

CONTRACT KILLERS AS PSYOP WARRIORS

Several things stuck out for me in the NYT's big story about DOD's PsyOp contractors-as-assassination-flunkies. First, the degree to which DOD allegedly hid its assassination program inside a PsyOp venture. As the story reports, Michael Furlong, the guy running this show, was ostensibly engaged in strategic information, collecting information on Afghanistan's social structure. But in fact, he was using that money to employ freelancers who, at a minimum, were targeting Afghans for assassination.

Mr. Furlong has extensive experience in "psychological operations" – the military term for the use of information in warfare – and he plied his trade in a number of places, including Iraq and the Balkans. It is unclear exactly when Mr. Furlong's operations began. But officials said they seemed to accelerate in the summer of 2009, and by the time they ended, he and his colleagues had established a network of informants in Afghanistan and Pakistan whose job it was to help locate people believed to be insurgents.

Government officials said they believed that Mr. Furlong might have channeled money away from a program intended to provide American commanders with information about Afghanistan's social and tribal landscape, and toward secret efforts to hunt militants on both sides of the country's porous border with Pakistan.

And that, in turn, is interesting because we really need the kind of information collection Furlong was supposed to be doing. So imagine what happens when those purportedly engaging in

such information collection lead to the deaths of their potential sources—it'd make this kind of information collection toxic (and potentially end up in the targeting of journalists and academic anthropologists also employed for such work, as has happened). That's particularly a problem when, as Danger Room's Nathan Hodge describes, more and more contractors doing PsyOp work are apparently doing something else instead.

But it also sheds light on some lesser-known players like International Media Ventures, a "strategic communications" firm that seems to straddle the line between public relations, propaganda work and private security contracting. "Strategic communications" firms have flourished in the strange new post-9/11 media environment. Unlike traditional military public affairs, which are supposed to serve as a simple conduit for releasing information to the public, strategic communications is about shaping the message, both at home and abroad. Why is that problematic? As Danger Room's Sharon Weinberger pointed out, "When a newspaper calls up a public affairs officer to find out the number of casualties in an IED attack, the answer should be a number (preferably accurate), not a carefully crafted statement about how well the war is going."

Afghanistan, in fact, has been a longtime laboratory for strategic communications. Back in 2005, Joshua Kucera wrote a fascinating feature in *Jane's Defence Weekly* about how one of the top U.S. military spokesmen in Afghanistan was also an "information operations" officer, who reported to an office responsible for psychological operations and military deception. That kind of dual-hatting continues today: Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, the top

military spokesman in Afghanistan, is also director for strategic communications in Afghanistan.

And then there's the military's interest in newsgathering-type intelligence on Afghanistan's social and cultural scene. As we've reported here before, the top U.S. intelligence officer in Afghanistan complained in a damning report that newspapers often have a better sense of "ground truth" in Afghanistan (and suggested that military intelligence needs to mimic newspaper reporting, or even hire a few downsized reporters, to get the job done). Furlong's scheme – and again, the *Times* account is a bit muddled here – may have shifted funds away from AfPax Insider, a news venture run by former CNN executive Eason Jordan and author/adventurer Robert Young Pelton.

Effectively, our propaganda efforts have themselves become cover for paramilitary activities.

And speaking of cover, was anyone else amused at the way this story reported the involvement of Duane Clarridge, an old CIA spook with a fetish for illegal ops?

Among the contractors Mr. Furlong appears to have used to conduct intelligence gathering was International Media Ventures, a private "strategic communication" firm run by several former Special Operations officers. Another was American International Security Corporation, a Boston-based company run by Mike Taylor, a former Green Beret. In a phone interview, Mr. Taylor said that at one point he had employed Duane Clarridge, known as Dewey, a former top C.I.A. official who has been linked to a generation of C.I.A. adventures, including the Iran-

Contra scandal.

In an interview, Mr. Clarridge denied that he had worked with Mr. Furlong in any operation in Afghanistan or Pakistan. "I don't know anything about that," he said.

NYT reports that Furlong employed Mike Taylor's company, which in turn employed Clarridge. And after Clarridge says he didn't work for **Furlong**, NYT just leaves it at that, apparently not pursuing whether Clarridge worked for Taylor, which was the claim in the first place.

In other words, even while reporting the egg-within-an-egg quality of this cover, NYT lets Clarridge issue a non-denial denial and leave it at that.

But there may be a reason why NYT doesn't want to acknowledge that this PsyOp contract became cover to pay Duane Clarridge to engage in off-the-books spywork.

Military officials said that Mr. Furlong would occasionally brag to his superiors about having Mr. Clarridge's services at his disposal. Last summer, Mr. Furlong told colleagues that he was working with Mr. Clarridge to secure the release of Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl, a kidnapped soldier who American officials believe is being held by militants in Pakistan.

From December 2008 to mid-June 2009, both Mr. Taylor and Mr. Clarridge were hired to assist The New York Times in the case of David Rohde, the Times reporter who was kidnapped by militants in Afghanistan and held for seven months in Pakistan's tribal areas. The reporter ultimately escaped on his own.

The NYT reports that **during precisely the period when this shell game was going on**, NYT itself employed one wing of the shell game to free its

reporter from militant custody. Here's how Brian Ross (frequently the target for CIA information and misinformation) describes it:

The New York Times used a private security company with ties to the CIA to bribe Taliban guards as part of its seven month effort to gain the freedom of reporter David Rohde and two others taken hostage with him in Afghanistan, according to people involved in the case.

The bribes were reportedly paid in small amounts of only a few hundred dollars at a variety of locations where Rhode was held. It was not clear what role, if any, they may have played in Rohde's daring escape early Saturday.

The company, the Boston-based American International Security Corporation, AISC, also proposed a possible armed assault to free Rohde but called off those plans when Rohde was moved from Afghanistan into Pakistan where such an assault was deemed more difficult to pull off, the people said.

Though NY Magazine says there was an attempted raid.

So let's review. The NYT has an incendiary story about how PsyOp contracts have become the means by which someone—who, they don't know—has potentially illegally funneled money to people, like Clarridge, with a history of freelance spookery. And the means by which information collection in Afghanistan has become blurred with paramilitary activities.

But as it turns out, the NYT has itself paid said freelance spooks.

Don't get me wrong—this is an important story, and I'm sure the CIA, worried about Furlong encroaching its turf, is happy that NYT's CIA guy Mazzetti and Filkins have told it. But there

are more weird shell games going on here that
we're not getting a full picture of.