

C.I.A. Said to Use Outsiders to Put Bombs on Drones

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WASHINGTON — From a secret division at its North Carolina headquarters, the company formerly known as [Blackwater](#) has assumed a role in Washington's most important counterterrorism program: the use of remotely piloted [drones](#) to kill [Al Qaeda](#)'s leaders, according to government officials and current and former employees.

The division's operations are carried out at hidden bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the company's contractors assemble and load Hellfire missiles and 500-pound laser-guided bombs on remotely piloted Predator aircraft, work previously performed by employees of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#). They also provide security at the covert bases, the officials said.

The role of the company in the Predator program highlights the degree to which the C.I.A. now depends on outside contractors to perform some of the agency's most important assignments. And it illustrates the resilience of Blackwater, now known as Xe (pronounced Zee) Services, though most people in and outside the company still refer to it as Blackwater. It has grown through government work, even as it attracted criticism and allegations of brutality in Iraq.

A spokesman for the C.I.A. declined to comment for this article.

The New York Times reported Thursday that the agency hired Blackwater in 2004 as part of a secret program to locate and assassinate top Qaeda operatives.

In interviews on Thursday, current and former government officials provided new details about Blackwater's association with the assassination program, which began in 2004 not long after [Porter J. Goss](#) took over at the C.I.A. The officials said that the spy agency did not dispatch the Blackwater executives with a "license to kill." Instead, it ordered the contractors to begin collecting information on the whereabouts of Al Qaeda's leaders, carry out surveillance and train for possible missions.

"The actual pulling of a trigger in some ways is the easiest part, and the part that requires the least expertise," said one government official familiar with the canceled C.I.A. program. "It's everything that leads up to it that's the meat of the issue."

Any operation to capture or kill militants would have had to have been approved by the C.I.A. director and presented to the White House before it was carried out, the officials said. The agency's current director, [Leon E. Panetta](#), canceled the program and notified Congress of its existence in an emergency meeting in June.

The extent of Blackwater's business dealings with the C.I.A. has largely been hidden, but its public contract with the State Department to provide private security to American diplomats in Iraq has generated intense scrutiny and controversy.

The company lost the job in Iraq this year, after Blackwater guards were involved in [shootings in 2007](#) that left 17 Iraqis dead. It still has other, less prominent State Department work.

Five former Blackwater guards have been indicted in federal court on charges related to the 2007 episode.

A spokeswoman for Xe did not respond to a request for comment.

For its intelligence work, the company's sprawling headquarters in North Carolina has a special division, known as Blackwater Select. The company's first major arrangement with the C.I.A. was signed in 2002, with a contract to provide security for the agency's new station in Kabul, Afghanistan. Blackwater employees assigned to the Predator bases receive training at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada to learn how to load Hellfire missiles and laser-guided smart bombs on the drones, according to current and former employees, who asked not to be identified for fear of upsetting the company.

The C.I.A. has for several years operated Predator drones out of a remote base in Shamsi, Pakistan, but has secretly added a second site at an air base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, several current and former government and company officials said. The existence of the Predator base in Jalalabad has not previously been reported.

Officials said the C.I.A. now conducted most of its Predator missile and bomb strikes on targets in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region from the Jalalabad base, with drones landing or taking off almost hourly. The base in Pakistan is still in use. But officials said that the United States decided to open the Afghanistan operation in part because of the possibility that the Pakistani government, facing growing anti-American sentiment at home, might force the C.I.A. to close the one in Pakistan.

Blackwater is not involved in selecting targets or actual strikes. The targets are selected by the C.I.A., and employees at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., pull the trigger remotely. Only a handful of the agency's employees actually work at the Predator bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the current and former employees said.

They said that Blackwater's direct role in these operations had sometimes led to disputes with the C.I.A. Sometimes when a Predator misses a target, agency employees accuse Blackwater of poor bomb assembly, they said. In one instance last year recounted by the

employees, a 500-pound bomb dropped off a Predator before it hit the target, leading to a frantic search for the unexploded bomb in the remote Afghan-Pakistani border region. It was eventually found about 100 yards from the original target.

The role of contractors in intelligence work expanded after the Sept. 11 attacks, as spy agencies were forced to fill gaps created when their work forces were reduced during the 1990s, after the end of the cold war.

More than a quarter of the intelligence community's current work force is made up of contractors, carrying out missions like intelligence collection and analysis and, until recently, [interrogation](#) of terrorist suspects.

"There are skills we don't have in government that we may have an immediate requirement for," Gen. [Michael V. Hayden](#), who ran the C.I.A. from 2006 until early this year, said during a panel discussion on Thursday on the privatization of intelligence.

General Hayden, who succeeded Mr. Goss at the agency, acknowledged that the C.I.A. program continued under his watch, though it was not a priority. He said the program was never prominent during his time at the C.I.A., which was one reason he did not believe that he had to notify Congress. He said it did not involve outside contractors by the time he came in.

Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#), the California Democrat who presides over the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the agency should have notified Congress in any event. "Every single intelligence operation and covert action must be briefed to the Congress," she said. "If they are not, that is a violation of the law."

Mark Landler contributed reporting.