WHAT HAPPENED TO MEHSUD'S DIRTY BOMB?

As I alluded the other day, the story the NYT told about the targeting of Baitullah Mehsud differs in key respects from the story Joby Warrick told in his book, *The Triple Agent*. And since the discrepancy involves yet another unsubstantiated nuclear claim, and since Mehsud's targeting led directly to the double agent Humam Khalil al-Balawi's successful attack on Khost, the difference is worth mapping carefully.

First, the stories provide different explanations for how Mehsud came to be targeted. As I noted here, Warrick explained that we started targeting Mehsud after NSA intercepted a discussion about nukes.

> In May [2009] one such phrase, plucked from routine phone intercepts, sent a translator bolting from his chair at the National Security Agency's listening station at Fort Meade, Maryland. The words were highlighted in a report that was rushed to a supervisor's office, then to the executive floor of CIA headquarters, and finally to the desk of Leon Panetta, now in his third month as CIA director.
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> *Nuclear devices*.
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> Panetta read the report and read it again. In a wiretap in the tribal province known as South Waziristan, two Taliban commanders had been overheard talking about Baitullah Mehsud, the short, thuggish Pashtun who had recently assumed command of Paksitan's largest alliance of Taliban groups. It was an animated discussion about an acquisition of great importance, one that would ensure Mehsud's defeat of Pakistan's central government and elevate his

> standing among the world's jihadists. One of the men used the Pashto term *itami*, meaning "atomic" or "nuclear." Mehsud had *itami* devices, he said. (62-63)

Shortly thereafter, the government intercepted Mehsud's shura council debating whether Islam permitted the use of Mehsud's devices. Ultimately, the CIA concluded Mehsud had acquired a dirty bomb and started targeting him (including killing a close associate in hopes Mehsud would show up at his funeral; the Administration targeted the funeral but didn't get Mehsud).

The NYT provides a much vaguer story.

> The C.I.A. worried that Mr. Mehsud, whose group then mainly targeted the Pakistan government, did not meet the Obama administration's criteria for targeted killing: he was not an imminent threat to the United States. But Pakistani officials wanted him dead, and the American drone program rested on their tacit approval. The issue was resolved after the president and his advisers found that he represented a threat, if not to the homeland, to American personnel in Pakistan.

The description is not inconsistent with Warrick's description, which describes the US originally hesitating to target Mehsud and the Paksitanis rejoicing once we did.

> U.S. officials had long viewed the Mehsud clan as a local problem for the Pakistanis and were reluctant to agitate yet another militant faction that might cross into Afghanistan to attack U.S. troops.
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> The dirty bomb threat changed everything. Now the Obama administration was privately talking about targeting

> Mehsud, and Pakistani officials, for once, were wholeheartedly embracing the idea of a U.S. missile strike on their soil. (71)

Perhaps it was the dirty bomb that convinced the US Mehsud threatened US troops, as described by the NYT. Mind you, it's unclear whether an as-yet unconfirmed dirty bomb in the hand of a guy targeting Pakistan (the Pakistanis blamed him for Benazir Bhutto's death) really presented a threat to US troops. Perhaps it represented—like the insurgents in Yemen—a sufficient threat to our allied government we considered it a threat?

In any case, the NYT doesn't mention the dirty bomb. Maybe that's because no one ever found it.

> By the time the campaign [against the Pakistani Taliban] ended, the Pakistanis were sitting on a mountain of small arms and enough explosives to supply a madrassa full of suicide bombers. But they found no trace of a dirty bomb. The radiation detectors never sounded at all.
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> [snip]
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> There was no further talk of devices in the agency's intercepts, and back in Washington, Obama administration officials made no mention of the dirty bomb scare. Publicly, it was as though the threat never existed. (90)

Perhaps it didn't.

The NYT version differs from Warrick's on the approval process, too. Warrick's book describes then-CIA Director Leon Panetta repeatedly making the decision to target someone with drones, including in this instance. Again, however, the versions are different, but not incompatible, not least because Warrick describes Panetta getting the request for approval while at a

National Security Council meeting.

> At that precise moment Panetta was not in his CIA office but in downtown Washington, attending a meeting of the National Security Council at the White House. A little before 4:00 P.M. Washington time, he excused himself form the meeting and walked into the hallway to make an urgent call. He frowned as he listened, visibly worried. For several minutes he paced the floor with his cell phone to his ear, asking questions and going over details and options. By some accounts there were dozens of people staying in the same house as Mehsud, including mothers with children.
>
> [snip]
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> Panetta gave his consent. (88)

In the NYT version, Panetta relayed this information to Brennan (though the NYT portrays Panetta clearly identifying Mehsud's wife—Warrick reports we thought it might have been the double agent Balawi).

> Then, in August 2009, the C.I.A. director, Leon E. Panetta, told Mr. Brennan that the agency had Mr. Mehsud in its sights. But taking out the Pakistani Taliban leader, Mr. Panetta warned, did not meet Mr. Obama's standard of "near certainty" of no innocents being killed. In fact, a strike would certainly result in such deaths: he was with his wife at his in-laws' home.
>
> [snip]
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> Mr. Obama, through Mr. Brennan, told the C.I.A. to take the shot, and Mr. Mehsud was killed, along with his wife and, by some reports, other family members as well, said a senior intelligence official.

The discrepancy here may say as much about the sources and narrative of the two versions as anything else. Warrick describes the involvement of Panetta's Chief of Staff, Jeremy Bash, suggesting he might be a source for the story; and Warrick's story clearly presents the CIA viewpoint on these issues. Whereas the NYT story seems to be Brennan's orchestrated attempt to present Obama as the decision-maker.

But that's why this particular discrepancy is so interesting. If Panetta did get the call at a National Security Council meeting—at which Brennan and Obama were almost certainly present—how is it that the approval would have had to go through Brennan in this instance? And how is it that it's not clear, to several of the on-the-record sources of this story, that Obama gave the order directly?

These versions are different in interesting ways. But perhaps the only problem the differences present is to Brennan's narrative of Obama the decider.