

OUR OTHER ASSASSINATION PROGRAM: MAFIA HITMEN HIDDEN FROM CONGRESS

As part of my not-yet exhausted obsession with the government's effort to obscure its drone assassination program, I re-read these two posts describing the assassination squads Dick Cheney set up but kept hidden from Congress. When Leon Panetta learned about it—and learned Congress had not been briefed—it set off a big scandal where, for once, Congress actually got pissed. The big scandal, we ultimately learned, was that the assassination squads had been outsourced in 2004 to Blackwater. And while actual approval for the program appears to have come in a September 26, 2001 directive following up on the Gloves Come Off Memorandum of Notification that authorized hit squads, its legal justification and logic parallels the drone program.

The Bush administration took the position that killing members of Al Qaeda, a terrorist group that attacked the United States and has pledged to attack it again, was no different from killing enemy soldiers in battle, and that therefore the agency was not constrained by the assassination ban.

But former intelligence officials said that employing private contractors to help hunt Qaeda operatives would pose significant legal and diplomatic risks, and they might not be protected in the same way government employees are.

[snip]

Officials said that the C.I.A. program was devised partly as an alternative to missile strikes using drone aircraft,

which have accidentally killed civilians and cannot be used in urban areas where some terrorists hide.

Yet with most top Qaeda operatives believed to be hiding in the remote mountains of Pakistan, the drones have remained the C.I.A.'s weapon of choice. Like the Bush administration, the Obama administration has embraced the drone campaign because it presents a less risky option than sending paramilitary teams into Pakistan.

Today, we learn that the guy who took the assassination program private, then CIA CTC Operations Director Ricky Prados, was a mob hitman whose murderous ways continued after he joined the Agency.

More startling, the Miami murders allegedly continued *after* Prado joined the CIA. One target included a cocaine distributor in Colorado who was killed by a car bomb. Investigators believed he was killed over concerns he would talk to the police.

Years later, in 1996, Prado was a senior manager inside the CIA's Bin Laden Issue Station, before the Al-Qaida mastermind was a well-known name. Two years later, the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania elevated Prado to become the chief of operations inside the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, headed by then-chief Cofer Black, later an executive for the notorious merc firm Blackwater. "As the title implied, the job made Prado responsible for all the moving pieces at the CTC – supervising field offices on surveillance, rendition, or other missions, and making sure that logistics were in order, that personnel were in place," according to Wright.

Prado was also reportedly put in charge of a "targeted assassination unit," that was never put into operation. (The CIA shifted to drones.) But according to Wright, the CIA handed over its hit squad operation to Blackwater, now called Academi, as a way "to kill people with precision, without getting caught." Prado is said to have negotiated the deal to transfer the unit, which Wright wrote "marked the first time the U.S. government outsourced a covert assassination service to private enterprise." As to whether the unit was *then* put into operation, two Blackwater contractors tell Wright the unit began "whacking people like crazy" beginning in 2008.

I'll grant you, there's little that would beat the story of a Miami hitman running our CT program. Except has the drone program really evolved in such different fashion? There are, after all, contractors involved in the targeting process even if they're not "whacking people like crazy."

More importantly, the government not only refuses to disclose details of its drone program to us mere taxpayers, but they also refuse to answer very basic questions posed by Congressional overseers.

What is it, then, that distinguishes Dick Cheney's secret mafia hitman-led assassination squad and John Brennan's secret contractor assisted drone program?