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Assassination as Policy in Washington and How It Failed: 1990-2015

The Kingpin Strategy

by ANDREW COCKBURN

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As the war on terror nears its 14th anniversary — a war we seem to be losing, given jihadist advances in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen — the U.S. sticks stolidly to its strategy of “high-value targeting,” our preferred euphemism for assassination. Secretary of State John Kerry has proudly cited the elimination of “fifty percent” of the Islamic State’s “top commanders” as a recent indication of progress. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself, “Caliph” of the Islamic State, was reportedly seriously wounded in a March airstrike and thereby removed from day-to-day control of the organization. In January, as the White House belatedly admitted, a strike targeting al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan also managed to kill an American, Warren Weinstein, and his fellow hostage, Giovanni Lo Porto.

More recently in Yemen, even as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took control of a key airport, an American drone strike killed Ibrahim Suleiman al-Rubaish, allegedly an important figure in the group’s hierarchy. Meanwhile, the Saudi news channel al-Arabiya has featured a deck of cards bearing pictures of that country’s principal enemies in Yemen in emulation of the infamous cards issued by the U.S. military prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq as an aid to targeting its leaders. (Saddam Hussein was the ace of spades.)

Whatever the euphemism — the Israelis prefer to call it “focused prevention” — assassination has clearly been Washington’s favored strategy in the twenty-first century. Methods of implementation, including drones, cruise missiles, and Special Operations forces hunter-killer teams, may vary, but the core notion that the path to success lies in directly attacking and taking out your enemy’s leadership has become deeply embedded. As then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it in 2010, “We believe that the use of intelligence-driven, precision-targeted operations against high-value insurgents and their networks is a key component” of U.S. strategy.

Analyses of this policy often refer, correctly, to the blood-drenched precedent of the CIA’s Vietnam-era Phoenix Program — at least 20,000 “neutralized.” But there was a more recent and far more direct, if less noted, source of inspiration for the contemporary American program of murder in the Greater Middle East and Africa, the “kingpin strategy” of Washington’s drug wars of the 1990s. As a former senior White House counterterrorism official confirmed to me in a 2013 interview, “The idea had its origins in the drug war. So that precedent was already in the system as a shaper of our thinking. We had a high degree of confidence in the utility of targeted killing. There was a strong sense that this was a tool to be used.”

Had that official known a little more about just how this feature of the drug wars actually played out, he might have had less confidence in the utility of his chosen instrument. In fact, the strangest part of the story is that a strategy that failed utterly back then, achieving the very opposite of its intended goal, would later be applied full scale to the war on terror — with exactly the same results.

The Kingpin Strategy Arrives

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was the poor stepsister of federal law enforcement agencies. Called into being by President Richard Nixon two decades earlier, it had languished in the shadow of more powerful siblings, notably the FBI. But the future offered hope. President George H.W. Bush had only recently re-launched the war on drugs first proclaimed by Nixon, and there were rich budgetary pickings in prospect. Furthermore, in contrast to the shadowy drug trafficking groups of Nixon’s day, it was now possible to put a face, or faces, on the enemy. The Colombian cocaine cartels were already infamous, their power and ruthless efficiency well covered in the media.

For Robert Bonner, a former prosecutor and federal judge appointed to head the DEA in 1990, the opportunity couldn’t have been clearer. Although Nixon had nurtured fantasies of deploying his fledgling anti-drug force to assassinate traffickers, even soliciting anti-Castro Cuban leaders to provide the necessary killers, Bonner had something more systematic in mind. He called it a “kingpin strategy,” whose aim would be the elimination either by death or capture of the “kingpins” dominating those cartels.

Implicit in the concept was the assumption that the United States faced a hierarchically structured threat that could be defeated by removing key leadership components. In this, Bonner echoed a traditional U.S. Air Force doctrine: that any enemy system must contain “critical nodes,” the destruction of which would lead to the enemy’s collapse.

In a revealing address to a 2012 meeting of DEA veterans held to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the kingpin strategy's inauguration, Bonner spoke of the corporate enemy they had confronted. Major drug trafficking outfits, he said, "by any measure are large organizations. They operate by definition transnationally. They are vertically integrated in terms of production and distribution. They usually have, by the way, fairly smart albeit quite ruthless people at the top and they have a command and control structure. And they also have people with expertise that run certain essential functions of the organization such as logistics, sales and distribution, finances, and enforcement." It followed therefore that the removal of those smart people at the top, not to mention the experts in logistics, would render the cartel ineffective and so cut off the flow of narcotics to the United States.

Pursuit of the kingpins promised rich institutional rewards. Aside from the overbearing presence of the FBI, Bonner had to contend with another carnivore in the Washington bureaucratic jungle eager to encroach on his agency's territory. "DEA and CIA were butting heads," recalled the former DEA chief in a 2013 interview. "There was real tension." Artfully, he managed to negotiate peace with the powerful intelligence agency, "so now we had a very important ally. CIA could use DEA and vice versa."

