

INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT'S SECRET  
DRONE WARFARE PROGRAM

FIND

FIND

**+**  
THE

**ASSASSINATION**

**COMPLEX**

FIX

FIX



**JEREMY SCAHILL**

AUTHOR OF BLACKWATER AND DIRTY WARS

AND THE STAFF OF  
THE INTERCEPT

FOREWORD BY EDWARD SNOWDEN  
AFTERWORD BY GLENN GREENWALD

FINISH

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COMPLEX**

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WARFARE  
PROGRAM**

**JEREMY SCAHILL  
AND THE STAFF OF  
THE INTERCEPT**

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# CONTENTS

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## **PREFACE**

**BETSY REED**

## **FOREWORD: ELECTED BY CIRCUMSTANCE**

**EDWARD SNOWDEN**

## **THE DRONE LEGACY**

**JEREMY SCAHILL**

## **DEATH AND THE WATCHLIST**

**JEREMY SCAHILL AND RYAN DEVEREAUX**

## **WHY I LEAKED THE WATCHLIST DOCUMENTS**

**ANONYMOUS**

## **FIND, FIX, FINISH**

**JEREMY SCAHILL**

## **THE KILL CHAIN**

**CORA CURRIER**

## **THE HEART OF THE DRONE MAZE**

**JEREMY SCAHILL**

## **TARGET AFRICA**

**NICK TURSE**

## **DEATH BY METADATA**

**JEREMY SCAHILL AND GLENN GREENWALD**

## **FIRING BLIND**

**CORA CURRIER AND PETER MAASS**

## **STINGRAYS AT HOME**

**JEREMY SCAHILL AND MARGOT WILLIAMS**

## **THE LIFE AND DEATH OF OBJECTIVE PECKHAM**

**RYAN GALLAGHER**

## **MANHUNTING IN THE HINDU KUSH**

**RYAN DEVEREAUX**

## **AFTERWORD: WAR WITHOUT END**

**GLENN GREENWALD**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**THE DOCUMENTS**

**CONTRIBUTORS**

**ABOUT THE INTERCEPT AND FIRST LOOK MEDIA**

**NOTES**

**GLOSSARY**

**IMAGE CREDITS**



For those who speak out clearly and pay up personally.

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# PREFACE

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## BETSY REED

The story of “The Drone Papers,” on which this book is based, began, as national security exposés often do, with a reporter and a source. Jeremy Scahill, whose previous book penetrated the secret world of government security contractors and special ops, was approached by a whistleblower from within the U.S. intelligence community whose conscience demanded that he reveal to the public the true nature of the covert war being waged in the name of their security.

What followed was a painstaking process of reporting and analysis by a team of reporters, researchers, editors, and designers at *The Intercept*, the digital investigative magazine that Scahill founded with Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras in the wake of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden’s massive leak of documents exposing the extent of domestic surveillance.

On October 15, 2015, *The Intercept* published “The Drone Papers,” a comprehensive investigation based on a new set of documents, detailing the U.S. military’s drone wars in Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Providing an unprecedented look at the military’s drone-based assassination program, the series revealed that drone strikes kill far greater numbers of people than those on kill lists—in one Afghan campaign 90 percent of those killed were not the intended target—and that the military classifies unknown persons, often innocent bystanders, as “enemies killed in action.”

In meticulously reported stories accompanied by vivid data visualizations, “The Drone Papers” illuminated the culture that celebrates targeted kills with terms like “jackpot” and “touchdown.” Exposing for the first time an official “kill chain” leading all the way to the president, *The Intercept*’s reporting paints a careful yet devastating portrait of how the drone campaign harms U.S. intelligence and exacerbates the very threat the war on terror seeks to overcome.

“The Drone Papers” earned extensive broadcast coverage and was the focus of hundreds of follow-up stories worldwide. Most major newspapers covered the story, many declaring the emergence of a “new Edward Snowden.” Published the same day President Obama declared that U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan, “The Drone Papers” framed the reception of that announcement and sparked debate about America’s role in the world.

*The Assassination Complex* presents the original articles from “The Drone Papers” along with additional reporting from *The Intercept* on the process by which the U.S. government creates its watchlists, the role of the National Security Agency in the assassination program, and the inevitable use of military surveillance technology in domestic policing. This body of reporting provides an unparalleled glimpse into the shadowy world of extrajudicial assassination that promises to be Barack Obama’s most troubling legacy.



