

THE BAITULLAH MEHSUD PROPAGANDA

I have twice before noted some curious details about Joby Warrick's telling of the events leading up to Baitullah Mehsud's death. I noted that it is another example—like the Iraq War—of an attack justified by nukes in which the nukes were ultimately never found. And I noted there are some significant differences between the NYT's version of the story and Joby Warrick's. Daniel Klaidman apparently tells his own version in his book, which I hope to read next week.

Mind you, I'm not saying that any of these journalists is telling the complete story or even that any one journalist presents a story that is entirely true, I'm just noting that different Administration sources are feeding different stories.

Last week Ben Wittes transcribed the complete passage from Klaidman's book that describes how Rahm Emanuel decided to publicize Baitullah's killing for political benefit.

When they finally took Mehsud out in August 2009, [White House Chief of Staff Rahm] Emanuel celebrated. He had a hawkish side to him, having volunteered with the Israeli Defense Forces as a civilian during the 1991 Gulf War. *But above all, Emanuel recognized that the muscular attacks could have a huge political upside for Obama*, insulating him against charges that he was weak on terror. "Rahm was transactional about these operational issues," recalled a senior Pentagon official. "He always wanted to know 'how's this going to help my guy,' the president."

Though the program was covert, Emanuel pushed the CIA to publicize its covert successes. When Mehsud was killed, agency public affairs

officers anonymously trumpeted their triumph, leaking colorful tidbits to trusted reporters on the intelligence beat. Newspapers described the hit in cinematic detail, including the fact that Mehsud was blown up on the roof of his father-in-law's compound **while his wife was massaging his legs**. [italics Wittes', bold mine]

Here's how Warrick describes the killing in his book.

It was now 1:00 A.M. in the Paksitani village. Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Pakistani Taliban and chief protector of the Jordanian physician Humam al-Balawi, now lay on his back, resting as the IV machine dripped fluid into his veins. **At his feet, a pair of young hands, belonging not to a doctor, as the CIA supposed, but to his new wife, were massaging his swollen legs**. Barely aware of the buzzing distance drone, oblivious of the faint hissing of the missile as it cleaved the night air, he took a deep breath and looked up at the stars.

The rocket struck Mehsud where he lay, penetrating just below the chest and cutting him in two. A small charge of high explosives detonated, hurling his wife backward and gouging a small crater in the bricks and plaster at the spot where she had knelt. The small blast reverberated against the nearby hills, and then silence.

Overhead, the drones continued to hover for several minutes, camera still whirring. A report was hastily prepared and relayed to Panetta at the White House.

Two confirmed dead, no other deaths or serious injuries. Building still stands. [italics original, bold mine]

That is, while Klaidman is too polite to say it, this account is the one that derives from Rahm's decision to publicize Mehsud's killing. (Warrick sources these details to "three U.S. intelligence officials involved in the planning or oversight of the operation.")

Now, the NYT reveals that some sources say there were other civilian casualties.

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.

This doesn't mean Warrick's version of the drones originally reporting there were no other casualties is incorrect on that front—after all, drones don't provide perfect intelligence, contrary to what their boosters say, and it's possible that reports of other casualties came later from HUMINT. But if there were other casualties, it probably means many of these cinematic details about the pinpoint nature of the strike—Mehsud being cut in two and his wife being blown back but the strike leaving only a small crater—are not entirely true.

Again, I'm not saying any of these journalists are fully capturing the truth; what they're telling is what Administration sources have told them, and I doubt NYT and Klaidman's sources have any less of an agenda than Warrick's did. And note all the details about Mehsud's death distract from the way we tried to get to him by first killing one of his clan-members, then targeting that man's funeral, which Warrick does include; Warrick was reporting on our funeral targeting tactic before TBIJ did, to great controversy.

But I am noting that this cinematic picture of very controlled killing (even the killing of a young woman who was probably pushed into this marriage as a teenager) comes from a decision

from Rahm to push such picture for political advantage.

One more thing. The killing of Mehsud's commander and then Mehsud and his young wife and maybe her family, reportedly justified by intelligence on nukes that never materialized? Mehsud claimed direct credit for Faisal Shahzad's attempted attack on Times Square, and al-Balawi killed 7 CIA officers at Khost in direct revenge for the killing of Mehsud. These are some of the most serious attacks on us or attempts in recent years, both stemming from this attack on someone whose aspirations to attack us may never have been real beforehand.