

By John Grant

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How do you assure the security of a nation of human beings who consume a disproportionate amount of the world's resources, habitually live beyond their means and are addicted to all forms of fantasy from Bible-based delusion, to patriotism-based arrogance, to movie special effects that make ordinary human drama seem boring?

What is the most powerful nation in the world with the largest, most expensive, most lethal military in the history of mankind to do when the good times turn bad, the money goes funny and class warfare breaks out on the homefront?

How does modern warfare in a nation-state system that evolved out of feudalism continue to evolve as new communication systems increase? What does modern warfare look like as that nation state system breaks down, to be replaced by a confusing, "globalized" world of power centers and power vacuums?

The answer for the United States seems to be a growing concentration on what is known as Special Operations, which includes Special Forces, Seals and a host of other lethal military forces that emphasize mobility, efficiency, secrecy and unaccountability. Navy Seal Team Six is the showcase unit of US Special Ops warfare; it's the much-touted force that killed Osama bin Laden in May and on August 6th lost 17 men when their Chinook helicopter was shot down. A total of 38 men were killed in [the shoot-down](#) , including pilots, crew and eight Afghans -- plus a dog.

The Seal team was on a mission to aid a Ranger unit trying to capture or kill a Taliban leader. Back in June 2005, a Chinook was similarly shot down, killing 16 special operations soldiers. By

now, this kind of focused killing mission by helicopter at night is standard procedure in Afghanistan. Chinooks, I can speak from experience in Vietnam, are loud, lumbering machines that would seem a reasonably vulnerable target for an experienced fighter with a rocket, something the Russians learned. No doubt the Chinooks are accompanied on missions by Apaches and other agile killing machines.

The transition to this kind of secret hunter-killer warfare began with the ascendancy of General Stanley McChrystal to command in Afghanistan following his successes in Iraq at using Special Ops units to identify and kill insurgent leaders. These unaccountable units were described by Bob Woodward as “the secret weapon” of The Surge. They were also called by some “the Salvadoran option,” referring to the death squad aspect of their function. They can arguably be seen as an updated, highly sophisticated Phoenix Program, the notorious US assassination teams employed during the Vietnam War.

This type of “dirty” warfare depends greatly on talent, efficiency and secrecy, all qualities General McChrystal was known for. Effective PR is also an important aspect of sustaining a special operations program. So it’s noteworthy that before he became famous for special operations, as a one star general during the Iraq invasion, McChrystal was the ranking public relations spokesman in Baghdad.

Secrecy keeps the American people in the dark as to what the Special Ops troops are actually doing on the ground; the PR assures homefront citizens are told only what incredible “warriors” Special Ops soldiers are (which they no doubt are) and what sacrifices they are making for our “freedom” here in “the homeland.” Witness any network news show, and you’ll see this formula being fulfilled in spades.

A perfect example of the PR-secrecy gap appeared Friday on the front page of [The New York Times](#) in a story about how the CIA is bragging that its controversial drone campaign in Pakistan has for the past year not killed an innocent civilian. Not even one! Meanwhile, reports from Pakistan tell of rockets and bombs from drones hitting schools, restaurants and houses.

Clearly the CIA is being dishonest. Even proponents of the drone program say zero collateral damage is preposterous. What the CIA seems to be doing is playing the old cruel wink’n’nod used in Vietnam that all US killed corpses are the enemy – even if it’s an 8-year-old boy next to the corpse of his mother in the kitchen of their home. The real problem, here, is that those

questioning this kind of blatant dishonesty become “subversives” in the eyes of the War Party.

The point is, Americans are powerfully discouraged from asking what Special Ops and drone units are really doing and what their actions mean in a larger context. Don't ask why in 2011 we're still hunting down and killing Taliban leaders; just believe our modern *centurians* out there on the edges of the empire are America's finest men and women sacrificing themselves for a nation of consumers back home.

And whatever you do, don't think of the downing of that Chinook as a legitimate act of war or put it in the context of a previous generation of *mujahadeen* fighters in Afghanistan using American rockets to knock down Russian helicopters. To do that, of course, would be to court inclusion into the ranks of the “enemy” itself.

### **Special Ops Culture Eases Into the System**

Two Special Ops admirals have just been named deputy commanders in two critical US foreign commands. Vice Admiral Robert Harward will join Central Command, which covers the Middle East and SW Asia, and Vice Admiral Joseph Kernan will join Southern Command, which covers Latin America. Both are Navy Seals.

[The New York Times](#) reported that these appointments reflected “a significant shift in military culture, reshaping not only the armed forces but also the executive branch and Capital Hill.” Given a reported distrust and tension between conventional military forces and special operations elements -- which tend to operate beyond the control of conventional military leaders -- the ascendancy of these two generals and others is reportedly an effort aimed at better “intermingling” the two distinct operational philosophies.

Newly designated Defense Secretary Leon Panetta is a [Special Ops](#) booster who has, we're told, “worked extensively” with these Special Ops officers during his tenure as director of the CIA. His replacement at CIA, retired General David Petraeus, of course, has been running the Special Ops hunter-killer war in Afghanistan. President Obama and Vice President Biden have made it clear they are both 100% on board with the use of Special Ops hunter-killer teams and drones, which can be seen as the robot arm of Special Ops.