# FOREWORD: ELECTED BY CIRCUMSTANCE

EDWARD SNOWDEN

“I’ve been waiting forty years for someone like you.” Those were the first words Dan Ellsberg spoke to me when we met last year. Dan and I felt an immediate kinship; we both knew what it meant to risk so much—and to be irrevocably changed—by revealing secret truths.

One of the challenges of being a whistleblower is living with the knowledge that people continue to sit, just as you did, at those desks, in that unit, throughout the agency, who see what you saw and comply in silence, without resistance or complaint. They learn to live not just with untruths but with *unnecessary* untruths, *dangerous* untruths, *corrosive* untruths. It is a double tragedy: what begins as a survival strategy ends with the compromise of the human being it sought to preserve and the diminishing of the democracy meant to justify the sacrifice.

But unlike Dan Ellsberg, I didn’t have to wait forty years to witness other citizens breaking that silence with documents. Ellsberg gave the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times* and other newspapers in 1971; Chelsea Manning provided the Iraq and Afghan War logs and the Cablegate materials to WikiLeaks in 2010. I came forward in 2013. Now here we are in 2014 and another person of courage and conscience has made available the set of extraordinary documents that are published here.

We are witnessing a compression of the working period in which bad policy shelters in the shadows, the time frame in which unconstitutional activities can continue before they are exposed by acts of conscience. And this temporal compression has a significance beyond the immediate headlines; it permits the people of this country to learn about critical government actions, not as part of the historical record but in a way that allows direct action through voting—in other words, in a way that empowers an informed citizenry to defend the democracy that “state secrets” are nominally intended to support. When I see individuals who are able to bring information forward, it gives me hope that we won’t always be required to curtail the illegal activities of our government as if it were a constant task, to uproot official lawbreaking as routinely as we mow the grass. (Interestingly enough, that is how some have begun to describe remote killing operations, as “cutting the grass.”)

A single act of whistleblowing doesn’t change the reality that there are significant portions of the government that operate below the waterline, beneath the visibility of the public. Those secret activities will continue, despite reforms. But those who perform these actions now have to live with the fear that if they engage in activities contrary to the spirit of society—if even a single citizen is catalyzed to halt the machinery of that injustice—they might still be held to account. The thread by which good governance hangs is this equality before the law, for the only fear of the man who turns the gears is that he may find himself upon them.

Hope lies beyond, when we move from extraordinary acts of revelation to a collective culture of accountability within the intelligence community. Here we will have taken a meaningful step toward solving a problem that has existed for as long as our government.

Not all leaks are alike, nor are their makers. Gen. David Petraeus, for instance, provided his illicit lover and favorable biographer information so secret it defied classification, including the names of covert operatives and the president's private thoughts on matters of strategic concern. Petraeus was not charged with a felony, as the Justice Department had initially recommended, but was instead permitted to plead guilty to a misdemeanor. Had an enlisted soldier of modest rank pulled out a stack of highly classified notebooks and handed them to his girlfriend to secure so much as a smile, he'd be looking at many decades in prison, not a pile of character references from a Who's Who of the Deep State.

There are authorized leaks and also permitted disclosures. It is rare for senior administration officials to explicitly ask a subordinate to leak a CIA officer's name to retaliate against her husband, as appears to have been the case with Valerie Plame. It is equally rare for a month to go by in which some senior official does not disclose some protected information that is beneficial to the political efforts of the parties but clearly "damaging to national security" under the definitions of our law.

This dynamic can be seen quite clearly in the al Qaeda "conference call of doom" story, in which intelligence officials, likely seeking to inflate the threat of terrorism and deflect criticism of mass surveillance, revealed to a neoconservative website extraordinarily detailed accounts of specific communications they had intercepted, including locations of the participating parties and the precise contents of the discussions. If the officials' claims were to be believed, they irrevocably burned an extraordinary means of learning the precise plans and intentions of terrorist leadership for the sake of a short-lived political advantage in a new cycle. Not a single person seems to have been so much as disciplined as a result of the story that cost us the ability to listen to the alleged al Qaeda hotline.

## If harmfulness and authorization make no difference, what explains the distinction between the permissible and the impermissible disclosure?

