Neither Masks nor Gloves

written by Laurie Calhoun | June 5, 2011

IN 1961, DWIGHT D. EISENHOWERwarned about the dangers of capitalized war, how the military-industrial complex was already taking on a life all its own, and the single-minded quest for profit—a virtue under capitalism — would continue to drive weapons companies to exert an untold influence upon politicians. Since that time, the war-making apparatus has expanded both in size and in kind, with ever more partners joining in on the enterprise. In the twenty-first century, we have reached what is arguably the final stage of the capitalization of war, as what were formerly anonymous, covert operators — privately contracted by governments to carry out special missions — have now stepped out from the shadows and into the bright light of day.

In two recently published books, *Soldiers of Fortune: A History of the Mercenary in Modern Warfare (2009)*, and *Black Ops: The Rise of Special Forces in the C.I.A., the S.A.S., and Mossad* (2010), Tony Geraghty traces the gripping history of "guns for hire" and covert operations in modern times. Mercenary soldiers and black ops existed even in the earliest days of recorded military history, but until recently their use was hidden from view by the administrators of democratic governments, who attempted to present and maintain a moral — and legal —image to the taxpayers funding war. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, strategists pursued their own Realpolitik policies, justified in their minds as exigencies of national defense. Throughout the Cold War, the perpetrators of "black ops" — discretionary and often illegal interventions in the affairs of other nations — were disguised through complex machinations devised so as to render "plausibly deniable" their connections to the governments for which they were contracted privately to work. Black operators were paid "under the table" from "black budgets" and wielded equally untraceable weapons. Although such contractees did not exist according to the official documents of formal governments, their deeds had tangible and sometimes dire consequences for the people of many lands, including Angola, the Congo, Nicaragua, and Sierra Leone, to name but a few. In *Soldiers of Fortune* and *Black Ops*, Geraghty telescopes in on a small but colorful selection of the hundreds of secret operations perpetrated in the name of national security by the CIA, the SAS (Britain's Special Air Service), and Mossad (Israel's primary intelligence agency).

The blackest of black ops, targeted assassination used as a political tool in shaping foreign policy, has a long history. Geraghty identifies Michael Collins and Sinn Fein's Irish Republican Army (IRA) as mentors of sorts to the resistance fighters of World War II and many other liberation groups. Collins and his comrades ultimately succeeded in securing some of their demands by assassinating intelligence agents and thus provoking the British government to overreact. The Black and Tans went out on a shooting spree, which ultimately backfired when they massacred entirely innocent people, causing public support for the IRA to swell. The use of black ops by formal governments, too, appears to have drawn inspiration from Collins, for example, in Mossad's retaliation against the Munich massacre of 1972, what Geraghty regards as Israel's "Everything changed" moment.

During the 1972 Olympics, what started as an abduction of about a dozen Israeli athletes by the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) for use as a bargaining chip in securing the release of prisoners culminated in the deaths of all of the hostages, along with most of the hostage-takers. What happened in Munich, suggests Geraghty, catalyzed a radical transformation in Mossad's approach, just as 9/11 was pivotal to the United States, whose Guantánamo Bay prison facility Geraghty likens to and suggests was created in the image of Israel's own Facility 1391, supposedly

nonexistent.* Mossad enlisted some of its own personnel to renounce their official positions and all traceable ties to the organization only to work for them unofficially, under pseudonyms and in plausibly deniable operations to assassinate the presumed architects of the Munich ploy. That black ops depend on highly fallible intelligence appears to be cursorily brushed aside by many of the people who agree to carry them out, some of whom may convince themselves that their missions were somehow divinely ordained. Others in this motley group are empirically indistinguishable from garden-variety hit men, who will kill anyone at the request of anyone else, provided that the price is right. A third group includes men (whom Geraghty frankly characterizes as "psychos") who seize upon such contracts as an opportunity to do some target practice, as did a group sent by the SAS to Angola in 1975 — and elsewhere as well, including, some have alleged, Afghanistan and Iraq.

One of the most spectacular of U.S. black ops ever brought to light was Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's "neat idea" (as he referred to it) to sell weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages, and then funnel the money received into the coffers of the Nicaraguan Contras to support an initiative which the U.S. congress had explicitly refused to do in the Boland amendment. According to U.S. law, that should have been the end of the matter, but President Reagan, undeterred by such a nicety as the Constitution of the United States, insisted that his inner circle figure out some way to support the Contras, which North and friends did —until their cover was blown on October 5, 1986, by the downing of a cargo plane carrying some of the illicit weapons to the rebels.

