

THE “KILL LIST” IS A SHINY OBJECT

I recognize the term “Kill List” has some political advantages. It’s a concise way to convey the cold brutality of our use of drones. Launching a petition for a Do Not Kill list—on the White House’s own website!—is a clever use of social media.

But the “Kill List” is a shiny object.

That’s because it propagates the myth that everyone we’re killing is a known terrorist. It propagates the myth that the outdated vetting process John Brennan wants to publicize to convince the American public we use a very deliberative process before killing people with drones covers all drone killings. It propagates the myth that the government plans out each and every drone strike so thoroughly as to have the President sign off on it.

Mr. Obama is the liberal law professor who campaigned against the Iraq war and torture, and then insisted on approving every new name on an expanding “kill list,” poring over terrorist suspects’ biographies on what one official calls the macabre “baseball cards” of an unconventional war.

It propagates the myth that the only innocents killed in drone strikes—19 year old Yemeni farmer Nasser Salim killed in the Fahd al-Quso drone strike, the girl Baitullah Mehsud had just married, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki—had the poor judgment to stand next to one of the named people on one of America’s Kill Lists.

The reference to and focus on a Kill List hides precisely the most controversial use of drones outside of Afghanistan: the targeting of patterns, not people.

There is absolutely no reason to believe, for

example, that Obama—or even John Brennan—knew the identity of the up to 8 civilians who were killed by a drone in Jaar, Yemen, on May 15. All anyone knew about them, according to reporting, is that they ran out after an earlier drone strike to look at the impact site. Boom! They were never on any Kill List, but they are nonetheless just as dead as Quso is.

At precisely the moment the press reported the White House had embraced signature strikes in Yemen and pulled control of those strikes into the White House, John Brennan rolled out a propaganda campaign to focus on the deliberation that goes into the Kill List—that is, into drone killings not covered by the new signature strike policy.

The effort, very clearly, is an attempt to distract attention from those drone killings that don't involve the kind of deliberation so carefully portrayed by the NYT.

A shiny object. One that is working.