The answer is control. A leak is acceptable if it's not seen as a threat, as a challenge to the prerogatives of the institution. But if all of the disparate components of the institution – not just its head but its hands and feet, every part of its body – must be assumed to have the same power to discuss matters of concern, that is an existential threat to the modern political monopoly of information control, particularly if we're talking about disclosures of serious wrongdoing, fraudulent activity, unlawful activities. If you can't guarantee that you alone can exploit the flow of controlled information, then the aggregation of all the world's unmentionables – including your own – begins to look more like a liability than an asset.

Truly unauthorized disclosures are necessarily an act of resistance – that is, if they're not done simply for press consumption, to fluff up the public appearance or reputation of an institution. However, that doesn't mean they all come from the lowest working level. Sometimes the individuals who step forward happen to be near the pinnacle of power. Ellsberg was in the top tier; he was briefing the secretary of defense. You can't get much higher, unless you are the secretary of defense, and the incentives simply aren't there for such

a high-ranking official to be involved in public interest disclosures because that person already wields the influence to change the policy directly.

At the other end of the spectrum is Manning, a junior enlisted soldier, who was much nearer to the bottom of the hierarchy. I was midway in the professional career path. I sat down at the table with the chief information officer of the CIA, and I was briefing him and his chief technology officer when they were publicly making statements like “We try to collect everything and hang on to it forever,” and everybody still thought that was a cute business slogan. Meanwhile I was designing the systems they would use to do precisely that. I wasn’t briefing the policy side, the secretary of defense, but I was briefing the operations side, the National Security Agency’s director of technology. Official wrongdoing can catalyze all levels of insiders to reveal information, even at great risk to themselves, so long as they can be convinced that it is necessary to do so.

Reaching those individuals, helping them realize that their first allegiance as a public servant is to the public rather than to the government, is the challenge. That’s a significant shift in cultural thinking for a government worker today.

I’ve argued that whistleblowers are elected by circumstance. It’s not a virtue of who you are or your background. It’s a question of what you are exposed to, what you witness. At that point the question becomes *Do you honestly believe that you have the capability to remediate the problem, influence policy?* I would not encourage individuals to reveal information, even about wrongdoing, if they do not believe they can be effective in doing so, because the right moment can be as rare as the will to act.

This is simply a pragmatic, strategic consideration. Whistleblowers are outliers of probability, and if they are to be effective as a political force, it’s critical that they maximize the amount of public good produced from scarce seed. When I was making my decision, I came to understand how one strategic consideration, such as waiting until the month before a domestic election, could become overwhelmed by another, such as the moral imperative to provide an opportunity to arrest a global trend that had already gone too far. I was focused on what I saw and on my sense of overwhelming disenfranchisement that the government, which I had believed for my entire life, was engaged in such an extraordinary act of deception.

At the heart of this evolution is that whistleblowing is a radicalizing event—and by “radical” I don’t mean “extreme”; I mean it in the traditional sense of *radix*, the root of the issue. At some point you recognize that you can’t just move a few letters around on a page and hope for the best. You can’t simply report this problem to your supervisor, as I tried to do, because inevitably supervisors get nervous. They think about the structural risk to their career. They’re concerned about rocking the boat and “getting a reputation.” The incentives aren’t there to produce meaningful reform. Fundamentally, in an open society, change has to flow from the bottom to the top.

As someone who works in the intelligence community, you’ve given up a lot to do this work. You’ve happily committed yourself to tyrannical restrictions. You voluntarily undergo

polygraphs; you tell the government everything about your life. You waive a lot of rights because you believe the fundamental goodness of your mission justifies the sacrifice of even the sacred. It's a just cause.

And when you're confronted with evidence – not in an edge case, not in a peculiarity, but a core consequence of the program – that the government is subverting the Constitution and violating the ideals you so fervently believe in, you have to make a decision. When you see that the program or policy is inconsistent with the oaths and obligations that you've sworn to your society and yourself, then that oath and that obligation cannot be reconciled with the program. To which do you owe a greater loyalty?

One of the extraordinary things about the revelations of the past several years, and the accelerating pace, is that they have occurred in the context of the United States as the “uncontested hyperpower.” We now have the largest unchallenged military machine in the history of the world, and it's backed by a political system that is increasingly willing to authorize any use of force in response to practically any justification. In today's context that justification is terrorism, but not necessarily because our leaders are particularly concerned about terrorism in itself or because they think it's an existential threat to society. They recognize that even if we had a 9/11 attack every year, we would still be losing more people to car accidents and heart disease, and we don't see the same expenditure of resources to respond to those more significant threats.