The ascendancy of secret, unaccountable Special Ops units is clearly a belated response to the global nature of insurgencies like al Qaeda. With a highly sophisticated back-up system of logistics and intelligence, Special Ops warfare allows the US to project small, custom-designed, lethal teams anywhere on the globe. The result is a military more and more obsessed with focused, efficient killing – or in the pop term of art, the “taking out” of specific high-profile individuals in leadership positions.

The lesson that seems to have been learned from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan is that, while we may not be able to “win” these wars, we sure can use our killing systems to slow the bastards down by whittling away at their leadership and key people. All that's required is a permanent state of war, which we seem to have arrived at.

Special Operations are certainly not new, but the current, growing emphasis on it is an operational evolution from Vice President Dick Cheney's advocacy of turning to the “dark side” to beat al Qaeda at their own game. The current program is a synthesis of this shift to the dark side and the criticism it generated. As such, the increasing use of highly-secret, super-lethal Special Ops units seems a harbinger for the future.

If the manner in which post-9/11 Homeland Security paranoia and militarism has infiltrated into all levels of police institutions in the United States is a model, as Special Ops gains footing and acceptance, its under-girding philosophy of focused violence, secrecy and unaccountability will, top down, likely pervade all sorts of government and police entities.

Maybe it's paranoia, but the really frightening aspect of a super secret Special Ops regime is, of course, that the employment of units depends entirely on who controls the units and who they decide is an “enemy” to be focused on. The more secret and unaccountable this stuff becomes, the more dangerous the future may become for a lot of fundamentally decent people.

A.K. Thompson -- a radical anti-globalization activist and author of *Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent*

-- feels this threat and puts it this way: “Invoking the spectre of terrorism has been one of the means by which social movement actors have been excluded from the realm of legitimate claim making.”

All the chaos and window smashing in Seattle and other anti-globalization protests aside, much of the fundamental “claim making” of these demonstrations was correct and predictive of the financial industry’s culpability in the recent economic collapse. This gives Thompson’s concern some real credence. (He was one of the self-described “dirty kids” in Seattle.) To avoid actually listening to people who legitimately question the shortcomings of “the system,” the system too often ostracizes and demonizes them, which ends up provoking anger and mayhem.

In the great spirit of American Exceptionalism, better to close one’s ears, draw a line in the sand and send in the assault teams.

Similarly, back in 2001, those asking why 16 men from Saudi Arabia would undertake a suicide raid to destroy the World Trade Towers, the Pentagon and the White House, were silenced and marginalized. Instead of addressing these questions, US leaders mounted a major, vengeful counter-attack in the form of conventional military invasions and occupations, first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq.

While the Global War On Terror made sense as far as recognizing we were literally under attack and the problem was “global,” it has been a disaster on all other scores. What was clearly *not* called for was Guantanamo and torture and the expensive and vengeful occupations we’re still caught up in and can’t seem to move beyond.

The post-9/11 Bush response fell back on the traditional semantic weapon used by all oppressive military powers when attacked by those it has dominated: It reduced anyone and everyone in certain regions critical of US interests and actions to “terrorists,” as it has significantly demonized an entire religion. This semantic trick translates to: At this point, throw complexity out the window, stop thinking and start taking aim. The Nazis were famous for doing it with partisan elements. Who those attacking us really were and why they did what they did fell away in the storm of fear Americans felt. Questions were unpatriotic nuances; the truth was simple: “They” attacked us for no reason, and “they” needed to be crushed.

If we *had* honestly asked these questions, we would have realized it was arrogant interventions exactly like our response to 9/11 that provoked the attacks. Invasions and occupations meant lots of pain, death and destruction, but they did not ratchet down the animosity directed at us; in fact, it did the opposite. It seems hard now to deny that the costly and bloody occupation of Iraq

was a world-class blunder that, wreaked havoc and effectively, increased the regional power of our bitterest enemy, Iran. It's also clear the occupation of Afghanistan is perennially bogged down in an absurdly doomed effort to empower a central government that even its US patrons concede is one of the most corrupt and ineffectual in the world.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the bulk of the populations are sick and tired of our occupying troops. In Pakistan, because of our cavalier and lethal interventions with drones and Special Ops units, we are widely reviled. In contrast to a globalized insurgency like al Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan have never shown any interest or inclination to attack the United States. All the Taliban want is for us to get *our* military out of *their* country. How do we make our leaders see there is no good reason to be there and that we have disasters at home that need to be addressed that aren't being addressed because we remain there?

In the face of an obsession in Washington with warfare, this view, of course, has been effectively marginalized and is generally limited to peace activists like me and other opponents of the bi-partisan War Party in America. People who persist on expressing these views have moved from being legitimate "claim makers" to being political "enemies." When they will reach the point of being deemed "terrorists" depends on two factors:

- How long the bi-partisan War Party, despite all reason, will insist on continuing its costly wars in order to save face and not have to recognize very real failures.

- Whether the marginalized Peace Party can break out of its margins and, if and when it does, how it will publicly express its growing frustrations.

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