

TURNING THE DRONE PROGRAM INTO A WEEKLY LAWN MAINTENANCE PROGRAM



Greg Miller has the first of what will be three

articles on Obama's efforts to institutionalize drone war in today's WaPo. After describing the Administration's efforts to systematize eliminating counterterrorist targets identified through a formalized process, he concludes with a reflection on how such systematization of the drone war might backfire.

In focusing on bureaucratic refinements, the administration has largely avoided confronting more fundamental questions about the lists. Internal doubts about the effectiveness of the drone campaign are almost nonexistent. So are apparent alternatives.

"When you rely on a particular tactic, it starts to become the core of your strategy – you see the puff of smoke, and he's gone," said Paul Pillar, a former deputy director of the CIA's counterterrorism center. "When we institutionalize certain things, including targeted killing, it does cross a threshold that makes it harder to cross back."

For a decade, the dimensions of the drone campaign have been driven by short-term objectives: the degradation of al-Qaeda and the prevention of a follow-on, large-scale attack on American soil.

Side effects are more difficult to measure – including the extent to which strikes breed more enemies of the United States – but could be more consequential if the campaign continues for 10 more years.

“We are looking at something that is potentially indefinite,” Pillar said. “We have to pay particular attention, maybe more than we collectively have so far, to the longer-term pros and cons to the methods we use.”

The entire article adds to the sense that drones have become a tactic in search of a strategy. Click through for Bruce Reidel’s analogizing of drones to mowing lawns.

Needless to say, the entire thing is worth reading.

I’m interested, as well, in a few of the details Miller provides.

He describes Brennan’s assumption of the Drone Assassination Czar role reported earlier this year, providing Brennan’s logic for why it’s a good thing he—rather than the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs—manages all the targeting.

Now the system functions like a funnel, starting with input from half a dozen agencies and narrowing through layers of review until proposed revisions are laid on Brennan’s desk, and subsequently presented to the president.

Video-conference calls that were previously convened by Adm. Mike Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have been discontinued. Officials

said Brennan thought the process shouldn't be run by those who pull the trigger on strikes.

"What changed is rather than the chairman doing that, John chairs the meeting," said Leiter, the former head of the NCTC.

One of the reasons Brennan is in the position he is is because he wasn't considered confirmable: his background with torture (and illegal wiretapping) made him politically toxic. And yet this guy, who hasn't been Senate confirmed and whose position evades almost all Congressional oversight, is the guy with power over life and death rather than a position over which Congress does exercise clear oversight?

And this detail—which echoes descriptions in earlier Miller stories as well as the Angler 2.0 story from earlier this year—haunts me.

Obama approves the criteria for lists and signs off on drone strikes outside Pakistan, where decisions on when to fire are made by the director of the CIA. But aside from Obama's presence at "Terror Tuesday" meetings — which generally are devoted to discussing terrorism threats and trends rather than approving targets — the president's involvement is more indirect.

"The president would never come to a deputies meeting," a senior administration official said, although participants recalled cases in which Brennan stepped out of the situation room to get Obama's direction on questions the group couldn't resolve.

There are a number of famous examples where top White House officials claim to consult the President on an issue but—history ends up showing—never did (I suspect the Plame outing is just one of many things Cheney did this with,

for example, and Al Haig used to do it too). Is there any reason we should believe that when Brennan steps out of the room he's actually consulting Obama, or that he's representing an apparently contentious debate faithfully? This is classic gatekeeping behavior, and on something as important as targeting, ought to concern everyone.

But it's not just Brennan we need to worry about. This article also talks about how central the National Counterterrorism Center has become to all this.

The administration has also elevated the role of the NCTC, which was conceived as a clearinghouse for threat data and has no operational capability. Under Brennan, who served as its founding director, the center has emerged as a targeting hub.

Other entities have far more resources focused on al-Qaeda. The CIA, JSOC and U.S. Central Command have hundreds of analysts devoted to the terrorist network's franchise in Yemen, while the NCTC has fewer than two dozen. But the center controls a key function.

"It is the keeper of the criteria," a former U.S. counterterrorism official said, meaning that it is in charge of culling names from al-Qaeda databases for targeting lists based on criteria dictated by the White House.

"The keeper of the criteria"! This concerns me, first of all, because NCTC is totally data driven. As the article's discussion of relative staffing suggests, NCTC's analysts aren't doing a whole lot more beyond datamining.

Moreover, while the context here is clearly foreign targeting, remember what happened earlier this year: NCTC got the authority to access all government databases—including social security databases or tax records—that it deems

to have a counterterrorist purpose. Which means some very personal data is part of the NCTC borg—along with inaccurate reports such as that Ford Motor Company is a terrorist suspect. That is, NCTC's are maximalist databases, not terrible accurate ones, and ones that include a lot of American citizens.

And that's the entity that's "the keeper of the criteria."

That's a problem.

The larger story clearly shows that the Administration is making drone killing a factory process, that needs to be fed with Muslim men like fuel. But it also reinforces the picture of a dangerous concentration of power in some highly unaccountable hands.