretary for Defense for Intelligence and a key planner of the Special Forces offensive in Iraq, announced, "We're going after these people. Killing or capturing them ... doing what the Phoenix program was designed to do, without all the secrecy."

Back in 1963, the CIA had supplied lists of communists to the Baath party coup so that communists could be rounded up and eliminated. Now, forty years later, it was the Baathists' turn to be rounded up by Special Forces and CIA and executed. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. military notoriously developed a set of playing cards to help troops identify the most-wanted members of Saddam Hussein's government, mostly high-ranking Baath Party members. Less well-known was the secret targeted killing of thousands of Baathist civilians by US Special Forces.

Seymour Hersh wrote in 2003 that "The Bush Administration authorized a major escalation of the Special Forces covert war in Iraq. ... Its highest priority (being) the neutralization of the Baathist insurgents, by capture or assassination. A former C.I.A. station chief described the strategy: "The only way we can win is to go unconventional. We're going to have to play their game. Guerrilla versus guerrilla. Terrorism versus terrorism. We've got to scare the Iraqis into submission." The US even hired thousands of contract killers previously responsible for US-sponsored extra-judicial killings and death squad activity in Latin America. The operation—called "preëmptive manhunting" by one Pentagon adviser—had, according to Hersh, "the potential to turn into another Phoenix Program."

Global Phoenix

In 2009, the Office of the Secretary of Defense sponsored a paper by the National Defense Research Institute entitled "The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency." The paper notes, "The persistent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have generated fresh interest among military officers, policymakers, and civilian analysts in the history of counterinsurgency. The Phoenix Program in Vietnam—the U.S. effort to improve intelligence coordination and operations aimed at identifying and dismantling the communist underground—is the subject of much renewed attention."

The paper continues, "As the United States and its allies shift their focus to Afghanistan and weigh counterinsurgency alternatives for that country, decisionmakers would be wise to consider how Phoenix-style approaches might serve to pry open Taliban and Al-Qaeda black boxes."

Two key architects of the current Phoenix-style global counterinsurgency efforts by the US are David Kilcullen and Michael Vickers. David Kilcullen has been counterinsurgency advisor to two former Middle East commanders, General Stanley McChrystal (formerly head of Special Operations) and General David Petraeus, now CIA Director. Michael G. Vickers, made famous in the book and film Charlie Wilson's War about the CIA's anti-Soviet Afghan campaign of the 1980s, is currently Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, wielding such vast authority over the US war on terror that, according to a Washington Post profile, Pentagon colleagues refer to as his "take-over-the-world-plan."



Kilcullen wrote in a much-quoted 2004 paper entitled "Countering Global Insurgency" that "Counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have reawakened official and analytical interest in the Phoenix Program." He proposed that "a global Phoenix program ... would provide a useful start point" for "a new strategic approach to the Global War on Terrorism", one which would focus on "interdicting links ... between jihad theatres, denying sanctuary areas, ... isolating Islamists from local populations and ... disrupting inputs" from others.

Vickers issued a Phoenix-style directive in December 2008 to "develop capabilities for extending U.S. reach into denied areas and uncertain environments by operating with and through indigenous foreign forces or by conducting low visibility operations." "It's not just the Middle East. It's not just the developing world. It's not just non-democratic countries – it's a global problem. Threats can emanate from Denmark, the United Kingdom, you name it." According to a Washington Post profile, "the most critical aspect of Vicker's plan targeting al-Qaeda-affiliated networks around the world involves US Special Forces working through foreign partners to uproot and fight terrorism." US military and Special Operations forces would "pay indigenous fighters and paramilitaries who work with them in gathering intelligence, hunting terrorists, fomenting guerrilla warfare or putting down an insurgency."

Pentagon colleagues have said of Vickers, "he tends to think like a gangster." Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell revealed that getting Bin Laden in Pakistan was Vicker's "baby", and "more than anyone else in the department, he drove the issue." 2011 New York Times Vickers summarizes his strategy this: "You make a deal with the devil to defeat another devil." "I just want to kill those guys." A 2011 Such is the megalomaniacal mission underlying the US global war on terror, its kill lists and worldwide program of targeted assassination.

Killer Drones Revisited

"Engaging in any assassination blurs the line between the good guys and the bad." It is also "a proclamation of weakness and an admission of failure." – *John Jacob Nutter, The CIA's Black Ops*

The purpose of this article is to reframe the current attention on killer drones and Obama's "kill list" within an historical perspective. The goal here is not to discourage the escalating protest against killer drones or against Obama's targeted assassination program around the globe. As stated at the outset, the unprecedented visibility of these nefarious activities and of the outraged public response to them is precisely what is needed at this time. This heightened awareness also affords a perfect opportunity to revisit the extraordinary history of US assassination and targeted killing that has led directly and explicitly to these activities.

Focus on the drones alone will not be sufficient. For even the major counter terrorist mastermind David Kilcullen himself, an avid proponent of the global targeted killing program, has argued against the use of drones. In a 2009 New York Times editorial he argues that "The goal should be to isolate extremists from their communities; (they) must be defeated by indigenous forces...Drone strikes make this harder, not easier." He adds, "The use of drones displays every characteristic of a tactic – or, more accurately, a piece of technology – substituting for a strategy, (with minimal understanding) of the tribal dynamics of the local population. This creates public outrage and a desire for revenge."

Scholar Maria Ryan, in a 2011 article entitled "War in Countries We Are Not at War With", writes: "In 2006 the Pentagon announced that it had sent small teams of Special Operations troops to US embassies to gather intelligence on terrorism in Africa, South East Asia and South America...There is, then, a covert side to the Global War on Terrorism that is not visible and not currently knowable in the absence of whistleblowers, leaks, or things gone wrong."

The heightened public attention paid to drone killing might very well, in time, lead to some welcome success in curtailing their use. But too narrow a focus on the US deployment of Predator and Reaper drones might also distract us from other forms of Phoenix-derived targeted killing still being perpetrated globally – and covertly – by our Assassination Nation.