By this he meant that the senior agency could use the DEA's legal powers for domestic operations to good advantage. This burgeoning relationship brought additional potent allies. Not only was his agency now closer to the CIA, Bonner told me, but "through them, the NSA." A new Special Operations Division created to work with these senior agencies was to oversee the assault on the kingpins, relying heavily on electronic intelligence.

This new direction would swiftly gain credibility after the successful elimination of the most famous cartel leader of all. Pablo Escobar, the dominant figure of the Medellín cartel, was an object of obsessive interest to American law enforcement. He had long evaded U.S.-assisted manhunts before negotiating an agreement with the Colombian government in 1991 under which he took up residence in a "prison" he himself had built in the hills above his home city. A year later, fearing that the government was going to welsh on its deal and turn him over to the Americans, Escobar walked out of that prison and went into hiding.

The subsequent search for the fugitive drug lord marked a turning point. The Cold War was over; Saddam Hussein was defeated in the first Gulf War in 1991; credible threats to the U.S. were scarce; and the danger of budget cuts was in the air. Now, however, the U.S. deployed the full panoply of surveillance technology originally developed to confront the Soviet foe against a single human target. The Air Force sent in an assortment of reconnaissance planes, including SR-71s, which were capable of flying at three times the speed of sound. The Navy sent its own spy planes; the CIA dispatched a helicopter drone.

At one point there were 17 of these surveillance aircraft simultaneously in the air over Medellín although, as it turned out, none of them were any help in tracking down Escobar. Nor did the DEA make any crucial contribution. Instead, his deadly rivals from Cali, Colombia's other major trafficking group, played the decisive role in the destruction of that drug lord's power and support systems, combining well-funded intelligence with bloodthirsty ruthlessness.

His once all-powerful network of informers and bodyguards destroyed, Escobar was eventually located by homing in on his radio and gunned down as he fled across a rooftop on December 2, 1993. Though the matter is open to debate, a former senior U.S. drug enforcement official assured me unequivocally that a sniper from the U.S. Army's Special Operations Delta Force had fired the killing shot.

Following this triumph, the DEA turned its attention to the Cali cartel, pursuing it with every resource available: "We really developed the use of wiretaps," Bonner told me. Patience and the provision of enormous resources eventually yielded results. In June and July 1995, six of the seven heads of the Cali cartel were arrested, including the brothers Gilberto and Miguel Rodríguez-Orijuela, and the cartel's cofounder, José "Chepe" Santacruz Londoño. Although Londoño subsequently escaped from jail, he would in the end be hunted down and killed. Continued U.S. pressure for the rest of the decade and beyond resulted in a steady flow of cartel bosses into prisons with life sentences or into coffins.

Cartel Heads Go Down and Drugs Go Up

The strategy, it appeared, had been an unqualified success. "When Pablo Escobar was on the run, for all practical purposes, his organization started going down... ultimately it was destroyed. And that's the strategy we have called the kingpin strategy," crowed Lee Brown, Bill Clinton's "drug czar," in 1994.

In public at least, no officials bothered to point out that if that strategy's aim was to counter drug use among Americans, it had achieved precisely the opposite of its intended goal. The giveaway to this failure lay in the on-the-street cost of cocaine in this country. In those years, the DEA put enormous effort into monitoring its price, using undercover agents to make buys and then laboriously compiling and cross-referencing the amounts paid.

The drugs obtained by these surreptitious means, however, were of wildly varying purity, the cocaine itself often having been adulterated with some worthless substitute. That meant that the price of a gram of pure cocaine varied enormously, since a few bad deals of very low purity could cause wide swings in the average. Dealers tended to compensate for higher prices by reducing the purity of their product rather than charging more per gram. As a result, the agency's price charts showed little movement and so gave no indication of what events were affecting the price and therefore the supply.

In 1994, however, a numbers-cruncher with the Institute for Defense Analysis, the Pentagon's in-house think tank, began subjecting the data to more searching scrutiny. The analyst, a former Air Force fighter pilot named Rex Rivolo, had been tasked to take an independent look at the drug war at the request of Brian Sheridan, the hardheaded director of the Defense Department's Office of Drug Control Policy who had developed a healthy disrespect for the DEA and its operations.

Having tartly informed DEA officials that their statistics were worthless, mere "random noise," Rivolo set to work developing a statistical tool that would eliminate the effect of the swings in purity of the samples collected by the undercover agents. Once he had succeeded, some interesting conclusions began to emerge: the pursuit of the kingpins was most certainly having an

effect on prices, and by extension supply, but not in the way advertised by the DEA. Far from impeding the flow of cocaine onto the street and up the nostrils of America, it was accelerating it. Eliminating kingpins actually increased supply.

It was a momentous revelation, running entirely counter to law enforcement cultural attitudes that reached back to the days of Eliot Ness's war against bootleggers in the 1920s and that would become the basis for Washington's twenty-first-century counterinsurgency wars. Such a verdict might have been reached intuitively, especially once the kingpin strategy in its most lethal form came to be applied to terrorists and insurgents, but on this rare occasion the conclusion was based on hard, undeniable data.

