AFTER TALKING ABOUT RESTORING TRUST IN CIA, PANETTA LIES ABOUT THE YOUNG WOMAN'S DRONE DEATH THAT LED TO KHOST

> "Every drone strike," [Baitullah Mehsud] would say, "brings me three or four new suicide bombers." —Joby Warrick, The Triple Agent

Leon Panetta is doing something of a media swan song this weekend, showing up on the Sunday shows and doing this interview with NPR.

Leon Panetta lies about the drone strike that killed Baitullah Mehsud and his wife

In it, he explains that President Obama picked him to run the CIA because he thought Panetta could restore trust in the CIA (around 4:00).

> He said the reason I'm talking to you is because I think you have the credibility and integrity to be able to restore trust in the CIA.

Yet even while talking about restoring trust, as Justin Elliott notes, NPR actually captures Panetta in a significant lie. In response to a question about civilian casualties from drone strikes, Panetta claims the CIA would not carry out a drone strike if there were women present (around 6:00).

> How did the civilian deaths and the risks of civilian deaths weigh on your decision making process?
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> Frankly, we made very clear that if

> there were any women or children we would not take the shot. I mean, that became a rule that we abided by.
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> That, if there women or children on site, the strike was called off?
>
> That's right.

Yet NPR follows up to note that in at least one strike, Panetta did know a woman was involved.

> There is at least one case where US officials, including Panetta, knew that a woman was present at a possible strike site, and the attack was ordered anyway.

Kudos to NPR for fact-checking Panetta thus far.

But it's worth examining the strike in question – the targeting of Baitullah Mehsud – in more detail (see my earlier posts on Mehsud's targeting here, here, and here). Because it illustrates how one particular drone strike led to an escalation of the war on terror.

The killing has been described at least three different times: in Joby Warrick's *The Triple Agent* (for which he pretty obviously relied on sources in the very immediate vicinity of Panetta; I include excerpts of Warrick's description of the killing here), Daniel Klaidman's *Kill or Capture*, and the NYT Drone Assassination Czar story. Given that Panetta is lying about it on his way out of government, it's worth drawing the several implications of the killing together in one place.

The killing of the young girl in the Pakistani tribal lands led directly to an escalation both of our drone war, but also of extremists' retaliation against us.

Yet another CIA operation justified by elusive nukes

As Warrick explains at great length, the Pakistanis had been asking us to target Mehsud

for some time, in part for his alleged role in the Benazhir Bhutto assassination. But we had no direct gripe with Mehsud and the Pakistani Taliban. We only decided to target Mehsud when we intercepted very vague rumors that led the CIA to wonder if he had materials for a dirty bomb.

> 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)
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> [snip]
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> 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.

> 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)

We never once found anything to confirm Mehsud had had nukes, nor was their any subsequent mention of them.

We started a war against this extremist leader – as we seem to start so many wars – because of thin intelligence that led us to believe he had nukes.

Killing a newlywed girl

As we'll see, the Obama Administration itself chose to publicize its "success" in this killing. Before we see that, though, here's how Warrick describes the young woman killed in the blast.

> At the edge of the village was a large, high-walled compound well known to im. It was the home of his father-in-law, Malik Ikramuddin, and the young girl who had recently become his second wife. Now thirty-five and the father of four girls from another marriage, Mehsud had decided to put serious effort into producing a male heir.

"Young girl," recently married. This is the woman – girl – who in the culture of the Pakistani tribal lands surely didn't get to choose to wed herself to a militant extremist. Yet we decided she was expendable in our efforts to get Mehsud.

Here's how the NYT described the approval process that resulted in this girl's death.

> 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.
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> 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.
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> "Many times," General Jones said, in similar circumstances, "at the 11th hour we waved off a mission simply because the target had people around them and we were able to loiter on station until they didn't."
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> But not this time. 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.

And, as Klaidman's account makes clear, Rahm Emanuel's response to killing this young girl and the man she had recently been married off to was to selectively leak information about the killing.

> When they finally took Mehsud out in August 2009, 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.”
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> 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. (88)

Warrick’s description is almost certainly the one CIA leaked on Rahm’s (and presumably, Panetta’s) orders (as this description makes clear, the CIA told Warrick – contrary to multiple other reports and the detail of the piece itself – that they thought the person on the roof of the building was Humam al-Balawi, the Jordanian doctor we believed at the time to have infiltrated Mehsud’s group on our behalf).

