

STEALTH BOOTS IN IRAQ: NOW WITH SPECIAL BONUS IMMUNITY!

Remember when Barack Obama used the magic of semantics in 2010 to turn our boots on the ground in Iraq into non-combat soldiers? Those “non-combat” troops remained for another year or so, with the last troops leaving in December of 2011. But now that Obama wants to return to fighting in Iraq, he has been forced to resort to a much larger array of deceptions than simple semantics to get his boots on the ground for the battle against ISIS. [And we have to fight ISIS because our wonderfully “trained” Iraqi security forces dissolved against them].

Among others, one of the voices for “boots on the grounds” is Max Boot:

Lift the prohibition on U.S. “boots on the ground.” President Obama has not allowed U.S. Special Forces and forward air controllers to embed themselves in the Free Syrian Army, Iraqi security forces, Kurdish peshmerga, or in Sunni tribes when they go into combat as he did with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. This lack of eyes on the ground makes it harder to call in air strikes and to improve the combat capacity of U.S. proxies. Experience shows that “combat advisors” fighting alongside indigenous troops are far more effective than trainers confined to large bases.

And Max loves him some Special Forces, as they return on his to-do list for Obama:

Send in the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Between 2003 and 2010, JSOC—composed of units such as SEAL Team

Six and Delta Force—became skilled at targeting the networks of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its success was largely due to its ability to gather intelligence by interrogating prisoners and scooping up computers and documents—something that bombing alone cannot accomplish. JSOC squadrons should once again be moved to the region (they could be stationed in Iraq proper, the Kurdistan Regional Government, Turkey, and/or Jordan) to target high-level ISIS organizers.

So Boot pines for the return of Special Forces to Iraq, not just for embedding to target air strikes, but for a full-fledged return to Petraeus' death squads in Iraq. But stealthy Obama very likely is already there, according to this Marc Ambinder piece back in September. After first stating his distaste for the "boots on the ground" meme, Ambinder tells us that covert operators are almost certainly already there, citing a Daily Beast report by Ford Sypher:

A spokesman for the Central Command denied this specifically. "There are no U.S. troops on the ground in or around Zumar," he said. But Sypher's Kurdish sources told him that one team of U.S. Special Operations Forces and several teams of German Kommando are on the ground to help coordinate airstrikes.

Whom to believe? Go with Sypher.

Why? Recall the NATO bombing in Libya and repeated denials from U.S. officials that troops weren't on the ground, and would not be on the ground.

But there were men and women employed and trained by the U.S. government inside Libya. They were engaged in paramilitary activities. They had guns. There were members of the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities

Division (SAD) – about 40 of them. They worked with Libyan and ground-spotters from other NATO countries to help NATO fighters find their targets and help the CIA track high-value Libyan and foreign terrorists. These Americans were there on the legal authority of a covert action finding that President Obama signed, and then notified Congress about.

The CIA does not belong to the Department of Defense. But the Defense Intelligence Agency has a clandestine wing that can essentially exchange personnel with CIA teams, a practice known as sheep-dipping – they “become” CIA operatives for as long as they need to. There may also have been actual Special Operations Forces on the ground, perhaps members of the Joint Special Operations Command task force that specializes in operationally preparing the battlefield and whose very name is a classified code word. Its barely unclassified identity: “The Activity.”

Any or all of these forces could be transferred to the CIA’s commander on the ground. At that point, there technically would be no U.S. military forces underneath the air combat canopy; JSOC would simply loan 12 soldiers for a week, or however long it took.

And there we have it. They aren’t military “boots on the ground” because they magically have been turned into CIA operatives who are under Presidential authority to do seekrit stuff. It’s just a very fortunate coincidence that the seekrit stuff is exactly what US military personnel in the area would be doing.

But that’s not the only way Obama is hiding behind his claim we don’t have “boots on the ground”. Don’t forget the huge role played by contractors. And you can bet that contractors

are getting lots of new involvement in Iraq, as The Week told us in early November:

Will contractors be used against ISIS?

Yes – in one role or another. The bases in Qatar and elsewhere that are the source of U.S. airstrikes require significant support staff to provide food and do the maintenance and cleaning of military facilities. President Obama has been adamant that there will be no U.S. military “boots on the ground” to fight the ISIS insurgency in Syria and Iraq. But contractors can also be hired to train moderate Syrian rebel factions or Iraqi Kurdish factions in the use of the weaponry the U.S. has pledged to supply. The real question is whether contractors will be hired as mercenary warriors.

Is that under consideration?

Erik Prince, the Blackwater founder who now heads a military services company called Frontier Services Group, is openly advocating the idea. He said since the U.S. won't send troops to fight ISIS, it should hire “a multibrigade-size unit of veteran American contractors” to “serve as the pointy end of the spear” for local fighters. While the administration is unlikely to publicly announce hiring mercenaries, President Obama did say that the fight against ISIS would be like the action in Somalia, where the U.S. has a “strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us while supporting partners on the front lines.” Those partners in Somalia include heavily armed, private U.S. security firms. The contracting firms already in Iraq, such as Triple Canopy, are advertising for positions such as “defense marksman,” for which an applicant must be a trained sniper. When the U.S. pulled most of its troops out

of Iraq, "it made us even more dependent on contractors for security," says former congressman Christopher Shays, who co-chaired the Commission on Wartime Contracting. "The one thing that's a given: We can't go to war without contractors, and we can't go to peace without contractors."

It seems Erik Prince is a blight that we can never quite wash out of the fabric of US policy. I wonder if he got the idea for that "pointy end of the spear" line from seeing those pointy things on top of his head?

Perhaps the most disturbing development in this gradual, hidden move back into full combat involvement in Iraq is the disclosure yesterday that US troops in Iraq once again have immunity. Recall that it was the lack of immunity that led to the full withdrawal in late 2011:

Washington has an agreement with Baghdad on privileges and immunities for the growing number of troops based in Iraq who are helping in the fight against the Islamic State group, the new U.S. ambassador said Thursday.

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, Stuart Jones said Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has given assurances that U.S. troops will receive immunity from prosecution. Under Iraq's former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, that issue was a major sticking point, ultimately leading to the decision to withdraw all remaining U.S. troops in late 2011.

"That was a different situation and those troops would have had a different role," Jones said.

"We have the assurances that we need from the government of Iraq on privileges and immunities," he said. "It's in the basis of our formal written

communications between our governments
and also based on the strategic
framework agreement that is the legal
basis of our partnership.”

With immunity now back in the Pentagon’s pocket,
look for them to keep increasing the level of
involvement and perhaps to even start dropping
the cloak of secrecy.