In the last month of 1993, for example, Pablo Escobar's once massive cocaine smuggling organization was already in tatters and he was being hunted through the streets of Medellín. If the premise of the DEA strategy — that eliminating kingpins would cut drug supplies — had been correct, supply to the U.S. should by then have been disrupted.

In fact, the opposite occurred: in that period, the U.S. street price dropped from roughly \$80 to \$60 a gram because of a flood of new supplies coming into the U.S. market, and it would continue to drop after his death. Similarly, when the top tier of the Cali cartel was swept up in mid-1995, cocaine prices, which had been rising sharply earlier that year, went into a precipitous decline that continued into 1996.

Confident that the price drop and the kingpin eliminations were linked, Rivolo went looking for an explanation and found it in an arcane economic theory he called monopolistic competition. "It hadn't been heard of for years," he explained. "It essentially says if you have two producers of something, there's a certain price. If you double the number of producers, the price gets cut in half, because they share the market.

"So the question was," he continued, "how many monopolies are there? We had three or four major monopolies, but if you split them into twenty and you believe in this monopolistic competition, you know the price is going to drop. And sure enough, through the nineties the price of cocaine was plummeting because competition was coming in and we were driving the competition. The best thing would have been to keep one cartel over which we had some control. If your goal is to lower consumption on the street, then that's the mechanism. But if you're a cop, then that's not your goal. So we were constantly fighting the cop mentality in these provincial organizations like DEA."

The Kingpin Strategy Joins the War on Terror

Deep in the jungles of southern Colombia, coca farmers didn't need obscure economic theories to understand the consequences of the kingpin strategy. When the news arrived that Gilberto Rodríguez-Orijuela had been arrested, small traders in the remote settlement of Calamar erupted in cheers. "Thank the blessed virgin!" exclaimed one grandmother to a visiting American reporter.

“Wait till the United States figures out what it really means,” added another local resident. “Hell, maybe they’ll approve, since it’s really a victory for free enterprise. No more monopoly controlling the market and dictating what growers get paid. It’s just like when they shot Pablo Escobar: now money will flow to everybody.”

This assessment proved entirely correct. As the big cartels disappeared, the business reverted to smaller and even more ruthless groups that managed to maintain production and distribution quite satisfactorily, especially as they were closely linked either to Colombia’s Marxist FARC guerrillas or to the fascist anti-guerrilla paramilitary groups allied with the government and tacitly supported by the United States.

Much of Rivolo’s work on the subject remains classified. This is hardly surprising, given that it not only undercuts the official rationale for the kingpin strategy in the drug wars of the 1990s, but strikes a body blow at the doctrine of high-value targeting that so obsesses the Obama administration in its drone assassination campaigns across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa today.

Rivolo was, in fact, able to monitor the application of the kingpin strategy in the following decade. In 2007, he was assigned to a small but high-powered intelligence cell attached to the Baghdad headquarters of General Ray Odierno, who was, at the time, the operational U.S. commander in Iraq. While there he made it his business to inquire into the ongoing targeting of “high-value individuals,” or HVIs. Accordingly, he put together a list of 200 HVIs — local insurgent leaders — killed or captured between June and October 2007. Then he looked to see what happened in their localities following their elimination.

The results, he discovered when he graphed them out, offered a simple, unequivocal message: the strategy was indeed making a difference, just not the one intended. It was, however, the very same message that the kingpin strategy had offered in the drug wars of the 1990s. Hitting HVIs did not reduce attacks and save American lives; it increased them. Each killing quickly prompted mayhem. Within three kilometers of the target’s base of operation, attacks over the following 30 days shot up by 40%. Within a radius of five kilometers, a typical area of operations for an insurgent cell, they were still up 20%. Summarizing his findings for Odierno, Rivolo added an emphatic punch line: “Conclusion: HVI Strategy, our principal strategy in Iraq, is counter-productive and needs to be re-evaluated.”

As with the kingpin strategy, the causes of this apparently counter-intuitive result became obvious upon reflection. Dead commanders were immediately replaced, and the newcomers were almost always younger and more aggressive than their predecessors, eager to “make their bones” and prove their worth.

Rivolo’s research and conclusions, though briefed at the highest levels, made no difference. The kingpin strategy might have failed on the streets of American cities, but it had been a roaring success when it came to the prosperity of the DEA. The agency budget, always the surest sign of an institution’s standing, soared by 240% during the 1990s, rising from \$654 million in 1990 to over \$1.5 billion a decade later. In the same way, albeit on a vaster scale, high-value targeting failed in its stated goals in the Greater Middle East, where terror recruits grew and terror groups

only multiplied under the shadow of the drone. (The removal of al-Baghdadi from day-to-day control of the Islamic State, for instance, has apparently done nothing to retard its operations.) The strategy has, however, been of inestimable benefit to a host of interested parties, ranging from drone manufacturers to the CIA counterterrorism officials who so signally failed to ward off 9/11 only to adopt assassination as their *raison d'être*.

No wonder the Saudis want to follow in our footsteps in Yemen. It's a big world. Who's next?