

Blackwater, torture and US imperialism

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On Wednesday, a jury of eight women and four men in a federal district court in Washington, DC convicted four Blackwater mercenaries for their role in the 2007 Nisour Square massacre. The jurors found one of the contractors guilty of murder and another three guilty of manslaughter for firing hundreds of rounds of ammunition and grenades at Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in a brutal operation that left 17 dead and another 20 wounded.

Coming seven years after the crimes were committed, the verdict is a welcome development. The jury's decision—which went against the expectations of the media and the political establishment—no doubt expressed the jurors' revulsion over the barbaric actions that were described in detail in the courtroom, including through the testimony of dozens of Iraqi eyewitnesses and victims. They were allowed to see for themselves the brutal reality of a war that was largely hidden from the American public.

This verdict is a reflection of a broader popular opposition in the United States to the crimes perpetrated by the American military and the legions of private mercenaries that have been hired to reinforce its operations all over the world.

However, the claim by officials in the Obama administration's Justice Department that the verdict represents, in the words of one of the chief prosecutors, "a resounding affirmation of the commitment of the American people to the rule of law," is part of a political whitewash and cover-up.

In fact, the actions of Blackwater employees—Nicholas Slatten (found guilty of murder) and Evan Liberty, Paul Slough and Dustin Heard (found guilty of manslaughter and using a machine gun to carry out a violent crime)—are the product of a deeper and more fundamental crime: the launching of the war of aggression against Iraq and the continuing eruption of imperialist violence of which this war was a

part.

Countless atrocities have been committed as part of these wars, some of which have come to light, while many more remain hidden: The systematic leveling of Fallujah in 2004 by US Marines, initiated in response to the killing of several Blackwater mercenaries and resulting in the deaths of well over 1,000 Iraqis; the Haditha massacre, in which a group of US Marines killed 24 unarmed Iraqis in November 2005, for which only one soldier was convicted of dereliction of duty; the incineration of a religious school in Pakistan by CIA drones in October 2006, killing at least 68 children; the massacre of 47 people attending a wedding party in Nangahar province, Afghanistan in July 2008, and a similar mass killing in Kandahar province that killed 63 only four months later...

The perpetrators of these crimes remain at large. They include top officials in the Bush administration (President Bush himself, former Vice President Dick Cheney, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of State Colin Powell and many others), who planned and launched a war on the basis of outright lies. They include top military and CIA officials, who carried out a war of terror against the peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan, employing torture and mass killings as an instrument of policy. They include the leaders of the Republican and Democratic Parties, who sanctioned wars that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. And they include leading personnel in the mass media, who worked to sell these wars to the American people.

Since coming into office in 2009, a central focus of the Obama administration has been to prevent any accountability for the crimes that have been committed—and continue to be committed—by the military and intelligence apparatus. The Democratic president and his key aides are among the many unindicted co-conspirators.

It is instructive to compare the jury decision on the Blackwater massacre to a hearing the day before in front of another district court judge in New York City. That case involves the ongoing attempts by the Obama administration, spanning six years, to block the release of 2,100 photos of torture carried out by the US military in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The White House has sought to keep the photos secret *en masse* on “national security” grounds—a rationale that it has also used to cover-up NSA spying, forced feeding of Guantanamo Bay inmates and other crimes. Judge Alvin Hellerstein has given the administration a December 12 deadline to provide specific reasons for withholding from public view each of the photographs.

According to a report yesterday in the WSWS, the torture photos “are said to be more disturbing than those released in 2004 showing the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib...They include soldiers pointing guns at the heads of detainees who are hooded and bound, soldiers beating detainees with their fists or objects, soldiers posing with groups of bound and restrained prisoners, soldiers posing with corpses, and, in at least one case, a female soldier pointing a broomstick at the rectum of a hooded detainee.”

The maneuvers of the Obama administration in the courtroom come at the same time as the White House continues its attempts to prevent the release of a Senate investigation into “medieval” torture, including “holding [detainees] under water until the point of death,” carried out by the CIA. Earlier this year, the CIA was caught spying on Senate staffers preparing the report, and the Obama administration has since worked with the spy agency to ensure that if anything is released, it will be heavily redacted.

According to human-rights lawyer Scott Horton, in an interview with *The Intercept*, “the battle plan” of CIA Director John Brennan and the Obama administration is to delay release of the CIA report until after the midterm elections in November. They hope that an anticipated victory in the Senate for the Republican Party will ensure that the report is permanently buried, without requiring the Democrats to perform this dirty deed themselves.

The reason for the White House’s determination to cover up the crimes of the Bush administration is clear enough. In the words of Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Torture, drone assassinations, massacres, extra-judicial killings—such are the methods of the American ruling class in asserting its interests all over the world. The Obama administration has continued and deepened the policies of its predecessor. It is currently escalating another war in the Middle East, while preparing new and even bloodier crimes. In Ukraine, it has worked with mercenaries embedded with right-wing and fascistic organizations as part of operations to assert US dominance in Eastern Europe. A recent document released by the US Army outlines a strategy of preventive war in every region of the world, singling out China and Russia as particular potential targets.

The Nisour Square massacre is not the exception, but the rule, not the product of a few “bad apples,” but the organic outcome of the criminality of American imperialism. Justice will not be served until those directing this policy at the highest levels of the military-state apparatus find themselves in a position similar to the convicted Blackwater mercenaries.



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