

The Secret War

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SOUTH POMFRET, Vt. -- In what may well be the largest expansion of covert action by the armed forces since the Vietnam era, the Bush administration has turned to what the Pentagon calls the "black world" to press the war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

The Defense Department is building up an elite secret army with resources stretching across the full spectrum of covert capabilities. New organizations are being created. The missions of existing units are being revised. Spy planes and ships are being assigned new missions in anti-terror and monitoring the "axis of evil."

The increasingly dominant role of the military, Pentagon officials say, reflects frustration at the highest levels of government with the performance of the intelligence community, law enforcement agencies and much of the burgeoning homeland security apparatus. It also reflects the desire of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to gain greater overall control of the war on terror.

Insulated from outside pressures, armed with matchless weapons and technology, trained to operate below the shadow line, the Pentagon's black world of classified operations holds out the hope of swift, decisive action in a struggle against terrorism that often looks more like a family feud than a war.

Coupled with the enormous effort being made throughout the government to improve and link information networks and databases, covert anti-terror operations promise to put better information in the hands of streamlined military teams that can identify, monitor and neutralize terrorist threats.

"Prevention and preemption are ... the only defense against terrorism," Rumsfeld said in May. "Our task is to find and destroy the enemy before they strike us."

The new apparatus for covert operations and the growing government secrecy associated with the war on terrorism reflect the way the Bush administration's most senior officials see today's world:

First, they see fighting terrorism and its challenge to U.S. interests and values as the 21st century equivalent of the Cold War crusade against communism. Second, they believe the magnitude of the threat requires, and thus justifies, aggressive new "off-the-books" tactics.

In their understandable frustration over continued atrocities such as the recent Bali attack, however, U.S. officials might keep two points in mind.

Though covert action can bring quick results, because it is isolated from the normal review processes it can just as quickly bring mistakes and larger problems. Also, the Pentagon is every bit as capable as the civilian side of the government when it comes to creating organization charts and bureaucracy that stifle creative thinking and timely action.

The development of the Pentagon's covert counter-terror capability has its roots in the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. The Army created a highly compartmentalized organization that could collect clandestine intelligence independent of the rest of the U.S. intelligence community and follow through with covert military action.

Known as the Intelligence Support Activity, or ISA, when it was established in 1981, this unit fought in drug wars and counter-terror operations from the Middle East to South America. It built a reputation for daring, flexibility and a degree of lawlessness.

In May 1982, Deputy Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci called the ISA "uncoordinated and uncontrolled." Though its freelance tendencies were curbed, the ISA continued to operate under different guises through the ill-starred U.S. involvement in Somalia in 1992 and was reportedly active in the hunt for Bosnian Serbs suspected of war crimes.

Today, the ISA operates under the code name Gray Fox. In addition to covert operations, it provides the war on terrorism with the kind of so-called "close-in" signals monitoring -- including the interception of cell phone conversations -- that helped bring down Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar.

Gray Fox's low-profile eavesdropping planes also fly without military markings. Working closely with Special Forces and the CIA, Gray Fox also places operatives inside hostile territory.

In and around Afghanistan, Gray Fox was part of a secret sphere that included the CIA's paramilitary Special Activities Division and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command.

These commands and "white" Special Forces like the Green Berets, as well as Air Force combat controllers and commandos of eight different nations report to a mind-boggling array of new command cells and coordination units set up after Sept. 11.

An Army brigadier general commands the Joint Interagency Task Force at Bagram air base north of Kabul to coordinate CIA, Defense Department and coalition forces in Afghanistan. A new Campaign Support Group has been established at Ft. Bragg, N.C. The Special Operations Joint Interagency Collaboration Center has been created in Tampa, Fla.

In Europe, the Joint Interagency Coordination Group handles information-sharing and logistical support with NATO. Hawaii's Pacific Command stood up a Joint Interagency Counter-Terrorist Group this summer.

Meantime, old commands are being morphed into new ones for the covert war. The two Joint Interagency Task Forces in the United States previously devoted to fighting drugs now have the war on terrorism as their highest priority.

The epicenter of the Pentagon's covert operations remains the North Carolina-based Joint Special Operations Command, often referred to as Delta Force. The super-secret command is still not officially acknowledged to exist. Its two-star commander, Army Maj. Gen. Dell L. Dailey, who spent much of the Afghan war in Oman, has no public biography.

Among Dailey's assets is a fleet of aircraft specially equipped for secret operations -- conventional and covert military planes and helicopters, and even former Soviet helicopters. The bulk of those craft, including the reconfigured Russian choppers, fly from airfields in Uzbekistan and from two Pakistani air bases, Shahbaz and Shamsi.

The Air Force and the CIA collect additional intelligence from unmanned Predator and Global Hawk drones. They also have low-profile reconnaissance assets that look like transport planes and operate under such code names as ARL-Low, Keen Sage, Scathe View and Senior Scout.

Not to be left out, the Navy's Gray Star spy vessel, reminiscent of the old Pueblo, captured by North Korea in 1968, now sweeps up sophisticated -- and obscure -- "measurements and signatures intelligence" to monitor the ballistic missile capabilities of Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

Even with all this, the Pentagon wants to expand covert capabilities.

Rumsfeld's influential Defense Science Board 2002 Summer Study on Special Operations and Joint Forces in Support of Countering Terrorism says in its classified "outbrief" -- a briefing drafted to guide other Pentagon agencies -- that the global war on terrorism "requires new strategies, postures and organization."

The board recommends creation of a super-Intelligence Support Activity, an organization it dubs the Proactive, Preemptive Operations Group, (P2OG), to bring together CIA and military covert action, information warfare, intelligence, and cover and deception.

Among other things, this body would launch secret operations aimed at "stimulating reactions" among terrorists and states possessing weapons of mass destruction -- that is, for instance, prodding terrorist cells into action and exposing themselves to "quick-response" attacks by U.S. forces.

Such tactics would hold "states/sub-state actors accountable" and "signal to harboring states that their sovereignty will be at risk," the briefing paper declares.

Never to be outdone in proposing hardware solutions, the Air Force is designing its own Global Response Task Force to fight the war on terrorism. The all-seeing, all-bombing Air Force envisions unmanned A-X aircraft capable of long-range, nighttime gunship operations and an M-X covert transport, as well as hypersonic and space-based conventional weapons capable of delivering a "worldwide attack within an hour."

Who says the arms race is over? Rumsfeld's science board warns against overemphasis on equipment even as it recommends more. Washington is well on its way to an arms race with itself.

And for those who worry that all these secret operations and aggressive new doctrines will turn the United States into the world's policeman, there is a ray of hope.

Rumsfeld is now the field marshal of the war on terrorism, but the Pentagon is also creating new layers of bureaucracy that may save it from itself. Not to mention the rest of us.

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