

JOHN BRENNAN'S OUTDATED DRONE SPEECH

The speech John Brennan gave today—purportedly offering a new level of transparency about our drone strikes—would have been more effective coming from someone else, delivered at a different time.

It would have been better for someone else to deliver this speech, because Brennan, a notable sieve of classified information, has no credibility talking about secrecy.

Again, there are some lines we simply will not and cannot cross because, at times, our national security demands secrecy. But we are a democracy. The people are sovereign. And our counterterrorism tools do not exist in a vacuum. They are stronger and more sustainable when the American people understand and support them. They are weaker and less sustainable when the American people do not. As a result of my remarks today, I hope the American people have a better understanding of this critical tool—why we use it, what we do, how carefully we use it, and why it is absolutely essential to protecting our country and our citizens.

All the past times when Brennan happily leaked classified information made it clear the Administration politicizes such claims to secrecy. So there's no reason for any person to take John Brennan's claims to secrecy seriously—he's not a credible messenger on that front. (But hell, at this point every invocation of secrecy might just be a reference to the Wizard of Oz.)

The timing undermines the message too. Brennan made it clear that his comments addressed only

strikes targeted at known individuals.

Broadly speaking, the debate over strikes targeted at individual members of al-Qa'ida has centered on their legality, their ethics, the wisdom of using them, and the standards by which they are approved.

[snip]

For example, when considering lethal force we ask ourselves whether the individual poses a significant threat to U.S. interests. This is absolutely critical, and it goes to the very essence of why we take this kind of exceptional action. We do not engage in lethal action in order to eliminate every single member of al-Qa'ida in the world. Most times, and as we have done for more than a decade, we rely on cooperation with other countries that are also interested in removing these terrorists with their own capabilities and within their own laws. Nor is lethal action about punishing terrorists for past crimes; we are not seeking vengeance. Rather, we conduct targeted strikes because they are necessary to mitigate an actual ongoing threat – to stop plots, prevent future attacks, and save American lives.

And what do we mean by a significant threat? I am not referring to some hypothetical threat—the mere possibility that a member of al-Qa'ida might try to attack us at some point in the future. A significant threat might be posed by an individual who is an operational leader of al-Qa'ida or one of its associated forces. Or perhaps the individual is himself an operative—in the midst of actually training for or planning to carry out attacks against U.S. interests. Or perhaps the individual possesses unique operational skills that

are being leveraged in a planned attack. The purpose of a strike against a particular individual is to stop him before he can carry out his attack and kill innocents. The purpose is to disrupt his plots and plans before they come to fruition.

Indeed, he was even asked how about signature strikes, to which Brennan responded he was only addressing targeted strikes.

But the government just resumed its practice of targeting patterns, rather than individuals. Why, if we just decided to stop showing this caution again, should we take comfort that we show this caution some of the time?

Though perhaps the detail that most discredited Brennan's claims came from a remarkably well timed outburst from a protestor, who interrupted Brennan to ask about the women and children our drones have killed; she named Abdulrahman al-Awlaki specifically. Once they had forcibly removed her, Brennan kept reading from his script where he had left off, reading these words:

More broadly, al-Qa'ida's killing of innocents—mostly Muslim men, women and children—has badly tarnished its image and appeal in the eyes of Muslims around the world. Even bin Laden and his lieutenants knew this. His propagandist, Adam Gadahn, admitted that they were now seen “as a group that does not hesitate to take people's money by falsehood, detonating mosques, [and] spilling the blood of scores of people.” Bin Laden agreed that “a large portion” of Muslims around the world “have lost their trust” in al-Qa'ida.

Killing women, children, and American teenagers seems to discredit everyone, whether they be terrorists or big powerful countries purportedly

exercising a lot of caution when killing those women, children, and American teenagers.

This speech shows the Administration is trying to do something about the trust such behavior has caused us to lose. But given that they've just re-upped signature strikes, it's not clear whether our government—as distinct from bin Laden—plan to address the underlying problem.