What it really comes down to is the political reality that we have a political class that feels it must inoculate itself against allegations of weakness. Our politicians are more fearful of the politics of terrorism – of the charge that they do not take terrorism seriously – than they are of the crime itself.

As a result we have arrived at this unmatched capability, unrestrained by policy. We have become reliant upon what was intended to be the limitation of last resort: the courts. Judges, realizing that their decisions are suddenly charged with much greater political importance and impact than was originally intended, have gone to great lengths in the post-9/11 period to avoid reviewing the laws or the operations of the executive in the national security context and setting restrictive precedents that, even if entirely proper, would impose limits on government for decades or more. That means the most powerful institution that humanity has ever witnessed has also become the least restrained. Yet that same institution was never designed to operate in such a manner, having instead been explicitly founded on the principle of checks and balances. Our founding impulse was to say, “Though we are mighty, we are voluntarily restrained.”

• • •

When you first go on duty at CIA headquarters, you raise your hand and swear an oath – not to government, not to the agency, not to secrecy. You swear an oath to the Constitution. So there's this friction, this emerging contest between the obligations and values that the government asks you to uphold, and the actual activities that you're asked to participate in.

These disclosures about the Obama administration's killing program reveal that there's a part of the American character that is deeply concerned with the unrestrained, unchecked exercise of power. And there is no greater or clearer manifestation of unchecked power than assuming for oneself the authority to execute an individual outside of a battlefield context.

and without the involvement of any sort of judicial process.

Traditionally, in the context of military affairs, we've always understood that lethal force in battle could not be subjected to ex ante judicial constraints. When armies are shooting at each other, there's no room for a judge on that battlefield. But now the government has decided, without the public's participation, without our knowledge and consent – that the battlefield is everywhere. Individuals who don't represent an imminent threat in any meaningful sense of those words are redefined, through the subversion of language, to meet that definition.

Inevitably that conceptual subversion finds its way home, along with the technology that enables officials to promote comfortable illusions about surgical killing and nonintrusive surveillance. Take, for instance, the Holy Grail of drone persistence, a capability that the United States has been pursuing forever. The goal is to deploy solar-powered drones that can loiter in the air for weeks without coming down. Once you can do that, and you put a typical signals-collection device on the bottom of it to monitor, unblinkingly, the emanations of, for example, the different network addresses of every laptop, smartphone, and iPod, you know not just where a particular device is in what city, but you know what apartment each device lives in, where it goes at any particular time, and by what route. Once you know the devices, you know their owners. When you start doing this over several cities, you're tracking the movements not just of individuals but of whole populations.

By preying on the modern necessity to stay connected, governments can reduce our dignity to something like that of tagged animals, the primary difference being that we paid for the tags and they're in our pockets. It sounds like fantasist paranoia, but on the technical level it's so trivial to implement that I cannot imagine a future in which it won't be attempted. It will be limited to the war zones at first, in accordance with our customs, but surveillance technology has a tendency to follow us home.

Here we see the double edge of our uniquely American brand of nationalism. We are raised to be exceptionalists, to think we are the better nation with the manifest destiny to rule. The danger is that some people will actually believe this claim, and some of those will expect the manifestation of our national identity, that is, our government, to comport itself accordingly.

Unrestrained power may be many things, but it's not American. It is in this sense that the act of whistleblowing increasingly has become an act of political resistance. The whistleblower raises the alarm and lifts the lamp, inheriting the legacy of a line of Americans that begins with Paul Revere.

The individuals who make these disclosures feel so strongly about what they have seen that they're willing to risk their lives and their freedom. They know that we, the people, are ultimately the strongest and most reliable check on the power of government. The insiders at the highest levels of government have extraordinary capability, extraordinary resources, tremendous access to influence, and a monopoly on violence, but in the final calculus there is but one figure that matters: the individual citizen.

And there are more of us than there are of them.

# THE DRONE LEGACY

JEREMY SCAHILL



From his first days as commander in chief, the drone has been President Barack Obama’s weapon of choice, used by the military and the CIA to hunt down and kill the people his administration has deemed—through secretive processes, without indictment or trial—deserving of execution. There has been intense focus on the technology of remote killing, but that often serves as a surrogate for what should be a broader examination of the state’s power over life and death.

