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How the CIA Sold Obama on Counterinsurgency by Drone Assassination

New Leaked WikiLeaks CIA Document

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December 23, 2014

Last week, WikiLeaks released a June 2009 CIA report on “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency: Making High-Value Targeting Operations an Effective Counterinsurgency Tool.” The report is classified secret and labeled “NoForn,” designating that it should not be distributed to non US nationals.

The *Washington Post*, ABC News, and other news outlets stress the report’s findings that targeted assassinations had limited impacts on Taliban targets. While this leaked report does criticize the effectiveness of some High-Value Target (HVT) assassination operations, such characterizations mistake the CIA’s argument that not all counterinsurgency problems can be solved with targeted assassinations as an argument against such operations. Far from dismissing HVT operations, the report advocates them in select conditions.

What the *Post* and others miss is the role this CIA report played in larger conversations about counterinsurgency strategies among members of the CIA, Pentagon, Congress, White House, and corporate military profiteers. In 2009, these conversations focused not only on the roles counterinsurgency should play in warzones, but whether this counterinsurgency should be based

on soft power models (providing needed services, etc.) or hard power models (like Project Phoenix in Vietnam, or JSOC's targeted assassination programs in Iraq). While this leaked document is only a single report, it provides a view into the types of intelligence analysis that informed President Obama's rapid increased use of CIA HVT drone operations targeting individuals, including American citizens, in Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

This 18-page CIA report reads like a Harvard International Relations dissertation proposal—an observation more about audience, than author—as it reviews data on past HVT programs, weighing the “positive and negative implications of targeted assassinations” in select insurgency campaigns around the world. High-Value Targeting refers to “focused operations against specific individuals or networks whose removal or marginalization should disproportionately degrade an insurgent group's effectiveness. The criteria for designating high-value targets will vary according to factors such as the insurgent group's capabilities, structure, and leadership dynamics and the government's desired outcome.”

The report acknowledged past HVT operations' failures. But the CIA report sorted past failures within a typological system claiming to the new President that the Agency understood past failures. The report made CIA understanding of past failures an implicit feature of support for new HVT operations. This report's identified variables contributing to the success or failure of HVT operations included: the degree of insurgents' organizational centralization, level of succession planning among insurgents, level of popular local support for insurgents, the importance of charismatic leaderships in a particular insurgency, how egalitarian an insurgency's structure, insurgents' access to sanctuary, etc. The report implied that controlling for such variables increased the positive counterinsurgency outcomes from these killings. This was to be a new science of smart killing.

Using a crudely designed comparative social science model to advocate a select assassination policy, the report identified structural factors contributing to whether or not targeted assassinations may or may not significantly contribute to counterinsurgency goals. For example, the CIA argued that because the structural organization of the Taliban “blends a top-down command system with an egalitarian Afghan tribal structure,” targeted assassinations may be of little strategic value, because of the relative ease with which assassinated individuals could be replaced. The Taliban's organizational structure was contrasted with that of the Shining Path, which was described as “highly centralized and based on a cult of personality,” which was significantly weakened after the capture of its senior leadership in 1992.

The identity of the author(s) of “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency” is unknown, but some philosophical roots of the report are discernable. There are clear similarities, including overlapping case studies and philosophical approach, to the work of Dr. Steven Metz. Dr. Metz is Director of Research, and Research Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, and his 2008 RAND report on “Strategic Decapitation: The Dynamics of High Value Targeting in Counterinsurgency” is cited heavily in the report. The report aligns with Dr. Metz's calculating approach to HVT operations as expressed in his July 2009 comments in the *National Journal*, “that high value targeting or strategic decapitation is difficult and dangerous does not mean that we must eschew [it]. Only that we should do it carefully, with foresight, and with the sadness that the world is such a dangerous place.”

The report provides brief just-so stories encapsulating insurgent campaigns in Afghanistan (2001-present), Algeria (1954-62), Colombia (2002-present), Iraq (2004-present), Israel (1972 to present), Peru (1980-1998), Northern Ireland (1969-98), Sri Lanka (1983-2009), and unspecified operations in Chechnya, Libya, Pakistan and Thailand. The narrative summarizes how some of these HVT programs worked and others failed. Admitting past failures, the report concludes that the Agency's review of these,

“high-value targeting (HVT) programs worldwide suggests that HVT operations can play a useful role when they are part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy. HVT operations are most likely to contribute to successful counterinsurgency outcomes when governments decide on a desired strategic outcome before beginning HVT operations, analyze potential effects and shaping factors, and simultaneously employ other military and nonmilitary counterinsurgency instruments.”

The report's identified positive effects of these assassinations includes such things as “eroding insurgent effectiveness” and annihilating or fragmenting local resistance groups, forcing local groups to abandon resistance operations, and “strengthening [local] government morale and support.”

Identified negative side effects of HVT operations included the possibility of “altering insurgent strategy or organization in ways that favor the insurgents, strengthening an armed group's bond with the population, radicalizing an insurgent group's remaining leaders, creating a vacuum into which more radical groups can enter, and escalating or deescalating a conflict in ways that favor the insurgents.” Some of the press reports misread these HVT disclaimers as failure warnings, misunderstanding that these warnings apply to very specific types of circumstances, not all HVT operations. These admissions of failure should not be heard as CIA warnings against HVT assassinations, they should be heard just like the fine print quickly read by the smooth talking voice in a pharmaceutical advertisement, coming after a slow articulate pitch promising a clearer Presidential complexion in a world without pesky insurgents, with these sort of warnings quickly glossing over the unlikely event of a water landing, explosive diarrhea, or the sudden unintentional creation or strengthening of groups like ISIL.