There were many other such initiatives — by Geraghty's count, about 900 — during the Cold War, up to and including the assassination (whether explicitly planned or encouraged) of U.S.-installed puppet leaders such as South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem who had proven to be refractory or ineffective. The assassination of democratically elected Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, too, Geraghty reminds us, was on the CIA's secret list of things to do. Although decades later such events have been analyzed by scholars, at the time when they transpired, strategists scrupulously kept all of these activities below the radar of public scrutiny in the name of national security.

"EVERYTHING CHANGED" on September 11, 2001, when George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Condoleezza Rice and company saw fit to "take off the gloves" in dealing with the elusive global terrorist threat and to do so without artifice or guile. With the George W. Bush administration, a new level of transparency was thus achieved, not because foreign affairs suddenly came to reflect the lofty moral rhetoric and carefully cleansed official stories mouthed by public relations spokesmen for the Pentagon, but, ironically enough, because the president himself, with the support of the U.S. congress, came overtly and unabashedly to espouse as official policy practices that had been regarded by many up until that time as unthinkable. Offensive military action—formerly known as "naked aggression" — was reconceptualized by strategists as just war through the explicit conflation of offense and defense, which during the Cold War had always been implicit but was never an officially espoused policy.

The Bush administration also initiated an era of targeted assassination, what under previous presidents was carried out (or attempted) but never freely admitted, much less vaunted. In his January 2003 State of the Union Address, Bush proclaimed that thousands of suspected terrorists had been taken prisoner and that many others had "met a different fate," exultantly adding, "Let's put it this way: they are no longer a problem to the United States and our friends and allies." Targeted assassination — formerly known as "extra-judicial killing" and denounced as illegal — was added to the military's toolbox by the Bush administration as yet another standard operating procedure, a means by which to defeat the evil enemy.

Other previously clear-cut divisions have become blurred in twenty-first century war as well, including, Geraghty explains, the distinction between regular and mercenary soldiers or private contractees. The private operators working in collaboration with the military today have faces and names and are paid by U.S. citizens through funds accounted for in officially approved contracts. Today private military companies (PMCs) provide security and logistical services up to and including officially undeniable, Pentagon-contracted surrogate soldiers who, although dressed as civilians and sometimes camouflaged as locals, tote and wield weapons on the ground no less than do regular soldiers in uniform. As a result of enormous "cost-plus" government contracts awarded to firms such as Halliburton, virtually overnight PMCs were cropping up everywhere, their chairmen and board members (often war veterans) endeavoring to grab their slice of the fat pie—the seemingly limitless funds being flung at the 2003 occupation.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, Special Forces, no less than civilian contractees, sometimes camouflaged their allegiance and status by donning local garb and growing beards. In effect, these soldiers were playing the very game that the "insidious and evil terrorists" did by blending in with the civilian community and making it difficult to target them without endangering innocent bystanders. The less fortunate of these plain-clothed soldiers found out the hard way what it really meant to live in a society subject to an occupying power whose rules of engagement were perhaps only half-facetiously summed up by some grunts on the ground (in the many documentaries which have appeared since 2003) as "Shoot first; ask questions later" or "If it looks like the enemy, shoot." The use of armed private contractors as "force multipliers" also elicited on the part of locals who had witnessed some of their more dubious actions a general antipathy toward foreign civilians, including unarmed humanitarian aid workers and camera-toting journalists.

Geraghty analyzes at length the unique ethical problem that arises in a war theater where some among the soldiers are not really soldiers at all but rather civilian contractees obliged only to carry out their employer's assignments, not to follow the protocol of the military itself. Such private soldiers essentially inhabit a law-free realm, as they are protected from prosecution on the one side by their civilian status (they cannot be court martialed) and on the other side by the fact that they are operating in a postwar, chaotic environment beyond the jurisdiction of their own country's laws.

Alienated and disgruntled former soldiers — who might have suffered the plight of the jobless and homeless veterans of Vietnam — are prime candidates for employment by PMCs, which peddle precisely the skills that troops have been forced to hone in order to survive but which have no obvious application within civil society. The contracts are lucrative because most civilians without military backgrounds are both ill-qualified and ill-inclined to undertake such missions, given the grave dangers which they entail. One result of these dynamics has been the phenomenon of regular forces drain. PMCs command huge contracts for their specialized services, and because regular soldiers earn much lower salaries than their civilian contractee counterparts, it has become quite common for new veterans (both American and British) to accept private employment rather than reenlist. In addition to seeing their salaries skyrocket, private contractees operating abroad enjoy effective immunity from prosecution in the event of their own disobedience or poor judgment — or even intentional malfeasance. The upshot of all of this seems quite clear: men with violent or criminal tendencies have every reason in the world to complete the minimum terms of their regular military service and subsequently sign up with a private company. When such employees are found to have misbehaved, they risk no more than losing their current position. But with the large number of PMCs that sprang up in the "gravy train"–contracting era, they may encounter little difficulty landing another position with another company, since transgressions within these firms are downplayed and even whitewashed by the management in order to maintain and secure future lucrative contracts.