Drones are a tool, not a policy. The policy is assassination. While every president since Gerald Ford has upheld an executive order banning assassinations by U.S. personnel, Congress has avoided legislating the issue or even defining the word “assassination.”<sup>1</sup> This has allowed proponents of the drone wars to rebrand assassinations with more palatable characterizations such as the term du jour, “targeted killings.”

When the Obama administration has discussed drone strikes publicly, it has offered assurances that such operations are a more precise alternative to boots on the ground and are authorized only when an “imminent” threat is present and there is “near certainty” that the intended target will be eliminated. Those terms, however, appear to have been bluntly redefined to bear almost no resemblance to their commonly understood meanings.<sup>2</sup>

The first drone strike outside of a declared war zone was conducted in 2002, yet it was not until May 2013 that the White House released a set of standards and procedures for conducting such strikes.<sup>3</sup> Those guidelines offered little specificity, asserting that the United States would conduct a lethal strike outside an “area of active hostilities” only if a target represents a “continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons,” without providing any sense of the internal process used to determine whether a suspect should be killed without being indicted or tried.<sup>4</sup> The implicit message on drone strikes from the Obama administration has been *Trust, but don’t verify.*<sup>5</sup>

On October 15, 2015, *The Intercept* published a cache of secret slides that provide a window into the inner workings of the U.S. military’s kill/capture operations during a key period in the evolution of the drone wars: between 2011 and 2013. The documents, which also outline the internal views of special operations forces on the shortcomings and flaws of the drone program, were provided by a source within the intelligence community who worked on the types of operations and programs described in the slides. We granted the source’s request for anonymity because the materials are classified and because the U.S. government has engaged in aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers. Throughout this book, we will refer to this person simply as “the source.”



The source said he decided to disclose these documents because he believes the public has a right to understand the process by which people are placed on kill lists and ultimately assassinated on orders from the highest echelons of the U.S. government: “This outrageous explosion of watchlisting, of monitoring people and racking and stacking them on lists, assigning them numbers, assigning them ‘baseball cards,’ assigning them death sentences without notice, on a worldwide battlefield, was, from the very first instance, wrong.

“We’re allowing this to happen. And by ‘we,’ I mean every American citizen who has access to this information now, but continues to do nothing about it.”

• • •

The Pentagon, White House, and Special Operations Command declined to comment on the documents. A Defense Department spokesperson said, “We don’t comment on the details of classified reports.”

The CIA and the U.S. military’s Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) operate parallel drone-based assassination programs, and the secret documents should be viewed in that context of an intense turf war over which entity should have supremacy in those operations. Two sets of slides focus on the military’s high-value targeting campaign in Somalia and Yemen as it existed between 2011 and 2013, specifically the operations of a secretive unit, Task Force 48-4.<sup>6</sup> Additional documents on high-value kill/capture operations in Afghanistan buttress previous accounts of how the Obama administration masks the true number of civilians killed in drone strikes by categorizing unidentified people killed in a strike as enemies, even if they were not the intended targets.<sup>7</sup> The slides also paint a picture of a campaign in Afghanistan aimed at eliminating not only al Qaeda and Taliban operatives but also members of other local armed groups. One slide, marked “Top Secret,” shows how the terror “watchlist” appears on the terminals of personnel conducting drone operations, linking unique codes associated with cell phone SIM cards and handsets to specific individuals in order to geolocate them.<sup>8</sup>