> It was now 1:00 A.M. in the Pakistani 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 of a distant 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 starts.
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> 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.

As he walks out the door, this is what Panetta is lying about. The CIA had incredibly detailed information about what was going on on that rooftop. They also knew Ikramuddin's other family members were below, including other women and their children. And yet the CIA – on Obama's word, at least if we believe John Brennan really consulted him on this kill – shot anyway.

We escalated the drone war immediately after this killing

Both Klaidman and Warrick describe the central role that Panetta had in the days following this kill in winning the CIA permission to use more toys in Pakistan.

Warrick describes it this way:

> Panetta had little time to dwell on the images [of Mehsud's death]. That week his staff was caught up in the drafting of a proposal that he would deliver up to the White House in the coming days.
>
> [snip]
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> By the late summer and early fall Panetta and his team finalized the detailed plan the director would present to the president and his National Security Council, which was in the middle of a months-long review of its Afghanistan strategy. Panetta had a long wish list, but the lead item was the most critical one: more robot

> planes—lots of them. Not just Predators, but the newer more powerful Reaper aircraft, along with operators and hardware to support them.
>
> [snip]
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> When it came time to make his case, Panetta made the trip to the White House to deliver his pitch to President Obama in person.
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> “Mr. President,” he began, “in order to really accomplish our mission, these are the things I need.” He proceeded to describe al-Qaeda’s resilience in the tribal region and his plan for ratcheting up the pressure, denying the terrorists even the smallest space to hide or regroup.
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> Obama looked at Panetta throughfully for a moment and turned to his aides.
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> “We’re going to do what Leon wants,” he said. (89-92)

Klaidman describes it this way:

> Though initially skeptical of Panetta’s appointment as CIA director, agency veterans learned to appreciate his close ties to Obama. In October 2009 Panetta brought a CIA wish list of counterterrorism requests to a White House Situation Room meeting. He asked Obama for ten items, thinking he might get half of them. At the end of the meeting, Obama said: ” The CIA gets what it wants.” Panetta got everything, including more Predator drones, authority to go after larger “target boxes” in Pakistan (the designated areas in the trial regions where the CIA was permitted to oeprate), and increased resources for the agency’s secret paramilitary forces. (121)

There's no clear proof that the CIA got what it wanted **because** it succeeded in hunting down Mehsud and his wife (after having targeted a funeral), because Rahm this "muscular attack" had a "huge upside" for Obama. But it did immediately follow it.

The two attacks avenging Mehsud

But it's fairly clear that Mehsud's death led the Pakistani Taliban to escalate.

Indeed, two of the most serious attacks on the US in recent years – Humam al-Balawi's successful attack on Khost in December 2009 and Faisal Shahzad's unsuccessful attempt to bomb Times Square in May 2010 – were both reportedly trained by and vengeance for Mehsud's killing. Balawi said so in his martyrdom video.

> Al-Balawi then continues alone: "This itishhadi [martyrdom-seeking attack] will be the first of the revenge against the Americans." After additional declarations of revenge by al-Balawi, MEHSUD resumes speaking in Pashtu, explaining the motive for the upcoming suicide attack by al-Balawi, that is the death of the former emir of the TTP, Baitullah Meshud [sic] which MESHUD [sic] attributes to the Americans.

As did Shahzad.

> In the video, Shahzad praises Baitullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban leader killed in a U.S. drone strike in August of last year, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq who died at the hands of U.S. led-troops in 2006, as martyrs, Al-Arabiya said.
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> "The attack on the United States will be a revenge for all the mujahedeen and oppressed Muslims," Shahzad said in the tape, according to Al-Arabiya. "Eight years have passed since the Afghanistan war and you shall see how the Muslim war

> has just begun and how Islam will spread across the world."

I'm certainly not saying the chain of violence set off by US' response to thin allegations of a dirty bomb excuse the actions of Balawi and Shahzad. But they are clearly the same chain of violence.

Panetta presumably has two reasons to lie about having okayed the killing of a young Pakistani bride. There's the legal liability, of course, particularly for an attack that Rahm decided to selectively leak, making the secrecy protecting the decision weaker. But there's also our own moral high ground that is sacrificed, when you realize the young girls who've been killed along the way.