

THE COMMERCIAL FOR ~~JOHN BRENNAN'S~~ ~~SIGNATURE STRIKE~~ ~~DRONE SHOP TADS~~

Between them, the NYT and the Daily Beast published over 10,000 words on Obama's drone assassination program yesterday. Both stories rolled out the new acronym the Administration wants us to use: terrorist-attack-disruption strikes, or TADS. Neither of them, in those over 10,000 words, once mentioned Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, Anwar al-Awlaki's 16 year old American citizen son also killed in a drone strike last year.

And while both stories break important new ground and challenge the Administration's narrative in key ways, the prioritization of TADS over Abdulrahman in them is a pretty clear indication of the success with which the Administration pushed a certain agenda in these stories.

As I suggested at the end of this post, I think John Brennan hoped to use them to reframe recent changes to the drone program to make them more palatable.

Drone Strikes before They Got Worse

Before I lay out the new spin these stories offer on the signature strikes and vetting process rolled out last month, let's recall what was included in the drone program before these recent changes, in addition to the killing of a 16-year old American citizen.

According to the NYT, the Administration assumed that, "people in an area of known terrorist activity, or found with a top Qaeda operative, are probably up to no good" and therefore all military age males in a strike zone could be targeted. A former senior counterterrorism official calls earlier drone targeting, "guilt

by association.” Of signature strikes in Pakistan, a senior (apparently still-serving) official joked “that when the C.I.A. sees ‘three guys doing jumping jacks,’ the agency thinks it is a terrorist training camp.” And one of Obama’s top political advisors, David Axelrod, was attending targeting meetings, injecting a political taint on the program.

Even with all of that, these stories don’t explain how the intense vetting process they describe resulted in the al-Majala strike that made Jeh Johnson think about going to Catholic confession and “shook” John Brennan and President Obama. Or, of course, how we came to kill a 16 year old American citizen.

So all of that was in place before the recent changes to the drone assassination program made it worse. Don’t worry, though, it’s TADS now.

With all that in mind—Abdulrahman and the guilt by association and the three guys doing jumping jacks—let’s look at how these stories reframe signature strikes in Yemen and White House consolidation of the vetting.

Assassination Czar John Brennan’s Drone Shop

Consider the way the articles describe the targeting process. The NYT—relying on a single source, “an administration official who has watched [Obama] closely”—describes a very aggressive vetting process led by the DOD, then nods to a “parallel” process at CIA in countries where it leads the vetting.

The video conferences are run by the Pentagon, which oversees strikes in those countries, and participants do not hesitate to call out a challenge, pressing for the evidence behind accusations of ties to Al Qaeda.

“What’s a Qaeda facilitator?” asked one participant, illustrating the spirit of the exchanges. “If I open a gate and you drive through it, am I a facilitator?” Given the contentious discussions, it

can take five or six sessions for a name to be approved, and names go off the list if a suspect no longer appears to pose an imminent threat, the official said. A parallel, more cloistered selection process at the C.I.A. focuses largely on Pakistan, where that agency conducts strikes.

The nominations go to the White House, where by his own insistence and guided by Mr. Brennan, Mr. Obama must approve any name. He signs off on every strike in Yemen and Somalia and also on the more complex and risky strikes in Pakistan – about a third of the total.

Since for the most part, DOD has managed the Yemen and Somalia strikes, while CIA managed the Pakistan ones, this conflates the vetting for personality strikes targeted at known people and the signature strikes the CIA has targeted against men doing jumping jacks in Pakistan. Somehow, al-Majala and Abdulrahman still got through that vetting process, but the exhaustive DOD one was, for the most part, far more rigorous than the CIA one.

Now compare that description of the DOD vetting process with the one the AP gave on May 21, which it says is “mostly defunct.”

The previous process for vetting them, now mostly defunct, was established by Mullen early in the Obama administration, with a major revamp in the spring of 2011, two officials said.