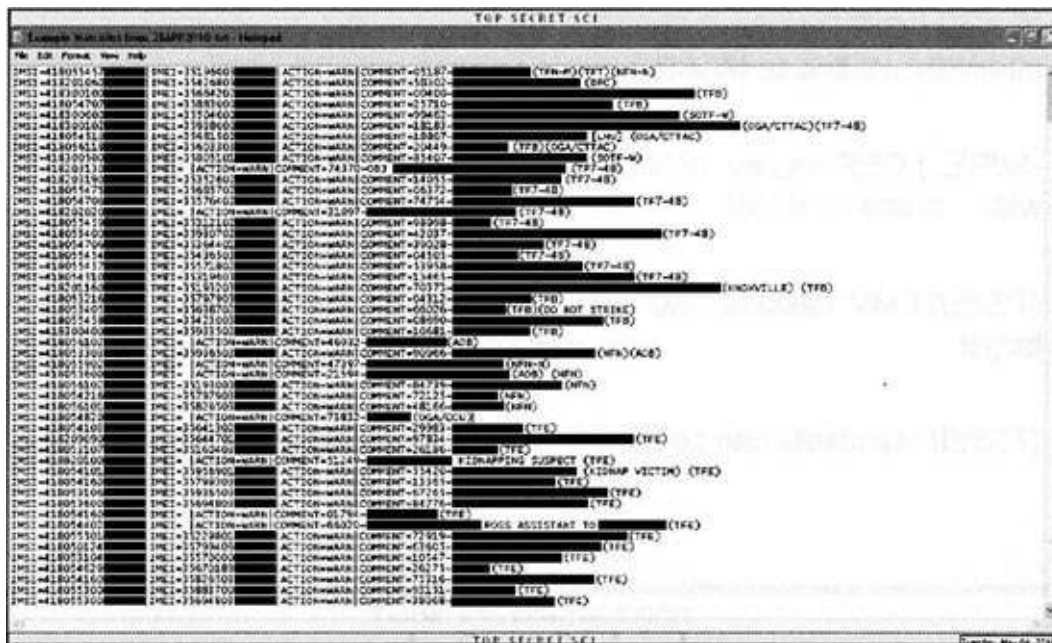
The costs to intelligence gathering when suspected terrorists are killed rather than captured are outlined in the slides pertaining to Yemen and Somalia, which are part of a 2013 study conducted by a Pentagon entity, the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force. The ISR study lamented the limitations of the drone program, arguing for more advanced drones and other surveillance aircraft and the expanded use of naval vessels to extend the reach of surveillance operations necessary for targeted strikes. It also contemplated the establishment of new “politically challenging” airfields and recommended capturing and interrogating more suspected terrorists rather than killing them in drone strikes.

The ISR Task Force at the time was under the control of Michael Vickers, the undersecretary



of defense for intelligence. A fierce proponent of drone strikes and a legendary paramilitary figure, Vickers had long pushed for a significant increase in the military's use of special operations forces. Key lawmakers viewed the ISR Task Force as an advocate for more surveillance platforms, like drones.<sup>9</sup>

The ISR study also reveals new details about the case of a British citizen, Bilal el-Berjawi, who was stripped of his citizenship before being killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2012. British and American intelligence had Berjawi under surveillance for several years as he traveled back and forth between the U.K. and East Africa yet did not capture him. Instead the United States hunted him down and killed him in Somalia.



A top-secret document shows how the watchlist looks on internal systems used by drone operators.

Taken together, the secret documents lead to the conclusion that Washington's fourteen-year-long high-value targeting campaign suffers from an overreliance on signals intelligence, an apparently incalculable civilian toll, and, due to a preference for assassination rather than capture, an inability to extract potentially valuable intelligence from terror suspects. The documents also highlight the futility of the war in Afghanistan by showing that the United States has poured vast resources into killing local insurgents, in the process exacerbating the very threat the United States is seeking to confront.

These secret slides help provide a historical context to Washington's ongoing wars and are especially relevant today, as the U.S. military intensifies its drone strikes and covert actions against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Those campaigns, like the ones detailed in these documents, are unconventional wars that employ special operations forces at the tip of the spear. The "find, fix, finish" doctrine that has fueled a post-9/11 borderless war is being refined and institutionalized. These documents lay bare the normalization of assassination, whether through the use of drones, night raids, or new platforms yet to be unleashed, as a central component of U.S. counterterrorism policy.

"The military is easily capable of adapting to change," the source told me, "but they don't like to stop anything they

feel is making their lives easier or is to their benefit. And this  
certainly is, in their eyes, a very quick, clean way of doing things. It's a very slick, efficient way to conduct the war, without having to have the massive ground invasion mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. But at this point they have become so addicted to this machine, to this way of doing business, that it seems like it's going to become harder and harder to pull them away from it the longer they're allowed to continue operating in this way."

This book, most of which was originally published by *The Intercept* as "The Drone Papers,"<sup>11</sup> was produced by a team of reporters and researchers that spent months analyzing the documents and is intended to serve as a long-overdue public examination of the methods and outcomes of America's assassination program. That campaign, carried out by two presidents through four presidential terms, has been conducted secretly. The public has a right to see these documents not only to engage in an informed debate about the future of U.S. wars, both overt and covert, but also to understand the circumstances under which the U.S. government arrogates to itself the right to sentence individuals to death without the established checks and balances of arrest, trial, and appeal.



