

GUARDIAN LAYS OUT DETAILS OF HOW PETRAEUS ORGANIZED DEATH SQUADS IN IRAQ



Petraeus salutes the death squads that advanced his career

Yesterday, the Guardian published an article detailing how the US turned to the use of death squads in Iraq to quell the rise of Sunni militias. The article provides convincing evidence that this was an intentional policy and was in fact a central tenet of David Petraeus' often-praised counterinsurgency, or COIN, strategy. The key person in the Guardian's reporting is James Steele, who was a veteran in organizing Central American death squads on behalf of the US during the Reagan years.

In reading the material from the Guardian, however, it should be kept in mind that Petraeus did not institute his COIN strategy only in Iraq. He put it into place in Afghanistan as well, and the fact that it led to widespread allegations of torture and murder there demonstrates that the atrocities committed by these militias is a feature of the funding and training provided to them and not an unfortunate outgrowth, because this practice has now produced death squads in Central America, Iraq and Afghanistan. Recall that less than two weeks ago, Hamid Karzai called for the expulsion of US Special Operations forces from Maidan Wardak province due to allegations of abuse by the

Afghan Local Police there. The Afghan Local Police are in reality groups of local militias trained and funded by US Special Operations forces and operating separately from the Karzai government. The ALP became one of the primary features of Petraeus' COIN strategy when he moved it to Afghanistan.

Here's the opening of the Guardian article:

The Pentagon sent a US veteran of the "dirty wars" in Central America to oversee sectarian police commando units in Iraq that set up secret detention and torture centres to get information from insurgents. These units conducted some of the worst acts of torture during the US occupation and accelerated the country's descent into full-scale civil war.

Colonel James Steele was a 58-year-old retired special forces veteran when he was nominated by Donald Rumsfeld to help organise the paramilitaries in an attempt to quell a Sunni insurgency, an investigation by the Guardian and BBC Arabic shows.

Via email, my friend Kirk pointed out this report from Newsweek back in early 2005 where the concept of the Salvador option was floated openly by the Bush administration:

What to do about the deepening quagmire of Iraq? The Pentagon's latest approach is being called "the Salvador option"—and the fact that it is being discussed at all is a measure of just how worried Donald Rumsfeld really is. "What everyone agrees is that we can't just go on as we are," one senior military officer told NEWSWEEK. "We have to find a way to take the offensive against the insurgents. Right now, we are playing defense. And we are losing." Last November's operation in Fallujah,

most analysts agree, succeeded less in breaking “the back” of the insurgency—as Marine Gen. John Sattler optimistically declared at the time—than in spreading it out.

Now, NEWSWEEK has learned, the Pentagon is intensively debating an option that dates back to a still-secret strategy in the Reagan administration’s battle against the leftist guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador in the early 1980s. Then, faced with a losing war against Salvadoran rebels, the U.S. government funded or supported “nationalist” forces that allegedly included so-called death squads directed to hunt down and kill rebel leaders and sympathizers. Eventually the insurgency was quelled, and many U.S. conservatives consider the policy to have been a success—despite the deaths of innocent civilians and the subsequent Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal. (Among the current administration officials who dealt with Central America back then is John Negroponte, who is today the U.S. ambassador to Iraq. Under Reagan, he was ambassador to Honduras. There is no evidence, however, that Negroponte knew anything about the Salvadoran death squads or the Iran-Contra scandal at the time. The Iraq ambassador, in a phone call to NEWSWEEK on Jan. 10, said he was not involved in military strategy in Iraq. He called the insertion of his name into this report “utterly gratuitous.”)

The most disgusting aspect of this apparent “trial balloon” floated by the Bush administration is that the program quite possibly was already underway when the Newsweek article came out. The Guardian article reminds us that Petraeus, the architect of this program, was sent to Iraq in June of 2004 (this was his

second deployment to Iraq) to begin training Iraqis, and the Newsweek article wasn't published until January of 2005. Steele, who was reporting directly to Rumsfeld, first went to Iraq in 2003 (Rumsfeld delighted in running his own people separately from the chain of command; he did this at times with McChrystal as well).

More evidence that the program was entirely intentional comes from the role of torture in the program and the moves the US made to ignore torture just as the program was put into place.

A little over two years ago, the Guardian analyzed a number of documents from Wikileaks and assembled a huge number of reports of torture carried out by the militias the US trained and supported under this program. Most devastating within this cache of information, however, is that the US issued an order to ignore reports of torture carried out by these Iraqi groups. From a 2010 report by the Guardian:

This is the impact of Frago 242. A frago is a "fragmentary order" which summarises a complex requirement. This one, issued in June 2004, about a year after the invasion of Iraq, orders coalition troops not to investigate any breach of the laws of armed conflict, such as the abuse of detainees, unless it directly involves members of the coalition. Where the alleged abuse is committed by Iraqi on Iraqi, "only an initial report will be made ... No further investigation will be required unless directed by HQ".

Did you notice that date? Yes, Frago 242, ordering US forces to ignore torture by Iraqi militias, was issued the same month as when Petraeus was sent to Iraq to institute his training program. Hardly a coincidence, if you ask me.

Here's a video the Guardian put together in 2010 based on what they found in the Wikileaks

documents and other investigations:

[youtuber

youtube='http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7t6l0HCy
XMU']

In conjunction with yesterday's article, the Guardian also released a video documentary that is nearly an hour long. It can be viewed here.

Oh, and just in case you try to say that Petraeus' COIN strategy exited the US government with Petraeus' resignation after it was learned he was boinking his biographer, think again. Yes, his primary aide in instituting the policy (and overseeing US torture), Stanley McChrystal, also has resigned in disgrace, but key aides William McRaven and Michael Flynn have advanced their careers on the basis of these war crimes. McRaven now heads Special Operations Command, and so he would be in charge of training the death squads in the next country where the US decides to institute them. Where will it be? Libya? Syria? Mali? And Michael Flynn heads the Defense Intelligence Agency. Flynn was responsible for turning the "intelligence" gained by torture, whether it was carried out by the US or Iraq, into actions such as night raids, thereby producing more insurgents and fueling the cycle of violence.