

Rumsfeld Revives Vietnam-Era 'Phoenix' Assassination Teams

by Edward Spannaus

On Jan. 8, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced a reorganization of the U.S. Special Forces Command (SO-COM) which, he said, will give it the authority and the tools "to plan and execute missions in support of the global war on terror." "The global nature of the war, the nature of the enemy and the need for fast, efficient operations in hunting down and rooting out terrorist networks around the world have all contributed to the need for an expanded role for the Special Operations forces," Rumsfeld said.

What Rumsfeld did not say, except implicitly, is that the reorganization is part of his effort to recreate the Vietnam-era "Phoenix" assassination program run by the CIA, which indiscriminately killed more than 8,000 alleged Communist sympathizers in the year 1970 alone. Rumsfeld's plan, like many of the shoot-from-the-hip ideas concocted by the top civilians in the Defense Department clustered around Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, has set off alarm bells among the uniformed military, and even within the Special Forces themselves.

'Hunter-Killer Teams'

The opening shot of this drive—at least the first publicly acknowledged one—came on Nov. 3 in Yemen, when an unmanned Predator drone aircraft fired a Hellfire missile at an automobile thought to be carrying an al-Qaeda leader. In fact, there were six men in the car, including an American citizen. All were killed instantly.

As background to the Yemen assassinations, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh reported in the Dec. 23-30 issue of the *New Yorker* that Rumsfeld had issued a secret directive to Air Force Gen. Charles Holland, the Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, "to develop a plan to find and deal with members of terrorist organizations." Rumsfeld also told Holland: "The objective is to capture terrorists for interrogation or, if necessary, to kill them, not simply arrest them in a law-enforcement exercise." Holland was to develop plans to cut through the Pentagon bureaucracy, so that he could process such deployment orders "in minutes and hours, not days and weeks."

Hersh reported that Rumsfeld and his deputies were complaining that General Holland had a case of "the slows" (a reference to Abraham Lincoln's criticism of Union Gen.

George McClellan), because of Holland's caution in carrying out Rumsfeld's order after 9/11, that Holland compile a list of terrorist targets for immediate retaliation in areas besides Afghanistan. Holland had told Rumsfeld that an immediate attack in areas identified—in Somalia, Mauritania, the Philippines, and the Triple Frontier area along the Brazil-Paraguay-Argentina border—was not feasible, because the military lacked "actionable intelligence" on the targets.

Rumsfeld's approach has been opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who, according to Hersh, do not wish to see the elite special forces units—the Navy's SEALs, the Army's Delta Force, and the ultra-secret Gray Fox unit—turned into "hunter-killer teams." Hersh made it clear that Rumsfeld has been in an internal Pentagon war with the uniformed commanders, who oppose this kind of assassination program as a revival of the Phoenix Program.

Hersh singled out Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Doug Feith, and a little-known Pentagon official, William J. Luti, who runs "the vaguely named Office of Special Plans," a unit which Hersh described as "the center of some of the most aggressive strategizing taking place in the Pentagon today."

'P2OG'

Other developments along similar lines have been reported recently, for example the proposed "Proactive Pre-emptive Operations Group" (P2OG). This came out of a Defense Science Board (DSB) study and report issued in October. According to published accounts, the DSB recommended creation of a P2OG organization which would be comprised of specialists in information warfare and information operations, covert action, cover and deception, intelligence operations, PsyOps, Humint and Sigint (human intelligence and signals intelligence) and Special Operations Forces.

The "proactive" element of the program is expressed in such concepts, contained in a DSB presentation, as:

- "Develop an entirely new capability to proactively, pre-emptively evoke responses from adversary/terrorist groups," and
- "Improve information collection by stimulating reactions."

That should bring a number of historical examples to

mind, such as the secret, repeated commando raids against North Vietnam in 1964 which provoked a North Vietnamese response, which was then magnified into a pretext for the “Gulf of Tonkin” resolution authorizing a U.S. response. Or, take a more recent example, that of the Palestinian Authority’s revelations that the Israeli Mossad was covertly recruiting young Palestinians to fake “al-Qaeda” cells in the Gaza Strip, which were actually run by Israeli agents.