Two matrixes illustrating the report's basic theoretical argument appears on the final pages of the report. One of these is a color chart summarizing “High-Value Targeting in Counterinsurgency Operations: Selected Case Studies” listing attributes of successful and failed HVT campaigns. This matrix lists attributes of “HVT Program's Contribution to Counterinsurgency to Date,” and ranks nine historical “conflict/ high-value targeting programs” that achieved high (Peru-Shining Path, 1980-1999; Columbia FARC 2002-present, Northern Ireland-IRA, 1969-1998), moderate (Iraq-al-Qa'ida in Iraq, 2004-present) or limited (Algeria-NLF, 1954-1962; Afghanistan-Taliban, 2001-present; Sri Lanka, LTTE, 1983-2009) success. The top of the matrix listed successful HVT operations, and the failures appear at the bottom. The horizontal matrix reports the following variables for each of these operations: degree of centralization, level of succession planning and bench strength, level of visibility, life cycle stage, level of popular support, access to sanctuary; providing a visible identification of the attributes of past HVT operations' successes and failures.

The report's embedded thesis implicitly argued that High Value Targeting assassination campaigns have made important contributions to *specific types of counterinsurgency operations*. These are not one size fits all operations, and the CIA's narrative describes attributes of insurgency movements that have been (and can be) controlled by these selective assassination programs. Claims that insurgencies can be typologically studied and classified—allowing for diagnosis and appropriate “treatment,” fits models of simplistically engineered social science that the Pentagon and CIA seeks to fund with post-9/11 programs like the Minerva Initiative, the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program, and other projects linking academics to American military and intelligence programs.

Portions of the CIA report use structural functional interpretations reminiscent of the work of past colonial anthropologists who developed mechanical interpretations in efforts to understand, and at times manage, foreign cultures. Functionalist analysis often uses metaphors comparing human groups to biological organisms or machines with interworking parts. These are the sort of organic metaphors used by pundits who heartlessly describe Israel's periodic bombing of civilians in Gaza as “mowing the grass.” The CIA's report evoked arboreal imagery describing the use of assassinations for cropping back pesky insurgent growth in Iraq and elsewhere. One passage antiseptically advocated the killing of political opponents, describing assassination as if it were the “pruning” of a plant:

“A pruning approach can be used to remove effective midlevel leaders, protect incompetent leaders or restore them to positions of authority, separate insurgent personalities from potential sources of government sponsorship, or protect human sources that are collecting intelligence on the networks.”

This clinical depiction of assassination parallels the descriptive language used by Pacific Northwest gardening newspaper columnist Marianne Binnetti when offering friendly advice to gardeners combatting botanical independence movements on the homefront, writing:

“Early spring pruning allows the fresh spring growth to take over and hide the stumpy brown remnants of winter. Pruning tall grasses in the fall may not kill your grassy clumps but it could stimulate new growth right when winter arrives.”

Both passages describe the excision of lifeforms that would otherwise assume dominance in the given environment, both advocate these pruning actions as ways of cultivating the propagation of desired cultivars.

The CIA argued that counterinsurgency operations cannot achieve their goals by targeted assassinations alone, noting that “other military and nonmilitary counterinsurgency instruments” are needed. While unnamed, these other instruments include other military hard power operations as well as the many soft power counterinsurgency functions provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development in warzones, where the delivery of basic infrastructure and services highlights the primary counterinsurgency functions of this State Department agency with long historical links to the CIA.

The importance of this leaked report is the view it provides us of how the CIA privately talked to itself and the Executive Branch, in part aping a pose of comparative social science, as it sold a new generation of assassination campaigns designed to thwart the development of insurgent political movements challenging American military interests. This report feeds an attraction to lethal counterinsurgency that has lured liberal American presidents from Kennedy to Obama, and plays to a certain form of intellectual arrogance nurtured at elite universities.

The report reveals details of the CIA and Pentagon's post-9/11 approach to social science analysis. This post-9/11 project renewed efforts to better link social scientific analysis to national security needs in ways that were supposed to provide the United States with smarter policy. But we must ask whether this CIA report really is what "smarter" looks like. To be sure, the recognition that the assassination of "high value" individuals within insurgency movements can backfire in certain circumstances; and using comparative social scientific methods to try and discern these conditions is in some sense just the sort of "smarter" that the Pentagon and CIA seeks—(though obviously there is much about the veracity, reliability, and validity of the analytical typology or model advanced in this CIA paper that remains questionable). Yet there are basic elements of this model for diagnosing when strategic killings will help or will undermine counterinsurgency operations that are decidedly something less than "smarter," and a covert science of assassination sullies a nation claiming to champion principles of democracy and freedom.

The report relied on a misshapen form of basic social science analysis that is disconnected from the political, moral, and ethical dimensions of the world it sought to control. The field-tests verifying this CIA's calculus of assassination are not the sort of work one slips past an Institutional Review Board. This project's theoretical approach is devoid of any effort to consider the legal, ethical, or moral dimensions of this project. These secret CIA practitioners pretend to practice a hyper-rationalistic form of realpolitik social science, as if the practice of science occurred without consequences or social context. But as details of this internally-imagined rational calculus of assassination are publicly leaked, some of us in this public now look in horror at the ways that secrecy shields our government from having to publicly confront the twisted academic logic supporting the Executive Branch and CIA's targeted assassination program.