[snip]

Under the old Pentagon-run review, the first step was to gather evidence on a potential target. That person’s case would be discussed over an interagency secure video teleconference, involving the National Counterterrorism Center and the State Department, among other agencies. Among the data taken into

consideration: Is the target a member of al-Qaida or its affiliates; is he engaged in activities aimed at the U.S. overseas or at home?

If a target isn't captured or killed within 30 days after he is chosen, his case must be reviewed to see if he's still a threat. [my emphasis]

That is, that free-ranging discussion, the process by which targets could come off the list as well as get put on it? At least according to the AP, it is now defunct—or at least “less relevant.” And there's little chance the AP is wrong about the change, given that after it initially reported Brennan's seizure of the process, a senior Administration official responded to it, acknowledging the change.

One senior administration official argues that Brennan's move adds another layer of review that augments rather than detracts from the Pentagon's role.

In other words, the description the NYT offers appears to be outdated, describing a process that recently became less deliberative.

Daniel Klaidman's description, which focuses closely on the important role James Cartwright played in the deliberative process, must also be outdated, given that Cartwright retired in August. Indeed, one (not entirely convincing) explanation the AP offers for the change in vetting is the retirement of Mike Mullen, who left in September, and the comparative disinterest of Mullen's replacement, Martin Dempsey.

As detailed as these stories are, then, it appears they don't portray the vetting process as it currently exists, in which Brennan's staffers get recommendations from other agencies rather than letting this larger group debate targets.

So understand what appears to have happened. In April, Brennan became the Assassination Czar, taking over the targeting process. Several weeks later, someone (I'm assuming in JSOC) leaked that fact to the AP, and as the story evolved the White House tried to put a good spin on it. And yet neither the exhaustive, sanctioned profile in the NYT nor Daniel Klaidman's book (which presumably was already substantially completed) included a description of the updated vetting process.

Which makes this line, from the AP, purportedly explaining the reason for the change in vetting process, all the more telling.

With Dempsey less involved, Brennan believed there was an even greater need to draw together different agencies' viewpoints, showing the American public that al-Qaida targets are chosen only after painstaking and exhaustive debate, the senior administration official said. [my emphasis]

The sentence doesn't make any sense (or didn't, until these other two stories came out). It consists of three apparent non sequiturs. Moreover, by moving targeting deeper into the White House, Brennan made the process less transparent, not more. Yet even as he was grasping control of the process (and other entities, presumably, were leaking that fact), he was claiming this was all about "showing the American public that al-Qaida targets are chosen only after painstaking and exhaustive debate." He hid the process even as he expressed an interest in telling the public a pretty tale about it.

And then two long profiles of the drone program came out.

The Assassination Czar's Signature Strikes

With that in mind, consider how these two stories treat signature strikes in Yemen, the other change rolled out as Brennan moved

targeting into the White House.

As I mentioned, the NYT actually conflates the CIA's signature strikes in Pakistan with other strikes in Yemen and Somalia (even while showing some sources mocking the signature strikes). That is, not only does it apparently present an outdated version of the vetting story, but it also ignores the other big change in the drone program.

Not so Klaidman, who ends his piece with a discussion of the change (after having, earlier, shown Obama's reluctant embrace of signature strikes in Pakistan, along with Obama's—rather, Brennan's, as portrayed—refusal to get involved in a Yemen “campaign”). Following a description showing how Obama's obsession with Anwar al-Awlaki ended in his death (but of course with no mention of Awlaki's son), Klaidman shows that that personality strike did not do a damn thing to bring stability to Yemen.

And the shadow wars continued. Throughout 2011, Obama's basic strategy held: he approved missions that were surgical, often lethal, and narrowly tailored to fit clearly defined U.S. interests. But even as Awlaki and others were taken out, Yemen fell further into chaos, and AQAP gained more and more territory—even threatening the strategic port city of Aden. It looked like the military's dire warnings were becoming a reality.

By 2012 Obama was getting regular updates on a Saudi double agent who'd managed to penetrate AQAP. He had volunteered to be a suicide operative for al-Asiri, AQAP's master bomb maker, and instead delivered the latest underwear-style explosive device to his handlers. By then the military and CIA were pushing again for signature-style strikes, but they'd given them a new name: terrorist-attack-disruption strikes, or TADS. And this time, after

resisting for the first three years of his presidency, Obama gave his approval.

