WASHINGTON — Duane R. Clarridge parted company with the Central Intelligence Agency more than two decades ago, but from poolside at his home near San Diego, he still runs a network of spies.

Over the past two years, he has fielded operatives in the mountains of Pakistan and the desert badlands of Afghanistan. Since the United States
Articles in this series are examining the secret expansion of the war against Al Qaeda and its allies.

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Jacquelyn Martin/Associated Press
Michael D. Furlong arranged Mr. Clarridge’s military contract.

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Hatching schemes that are something of a cross between a Graham Greene novel and Mad Magazine’s “Spy vs. Spy,” Mr. Clarridge has sought to discredit Ahmed Wali Karzai, the Kandahar power broker who has long been on the C.I.A. payroll, and planned to set spies on his half brother, the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, in hopes of collecting beard trimmings or other DNA samples that might prove Mr. Clarridge’s suspicions that the Afghan leader was a heroin addict, associates say.

Mr. Clarridge, 78, who was indicted on charges of lying to Congress in the Iran-contra scandal and later pardoned, is described by those who have worked with him as driven by the conviction that Washington is bloated with bureaucrats and lawyers who impede American troops in fighting adversaries and that leaders are overly reliant on mercurial allies.

His dispatches — an amalgam of fact, rumor, analysis and uncorroborated reports — have been sent to military officials who, until last spring at least, found some credible enough to be used in planning strikes against militants in Afghanistan. They are also fed to conservative commentators, including Oliver L. North, a compatriot from the Iran-contra days and now a Fox News analyst, and Brad Thor, an author of military thrillers and a frequent guest of Glenn Beck.

For all of the can-you-top-this qualities to Mr. Clarridge’s operation, it is a startling demonstration of how private citizens can exploit the chaos of combat zones and rivalries inside the American government to carry out their own agenda.

It also shows how the outsourcing of military and intelligence operations has spawned legally murky clandestine operations that can be at cross-purposes with America’s foreign policy goals. Despite Mr. Clarridge’s keen interest in undermining Afghanistan’s ruling family, President Obama’s administration appears resigned to working with President Karzai and his half brother, who is widely suspected of having ties to drug traffickers.
Charles E. Allen, a former top intelligence official at the Department of Homeland Security who worked with Mr. Clarridge at the C.I.A., termed him an “extraordinary” case officer who had operated on “the edge of his skis” in missions abroad years ago.

But he warned against Mr. Clarridge’s recent activities, saying that private spies operating in war zones “can get both nations in trouble and themselves in trouble.” He added, “We don’t need privateers.”

The private spying operation, which The New York Times disclosed last year, was tapped by a military desperate for information about its enemies and frustrated with the quality of intelligence from the C.I.A., an agency that colleagues say Mr. Clarridge now views largely with contempt. The effort was among a number of secret activities undertaken by the American government in a shadow war around the globe to combat militants and root out terrorists.

The Pentagon official who arranged a contract for Mr. Clarridge in 2009 is under investigation for allegations of violating Defense Department rules in awarding that contract. Because of the continuing inquiry, most of the dozen current and former government officials, private contractors and associates of Mr. Clarridge who were interviewed for this article would speak only on the condition of anonymity.

Mr. Clarridge declined to be interviewed, but issued a statement that likened his operation, called the Eclipse Group, to the Office of Strategic Services, the C.I.A.’s World War II precursor.

“O.S.S. was a success of the past,” he wrote. “Eclipse may possibly be an effective model for the future, providing information to officers and officials of the United States government who have the sole responsibility of acting on it or not.”

A Pentagon spokesman, Col. David Lapan, declined to comment on Mr. Clarridge’s network, but said the Defense Department “believes that reliance on unvetted and uncorroborated information from private sources may endanger the force and taint information collected during legitimate intelligence operations.”

Whether military officials still listen to Mr. Clarridge or support his efforts to dig up dirt on the Karzai family is unclear. But it is evident that Mr. Clarridge — bespectacled and doughy, with a shock of white hair — is determined to remain a player.

On May 15, according to a classified Pentagon report on the private spying operation, he sent an encrypted e-mail to military officers in Kabul announcing that his network was being shut down because the Pentagon had just terminated his contract. He wrote that he had to “prepare approximately 200 local personnel to cease work.”
In fact, he had no intention of closing his operation. The very next day, he set up a password-protected Web site, afpakfp.com, that would allow officers to continue viewing his dispatches.

**A Staunch Interventionist**

From his days running secret wars for the C.I.A. in Central America to his consulting work in the 1990s on a plan to insert Special Operations troops in Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein, Mr. Clarridge has been an unflinching cheerleader for American intervention overseas.

Typical of his pugnacious style are his comments, provided in a 2008 interview for a documentary now on YouTube, defending many of the C.I.A.’s most notorious operations, including undermining the Chilean president Salvador Allende, before a coup ousted him in 1973.

“Sometimes, unfortunately, things have to be changed in a rather ugly way,” said Mr. Clarridge, his New England accent becoming more pronounced the angrier he became. “We’ll intervene whenever we decide it’s in our national security interests to intervene.”

“Get used to it, world,” he said. “We’re not going to put up with nonsense.”

*Barclay Walsh contributed research.*

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