

# THE MORAL RECTITUDE ASSASSINATION CZAR

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Back in April and May, when John Brennan seized control of the drone targeting process purportedly in the interest of “showing the American public that al-Qaida targets are chosen only after painstaking and exhaustive debate,” an extensive NYT article—providing a picture of drone targeting as done before Brennan had consolidated control of it—described Brennan in religious terms. Among other descriptions offered of the guy in charge of drone assassinations, Harold Koh described him as a priest.

“If John Brennan is the last guy in the room with the president, I’m comfortable, because Brennan is a person of genuine moral rectitude,” Mr. Koh said. “It’s as though you had a priest with extremely strong moral values who was suddenly charged with leading a war.”

That same formulation—moral rectitude—shows up in Karen DeYoung’s profile of John Brennan today.

Some White House aides describe him as a nearly priest-like presence in their midst, with a moral depth leavened by a dry, Irish wit.

One CIA colleague, former general counsel John Rizzo, recalled his rectitude surfacing in unexpected ways. Brennan once questioned Rizzo’s use of the “BCC” function in the agency’s e-mail system to send a blind copy of a message to a third party without the primary recipient’s knowledge.

“He wasn’t joking,” Rizzo said. “He

regarded that as underhanded.”

That’s not all that surprising. After all, DeYoung may have talked to Koh for this article, or “moral rectitude” may just be a well rehearsed line inside the White House.

Having anyone question Rizzo’s ethics, however, is no evidence of moral rectitude.

Indeed, the article—and the last set of similar articles—suggests Brennan does not exercise the moral rectitude the anonymous White House sources claim. Last time around, after all, the articles told how Brennan shut down signature strikes and war in Yemen. But by the time the articles came out, he had approved them.

This time around, the article notes Brennan’s belief CIA shouldn’t be in the paramilitary business, but approved such activities operating out of Djibouti. He is about to approve more drones because Petraeus wants them rather than fixing our HUMINT weaknesses. Similarly, Brennan’s moral rectitude on Mali involvement has faded.

It’s in light of this false myth of Brennan’s moral rectitude that I want to look more closely at the most remarked lines of this story.

In them, an anonymous Administration official seemingly shows regret for the killing of Abdulrahman al-Awlaki (as I noted at the time, the big profiles in May both were utterly silent about Abdulrahman).

Two administration officials said that CIA drones were responsible for two of the most controversial attacks in Yemen in 2011 – one that killed American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, a prominent figure in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and a second a few days later that killed his 16-year-old son, also an American citizen. One of the officials called the second attack “an outrageous mistake. . . . They were going after the

guy sitting next to him.”

Note, last year, Greg Miller reported JSOC carried out the Abdulrahman strike.

On Sept. 30, Awlaki was killed in a missile strike carried out by the CIA under Title 50 authorities – which govern covert intelligence operations – even though officials said it was initially unclear whether an agency or JSOC drone had delivered the fatal blow. A second U.S. citizen, an al-Qaeda propagandist who had lived in North Carolina, was among those killed.

The execution was nearly flawless, officials said. Nevertheless, when a similar strike was conducted just two weeks later, the entire protocol had changed. The second attack, which killed Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, was carried out by JSOC under Title 10 authorities that apply to the use of military force.

The detail matters, because ongoing FOIAs for information on Abdulrahman’s death face a higher bar if CIA carried out the attack than if JSOC did (Brennan’s laughable claim to want DOD to carry out these strikes so they will be transparent is another of the instances in the story where his moral rectitude proves infinitely flexible).

But it’s the statement itself—“an outrageous mistake. . . . They were going after the guy sitting next to him”—that I find even more laughable. Partly it’s word choice. Who says “outrageous mistake”? Normally, you’d expect someone to say “horrible mistake,” because if it’s a “mistake” then there’s no intent or poor judgment to get outraged about (unless the targeting here, overseen by Brennan personally, was particularly incompetent—but that’s the kind of thing these Kill List articles assure us could never happen).

Besides, according to the rules exposed in the last set of Kill List articles, Abdulrahman qualifies as a legitimate target. He's a military aged male. Therefore, according to the rules of targeting, **hitting him wasn't a mistake at all**. He was a militant considered an acceptable target by the moral rectitude Assassination Czar.

And all that's before you consider that every other American killed by drones—Kamal Derwish, who purportedly died as “collateral damage” in the Abu Ali al-Harithi strike; Anwar al-Awlaki, who was first missed on December 24, 2009 in a strike purportedly targeting someone else, WikiLeaks evidence to the contrary notwithstanding (at a time when the Intelligence Community didn't consider Awlaki operational); and Samir Khan, who died as collateral damage in the Awlaki strike—were or were going to be collateral damage at one point. That's a lot of collaterally damaged inconvenient Americans.

Do people at the White House regret that they keep getting questions about the dead American teenager? Do they regret the almost nonexistent political fallout that has resulted? Do they feel a tinge of guilt that their rules make killing a teenager legal? Perhaps.

But the performance of morality in the Abdulrahman statement—like the moral rectitude rehearsed once again in a John Brennan article—is unconvincing.