The White House was worried that Yemeni forces were collapsing under the brutal AQAP assault. The more territory AQAP controlled, the more training camps they could set up, and the easier it would be to plot and plan attacks against the United States and its interests. Obama concluded that he had no choice but to defend the Yemeni Army against a common enemy. "They are decapitating Yemeni soldiers and crucifying them," one senior administration official said in justifying the American escalation. "These are murderous thugs, and we are not going to stand idly by and allow these massacres to take place."

In the spring of 2012, the United States carried out more drone attacks in Yemen than in the previous nine years combined—dating all the way back to when the CIA conducted its first such operation.

While Klaidman intersperses the UndieBomb sting in his discussion, the "more training camps they could set up, and the easier it would be to plot and plan attacks against the United States and" is secondary to the more immediate reason Brennan embraced signature strikes in Yemen: because the Yemeni military was getting badly beaten by AQAP.

These signature strikes, then, are not primarily about protecting the US. Rather, they're about fighting a common enemy (and implicitly, then, also fighting insurgents who have allied with AQAP but are not part of it).

That detail is important not just because it reveals how deeply we might get sucked into this war. It also explains the conflicting reporting about whether just the CIA or both the CIA and DOD wanted these signature strikes, as well as

why Brennan would have to de-emphasize the previously rigorous DOD vetting. The AP describes how the CIA dodges restrictions in international law on civilians doing the killing this way.

By law, the CIA can target only al-Qaida operatives or affiliates who directly threaten the U.S. JSOC has a little more leeway, allowed by statute to target members of the larger al-Qaida network.

In Yemen, the CIA doesn't have the excuse it uses in Pakistan, that insurgents might cross the border into Afghanistan and target our troops there, and because of that constitute an imminent threat. As Klaidman almost lays out, hitting low-level AQAP fighters, much less insurgents with no formal tie to AQAP, is not about protecting America from an imminent threat, but fighting an enemy we share with the Yemeni government.

And so you need to find a way to get DOD to target three men doing jumping jacks, these insurgents fighting the Yemeni government. One part of that is embracing signature strikes in Yemen. The other part is making sure DOD doesn't do the same kind of vetting of targets they used to do.

The Saudi Order-a-Plot

Which brings me to the element that Klaidman, alone among traditional journalists, put into the proper chronological context. The Saudis dial up a sting with an agent of theirs they've had embedded for months if not years. And only then—almost immediately thereafter—does Brennan fully adopt the Assassination Czar role so as to fight our common enemy, AQAP. The Saudi sting provides the cover—the “imminent threat” to the US—that we need legally to start targeting insurgents.

Which brings me to this acronym the NYT and Klaidman unquestioningly repeat. “Terrorist-attack-disruption strikes.”

The propagandist goal of the name is clear: to rename the process by which we target patterns of behavior—three men doing jumping jacks, a guy opening a gate, all the military-aged men in the vicinity of extremists—and with that name pretend not just that everyone we're hitting is an actual terrorist rather than an insurgent or a military-aged baker in the vicinity or even a terrorist's wife and kids, but also that everyone we're hitting is actively involved in conducting terrorist plots.

Not even our personality strikes—strikes targeted at named individuals vetted by DOD's mostly defunct process—consisted exclusively of disrupting active terrorist attacks. And the signature strikes in Yemen—pretty obviously targeted at insurgents whose animus against the US has everything to do with us propping up a dictator and little to do with an ambition to directly target the US—are even less about disrupting terrorist attacks.

Ah well, thanks to that conveniently timed Saudi-managed plot, the Administration seems to have gotten journalists to adopt an obviously propagandistic name with no question.

According to the AP, John Brennan set out to show—or rather claim to—the American public that al-Qaida—or rather Yemeni AQAP and insurgent and men in the vicinity—targets are chosen only after painstaking and exhaustive debate, even while he had just minimized this debate.

This new, patently false acronym, is part of that.