An MQ-1 Predator unmanned aircraft.

Among the key revelations uncovered by *The Intercept* are the following.

## **HOW THE PRESIDENT AUTHORIZES TARGETS FOR ASSASSINATION.**

It has been widely reported that President Obama directly approves high-value targets for inclusion on the kill list. The secret ISR study provides new insight into the kill chain, including a detailed chart stretching from electronic and human intelligence gathering all the way to the president's desk. In the same month the ISR study was circulated, May 2013, Obama signed the policy guidance on the use of force in counterterrorism operations overseas. A senior administration official, who declined to comment on the classified document

admitted that “those guidelines remain in effect today.”

As we detail in chapter 2, U.S. intelligence personnel collect information on potential targets drawn from government watchlists and the work of intelligence, military, and law enforcement agencies. At the time of the ISR study, when someone was destined for the kill list, intelligence analysts created a portrait of the suspect and the threat that person posed, pulling it together “in a condensed format known as a ‘baseball card.’” That information was then bundled with operational information in a “target information folder” to be “staffed up to higher echelons” for action. On average, one slide indicates, it took fifty-eight days for the president to sign off on a target. At that point U.S. forces had sixty days to carry out the strike. The documents include two case studies that are partially based on information detailed on baseball cards.

The system for creating baseball cards and targeting packages, according to the source, depends largely on intelligence intercepts and a multilayered system of fallible, human interpretation. “It isn’t a surefire method,” he said. “You’re relying on the fact that you do have all these very powerful machines, capable of collecting extraordinary amounts of data and information,” which can lead personnel involved in targeted killings to believe they have “godlike powers.”

## **ASSASSINATIONS DEPEND ON UNRELIABLE INTELLIGENCE AND DISRUPT INTELLIGENCE GATHERING.**

In undeclared war zones the U.S. military has become overly reliant on signals intelligence, or SIGINT, to identify and ultimately hunt down and kill people. The documents acknowledge that using metadata from phones and computers, as well as communications intercepts, is an inferior method of finding and finishing targeted people. They describe SIGINT capabilities on these unconventional battlefields as “poor” and “limited.” Yet such collection, much of it provided by foreign partners, accounted for more than half the intelligence used to track potential kills in Yemen and Somalia. The ISR study characterized these failings as a technical hindrance to efficient operations, omitting the fact that faulty intelligence has led to the killing of innocent people, including U.S. citizens, in drone strikes.<sup>12</sup>

The source underscored the unreliability of metadata, most often from phone and computer communications intercepts. These sources of information, identified by so-called selectors, such as a phone number or email address, are the primary tools used by the military to find, fix, and finish its targets. “It requires an enormous amount of faith in the technology that you’re using,” the source said. “There’s countless instances where I’ve come across intelligence that was faulty.” This, he said, is a primary factor in the killing of civilians. “It’s stunning the number of instances when selectors are misattributed to certain people. And it isn’t until several months or years later that you all of a sudden realize that the entire time you thought you were going after this really hot target, you wind up realizing it was his mother’s phone the whole time.”

The source described how members of the special operations community view the people being hunted by the United States for possible death by drone strike: “They have no rights. They have no dignity. They have no humanity to themselves. They’re just a ‘selector’ to an analyst. You eventually get to a point in the target’s life cycle that you are following them, you

don't even refer to them by their actual name." This practice, he said, contributes to "dehumanizing the people before you've even encountered the moral question 'Is this legitimate kill or not?'"

The authors of the ISR study admit that killing suspected terrorists, even if they are "legitimate" targets, further hampers intelligence gathering: "Kill operations significantly reduce the intelligence available." A chart shows that special operations actions in the Horn of Africa resulted in captures just 25 percent of the time, indicating a heavy tilt toward lethal strikes.

## **STRIKES OFTEN KILL MANY MORE THAN THE INTENDED TARGET.**

The White House and Pentagon boast that the targeted killing program is precise and that the numbers of civilian deaths are minimal. However, documents detailing a special operations campaign in northeastern Afghanistan, Operation Haymaker, show that between January 2012 and February 2013, U.S. special operations airstrikes killed more than two hundred people. Of those, only thirty-five were the intended targets. During one four-and-a-half-month period of the operation, according to the documents, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. In Yemen and Somalia, where the United States has far more limited intelligence capabilities to confirm the people killed are the intended targets, the equivalent ratios may well be much worse.

