

OBAMA'S FINGER IS ON THE TRIGGER EXCEPT WHERE IT MATTERS

Update: In his speech, Obama took clear responsibility for killing Awlaki.

And as President, I would have been derelict in my duty had I not authorized the strike that took out Awlaki.

Daniel Klaidman remains the Administration's go-to guy for stories that report facts that contradict the spin he gives them. Today's installment explains that Obama insisted on retaining direct say over DOD drone strikes in part to ensure we don't get embroiled in new wars.

Obama wanted to assume the moral responsibility for what were in effect premeditated government executions. But sources familiar with Obama's thinking say he also wanted to personally exercise supervision over lethal strikes away from conventional battlefields to avoid getting embroiled in new wars.

But at the same time reports that Obama didn't exercise direct control over those strikes – in Pakistan and, starting in 2011, in Yemen – that have threatened to embroil us in new wars (and indeed, in the case of our strikes on the Pakistani Taliban, led directly to terrorist attacks on the US as well as the Khost attack).

While Obama had broadly signed off on the CIA's targeted killing program through a presidential finding for covert action, he did not authorize individual killings except in rare instances.

Effectively, by the time Obama overruled the

military in the fight Klaidman portrays in this piece last year, all of the strikes away from battlefields were conducted by the CIA, the strikes Obama apparently took no moral responsibility for.

Klaidman's report includes another laugh, one which undermines the central Administration claim that today's speech will represent new drone guidelines.

Lethal force can only be used against targets who represent a "continuing, imminent threat," and where "capture is not feasible," Holder said in his letter. It is unclear whether that would signal an end to the controversial practice of "signature strikes," where groups of suspected terrorists have been targeted even though their identities were not known. (The tactic is believed to have led to significant civilian casualties, while at the same time increasing the number of high level al Qaeda members who were killed.) One senior Obama administration official said the question of signature strikes, sometimes referred to morbidly as "crowd killing," has yet to be resolved.

I guess my earlier suggestion that the word "ongoing" will be defined so broadly as to allow a great number of problematic drone strikes was correct: it apparently might even include signature strikes.

But ultimately, this is the funniest thing about this perfectly timed advertisement that on drones Obama is (yes, Klaidman uses this term) "the decider." Klaidman's headline (one he likely didn't choose) is,

Obama: I Make the Drone Decisions

His closing two sentences are,

Obama won't be declaring the end of the

war anytime soon. And that is why his
finger will still be on the trigger.

Yet the day before this obviously sanctioned story, Obama's Attorney General sent out a letter that shielded the President from all responsibility for the decision to kill an American citizen. Again, maybe Obama will change this trend today by taking responsibility for personally ordering the execution of Anwar al-Awlaki. But it seems as though, even as the Administration boasts of "unprecedented transparency," they still want to legally protect one of the most important facts about drone killing.