

CHENEY'S ASSASSINATION SQUADS

You know how Sy Hersh promised bombshells after Bush left office? Well this seems like his first installment—though it also sounds like he's not ready to put this in print yet. (h/t RawStory)

At a "Great Conversations" event at the University of Minnesota last night, legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh may have made a little more news than he intended by talking about new alleged instances of domestic spying by the CIA, and about an ongoing covert military operation that he called an "executive assassination ring."

Hersh spoke with great confidence about these findings from his current reporting, which he hasn't written about yet.

In an email exchange afterward, Hersh said that his statements were "an honest response to a question" from the event's moderator, U of M Political Scientist Larry Jacobs and "not something I wanted to dwell about in public."

[snip]

"Yuh. After 9/11, I haven't written about this yet, but the Central Intelligence Agency was very deeply involved in domestic activities against people they thought to be enemies of the state. Without any legal authority for it. They haven't been called on it yet. That does happen.

"Right now, today, there was a story in the New York Times that

if you read it carefully mentioned something known as the Joint Special Operations Command – JSOC it's called. It is a special wing of our special operations community that is set up independently. They do not report to anybody, except in the Bush-Cheney days, they reported directly to the Cheney office. They did not report to the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff or to Mr. [Robert] Gates, the secretary of defense. They reported directly to him. ...

"Congress has no oversight of it. **It's an executive assassination ring essentially, and it's been going on and on and on.** Just today in the Times there was a story that its leaders, a three star admiral named [William H.] McRaven, ordered a stop to it because there were so many collateral deaths.

"Under President Bush's authority, they've been going into countries, not talking to the ambassador or the CIA station chief, and finding people on a list and executing them and leaving. That's been going on, in the name of all of us. [emphasis original]

Mind you, I think this refers to two different things: the assassination squads (which seems to return us to the way of the 1960s, where we just tried to off foreign leaders we didn't like), and CIA's domestic targeting of those perceived to be enemies of the states (somehow I'm sure this will end up including Quakers).

Now, there have been hints of the JSOC working outside of the chain of command before. And we know they have targeted alleged terrorist leaders. I wonder, though, if it included bigger names—people like Yasir Arafat, who died of a mysterious illness at a time when Cheney's office was talking about finding someone among the Palestinians to replace him.

In any case, from the NYT story Hersh referenced, it looks like this is another example of Cheney's sloppy incompetence that has had to be cleaned up under Obama.

A United Nations report released last month specifically blamed clandestine missions by commando units for contributing to a surge in civilian deaths in Afghanistan in 2008. The report concluded that the number of civilian casualties rose nearly 40 percent compared with 2007, although it found that suicide bombings and other Taliban attacks were the primary cause.

Military officials said the halt was ordered in part to allow American commanders time to impose new safeguards intended to reduce the risk of civilian deaths. They said it was also intended to help the military release information about civilian casualties more quickly, to pre-empt what some said have been exaggerated accounts by Afghan officials.

According to senior military officials, the stand-down was ordered by Vice Adm. William H. McRaven, the head of the military's Joint Special Operations Command, which oversees the secret commando units.

The rising civilian death toll in Afghanistan has soured relations between American commanders and the Afghan government led by President Hamid Karzai, who has vocally criticized the

raids.

The stand-down began in mid-February, and the raids have since resumed. It is unclear, though, whether the Special Operations missions are being carried out with the same frequency as before the halt.