And, speaking of historical analogies, the P2OG would combine Defense Department and CIA capabilities, and would report directly to a special unit in the National Security Council which would be dubbed the “Special Operations Executive” (not accidentally, the name of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) coordination point for special operations during World War II).

Putting P2OG under the National Security Council, is the same model under which the 1980s so-called “Iran-Contra” operations were conducted, when covert operations were run out of the NSC using military and CIA assets, under the direction of the clowns around Oliver North.

ISA/Gray Fox

EIR was advised, early last Fall, that the old “Iran-Contra” networks were being reactivated, and one of the areas of reactivation identified was the Intelligence Support Activity (ISA). ISA was an intelligence unit created as part of the Army’s Special Forces, and it did many of the things which were commonly thought to have been done by the CIA—in fact, it sometimes used the CIA as a cover for its own operations. ISA was part of what was traditionally known as the “focal point” apparatus, developed during the 1950s under the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, which established a special channel for the CIA within the Defense Department. (That was the CIA of the 1950s; not today’s CIA, which is a very different, and some would say, more timid, animal.)

During the Reagan-Bush “Iran-Contra” era, ISA was used directly by the NSC for arms deals, counter-terrorist actions, and other covert operations. It was ISA which was responsible for the creation of the John Hull ranch in Costa Rica as a transshipment point for guns (and drugs) in the early 1980s. In 1982, ISA was “buried” so that Congress was not even aware of its existence, with its funds being drawn from the Pentagon’s “black budget” and secret CIA funds. Within the Pentagon, it was referred to as “the crazies in the basement.” Its free-flowing financing and spending led to the eruption of a public scandal around its “Yellow Fruit” unit, which resulted in criminal prosecutions and the jailing of its leader, Lt. Col. Dale Duncan.

ISA never really went away. Today it is part of the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and is reportedly already active in anti-terrorist operations around the world, under the name “Gray Fox.” By some accounts, ISA was in Venezuela earlier last year, involved in the coup attempt against President Hugo Chávez. And in Af-

ghanistan, many of the horseback-riding, bearded special operations forces are actually ISA personnel.

When Seymour Hersh referred to “the United States government’s secret undercover teams, known as Gray Fox,” which would comprise Rumsfeld’s new “hunter-killer” teams, this is what he was actually talking about.

Of course, there is no more obvious example of what is being proposed, than the Israeli “targetted assassinations” of persons they describe as suspected terrorists. The Israeli secret services have a well-known, long history of conducting assassinations abroad. (What is less well known, is that the Mossad has intentionally knocked off moderate leaders of the secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), with the objective of promoting the most extreme religious fundamentalists, such as those in Hamas—which Ariel Sharon was instrumental in creating in the late 1980s.)

U.S. Military Vulnerabilities

Former military officers have explained to *EIR* some of the vulnerabilities that make the U.S. military susceptible to the insertion of capabilities modelled on, and linked to, Israeli and British special operations organizations.

The Special Operations Command (SOCOM) is regarded by many in the military as having become bureaucratized and lethargic. Its commander, General Holland, is considered a good, kind man, and a consensus type, not a warrior type. Add to this, the fact that Special Operations Forces are overdeployed right now, at “warp-speed op-tempo” (as one source put it), and the result is, that there is little or no innovative, strategic thinking going on in SOCOM.

So, into this vacuum ride the Perle-Wolfowitz gang, who are easily able to foist their schemes upon Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, who are frustrated with what they regard as a lack of aggressive, “forward-leaning” thinking in SOCOM—or in the CIA, for that matter.

What the recent organizational changes announced by Rumsfeld permit, is that the Secretary of Defense can deploy SOCOM forces directly, without “going through the military bureaucracy;” that is, by-passing the Combatant Commanders of the geographic commands such as the Central Command or European Command. In some cases, it also means that SOCOM units can operate in-country without the approval of the State Department.

In short, what Wolfowitz, Perle and company have done, is to give Rumsfeld his own personal Israeli-style hit squads, to be culled out of the Special Operations Forces. “They want to turn these guys into assassins,” Hersh was told by a former high-level intelligence officer. “They want to go on rumors—not facts—and go for political effect; and that’s what the Special Forces Command is afraid of. Rummy is saying that politics is bigger than war, and we need to take guys out for political effect.”

As for Rumsfeld, the source reported, “The military is saying, ‘Who is this guy?’ ”