The worst consequences of this law-free zone were borne out in Iraq, where private contractees

were further protected by Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, which explicitly provided civilian contractees with legal immunity in their use of lethal force, glossed by Geraghty as "a license to kill." One incident, captured in a widely disseminated YouTube video, shows a private contractee in the back of an Aegis company vehicle shooting —apparently at random — Iraqis standing outside in the street. An official investigation into allegations of wrongdoing concluded that no malfeasance was involved.

One result of gun-slinging, civilian-clad private soldiers operating with impunity side-by-side regular forces has been that the lines between what may and may not be done have grown fainter and fainter, certainly from the perspective of the troops themselves. This sort of "moral compass" breakdown among regular forces was witnessed at Abu Ghraib prison, where enlisted soldiers serving as guards took seriously their directives from private contractee interrogators to "be creative" in taking prisoners "out of their comfort zones." Geraghty compares the case of Abu Ghraib to the French soldiers in Algeria who were told to use "all means necessary" in combating the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and then made into scapegoats upon the revelation of the army's use of torture.

Geraghty's charitable assessments of the grunts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in spite of his sometimes bristling critiques of especially the latter war, become comprehensible in the light of the fact that he himself is a former soldier. He blames the failure to capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora upon the risk-averse top brass, insisting that the soldiers themselves were prepared even to die in pursuing the ostensible raison d'être of the Afghanistan war. This pro-grunt perspective is very much in line with the classical just war paradigm's concept of invincible ignorance, according to which soldiers are to be judged within the context of war by appeal to jus in bello principles such as whether they intentionally kill only combatants.

What is not questioned by Geraghty, nor by the many even more pro-military (often American — Geraghty is British) commentators on any of the many controversial episodes in Afghanistan and Iraq, is the hierarchical military framework which generates such conflicts. U.S. soldiers occupying a foreign land and wielding force to the detriment of the local population is frequently depicted, without apparent irony, as justified self-defense. Strikingly, the people whose homeland has been invaded are denied the very right to self-defense by the occupiers, who, far from protecting them, instead greatly increase their risk of death. Civilians are summarily slaughtered the moment they are spotted carrying even what might possibly be a weapon,* or when they fail to heed either the written instructions posted at checkpoints (incomprehensible to those who are illiterate) or the orders of U.S. troops speaking in English.

Still, despite these problems, most U.S. citizens and legislators do not appear to find at all objectionable the policy of "taking the battle to the enemy." Geraghty explains how, in order to sustain this perspective — that "we are at war" — the victims of targeted assassination are officially characterized as combatants on the battlefield, categories which recently expanded to include Afghan drug lords, said to be fair game for execution as a result of their economic complicity with terrorists. Similarly, rather than acknowledging that they have abandoned all pretense to the so-called rule of war according to which enemy combatants must be provided with the opportunity to surrender, those who direct operations simply reject what they evidently regard as this "quaint" notion.

At the end of the text proper of *Black Ops* (published in 2010), Geraghty expresses skepticism about U.S. policy in Afghanistan, what has spilled over the border into Pakistan to become, in a classic case of mission creep, "Af-Pak." He cites approvingly opinions according to which it might actually be better simply to let the Taliban rule their country, since at the very least they were able to provide the populace with security. Geraghty's perspective on both Afghanistan and Iraq evinces a

realism (sorely lacking in Washington) about what can reasonably be expected of such societies, with long histories devoid of anything even vaguely resembling the ethos of modern democracies. Rather than pressing his points, however, Geraghty appends to his own *Black Ops* text a hefty chunk (166 pages) of documents from 2009 supportive of his position. The most persuasive of these texts is the highly repetitive "McChrystal Report on Afghanistan" — replete with platitudinous "new" policy prescriptions such as "gain the initiative," "improve effectiveness," and "build relationships" — which lays out the former commander's concerns about the ongoing mission and what he diagnoses as the need for a major change in strategy, in addition, predictably enough, to increased allocation of both troops and funds.

Although this was not McChrystal's intention, his Report provides ample reasons for thinking that the mission in Afghanistan is truly hopeless. How to "build relationships" with a populace jaded by eight years of an occupation in which their interests were not put first, an occupation "Pre-occupied with our own forces," as McChrystal puts it, is not at all obvious. He warns:

> "[P]rogress is hindered by the dual threat of a resilient insurgency and a crisis of confidence in the government and the international coalition. To win their support, we must protect the people from both of these threats." ("The McChrystal Report," August 30, 2009, 1-3, reproduced in *Black Ops*, p. 260)

Thus a fundamental plank of the "new" strategy is to save the Afghan people from the U.S.-installed government and the occupiers — by increasing the presence of the latter!

THROUGHOUT *Soldiers of Fortune* and *Black Ops*, Geraghty vacillates between wanting to take to task administrations that operate according to "Might makes right," and those who do not. He suggests, for example, that the Carter administration was ineffective as a result of its insistence upon holding the ethical torch high. At the same time, many of Geraghty's critiques are grounded in what he himself appears to regard as the importance of regulated warfare, what is essential, he seems to believe, to maintaining the moral high ground. To wish nostalgically for "the good old days," back when international affairs and war were supposedly rule governed, is an entirely natural response to the transformation of black to gray ops on the part of military supporters critical of the Bush administration.

However, *Soldiers of Fortune* and *Black Ops* offer every reason for believing that the "moral high ground" about which just war theorists may wistfully dream is but a chimera. Throughout the twentieth century, whenever strategists felt that black ops would be effective, they opted for them, simply ignoring questions of morality and legality, in the manner of full-fledged political realists. Accordingly, this historical moment of frightening transparency affords us an opportunity to look honestly at the narratives of the past, the crimes against human beings committed in the name of defense and claimed to be necessary, and to see at last that the fairytale of categorically good and evil allies and adversaries was always and only just that. In reality, the impunity of governments in initiating and funding black ops is mirrored by their impunity in executing modern war — provided that they are the victors. But in war democratic principles are not merely set aside in a few isolated cases (as in small-scale black ops) but systematically discarded. Military supporters such as Geraghty fail to recognize that the characterization of the victims of wars fought abroad as either "legitimate targets" or permissible "collateral damage" (those categories assumed to be exhaustive in any action officially ordained by the government) is tantamount to stripping all of the people of those lands of all rights, even the most fundamental: the right to life. Thus even opting for war is

already to cede the moral high ground.

War, like black ops, offers the tyrant's solution to conflict: homicide substitutes for criminal investigation and due process, and all of this is rationalized in the name of defense. War, like black ops, has always promoted the view that a small number of human beings possess the right to decide who may live and who must die, according to their own interpretations of what needs to be done and what would be an acceptable price to pay — in other people's lives. But there is no sense in which the slaughter of hundreds of thousands or even millions of innocent people (as in Vietnam) is necessary. Having lost the war in Vietnam, the United States certainly did not cease to exist, which in and of itself demonstrates that the war was not necessary to the nation's survival. A huge chunk of treasure and the lives of 58,000 U.S. soldiers were sacrificed in that conflict, but by far the greatest price paid for the many covert wars between the two superpowers were the lives and well-being of millions of the inhabitants of lands selected as battlegrounds by strategists in secret meetings behind closed doors. When U.S. troops did not themselves slaughter the victims (as in Vietnam), U.S. initiatives nonetheless created the conditions that ultimately led to the victims' demise, for example, in neighboring Cambodia.

It is time to reexamine the archaic and delusive assumption of just war theorists that good intentions alone suffice to exculpate agents for the devastation that they wreak. This presumption has given rise to a wholesale diffusion of responsibility for the consequences of war and is precisely what perpetuates the practice. U.S. interventions abroad — both black and gray —certainly confirm the age-old adage that "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," but Americans are either unfazed by or unaware of the hells on earth that their money has been used to create. Ultimately, all of the tragic and needless suffering, death and destruction that results from U.S. interventions is made possible by those who pay, the citizens of the United States, who in the age of the internet have the unprecedented opportunity to see what it is that U.S. soldiers are doing in their name. Abu Ghraib was widely decried, but what U.S. taxpayers need to reassess is the wisdom of even "regular" missions of soldiers acting under order today. While the military-industrial-congressional-media-pharmaceutical complex continues to generate new millionaires, the corrupt system does not support but corrodes morality and deepens the rifts of injustice through sacrificing less powerful people, civilians and soldiers alike, for the "neat ideas," essentially mercenary schemes, of war entrepreneurs.