"Anyone caught in the vicinity is guilty by association," the source said. "[When] a drone strike kills more than one person, there is no guarantee that those persons deserved the fate. . . . So it's a phenomenal gamble."

## **THE MILITARY LABELS UNKNOWN PEOPLE IT KILLS "ENEMIES KILLED IN ACTION."**

The documents show that the military designated people it killed in targeted strikes as EKIA, "enemy killed in action," even if they were not the intended targets of the strike. Unless evidence posthumously emerged to prove the males killed were not terrorists or "unlawful enemy combatants," EKIA remained their designation, according to the source. That process, he said, "is insane. But we've made ourselves comfortable with that. The intelligence community, JSOC, the CIA, and everybody that helps support and prop up these programs—they're comfortable with that idea." The source described official U.S. government statements minimizing the number of civilian casualties inflicted by drone strikes as "exaggerating . . . best, if not outright lies."

## **THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE TARGETED FOR DRONE STRIKES AND OTHER FINISHING OPERATIONS.**

According to one secret slide, as of June 2012, there were sixteen people in Yemen whom

President Obama had authorized U.S. special operations forces to assassinate. In Somalia there were four. The statistics contained in the documents appear to refer only to targets approved under the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, not CIA operations. In 2012 alone, according to data compiled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there were more than two hundred people killed in operations in Yemen and between four and eight in Somalia.

## HOW GEOGRAPHY SHAPES THE ASSASSINATION CAMPAIGN.

In Afghanistan and Iraq the pace of U.S. drone strikes was much quicker than in Yemen and Somalia. This appears due, in large part, to the fact that Afghanistan and Iraq were declared war zones, and in Iraq the United States was able to launch attacks from bases closer to the targeted people. By contrast, in Somalia and Yemen, undeclared war zones where strikes were justified under tighter restrictions, U.S. attack planners described a serpentine bureaucracy for obtaining approval for assassination. The secret ISR study states that the number of high-value targeting operations in these countries was “significantly lower than previously seen in Iraq and Afghanistan” because of these “constraining factors.”

Even after the president approved a target in Yemen or Somalia, the great distance between drone bases and targets created significant challenges for U.S. forces, a problem referred to in the documents as the “tyranny of distance.” In Iraq more than 80 percent of “finishing operations” were conducted within 150 kilometers of an air base. In Yemen the average distance was about 450 kilometers, and in Somalia it was more than 1,000 kilometers. On average, one document states, it took the United States six years to develop a target in Somalia, but just 8.3 months to kill the target once the president had approved his addition to the kill list.

## INCONSISTENCIES WITH WHITE HOUSE STATEMENTS ABOUT TARGETED KILLING.

The White House’s publicly available policy standards state that lethal force will be launched only against targets who pose a “continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons.” In the documents, however, there is only one explicit mention of a specific criterion: that a person “presents a threat to U.S. interest or personnel.” While such a criterion may make sense in the context of a declared war in which U.S. personnel are on the ground in large numbers, such as in Afghanistan, that standard is so vague as to be virtually meaningless in countries like Yemen and Somalia, where very few U.S. personnel operate.

While many of the documents provided to *The Intercept* contain explicit internal recommendations for improving unconventional U.S. warfare, the source said that what is implicit is even more significant: the mentality reflected in the documents on the assassination programs. “This process can work. We can work out the kinks. We can excuse the mistakes. And eventually we will get it down to the point where we don’t have to continuously come back . . . and explain why a bunch of innocent people got killed.”

The architects of what amounts to a global assassination campaign do not appear concerned with either its enduring impact or its moral implications. “All you have to do is take a look at

the world and what it's become, and the ineptitude of our Congress, the power grab of the executive branch over the past decade," the source said. "It's never considered: Is what we're doing going to ensure the safety of our moral integrity? Of not just our moral integrity, but the lives and humanity of the people that are going to have to live with this the most?"

# DECODING THE LANGUAGE OF COVERT WARFARE

JOSH BEGLEY

Woven throughout this book are sidebars defining terms used in the secret documents provided to The Intercept. Together they form a labyrinth with twelve entrances and no exit.

187 ←

## BIRDS

→ 35

The first bomb that was dropped from an airplane exploded in an oasis outside Tripoli on November 1, 1911.\*

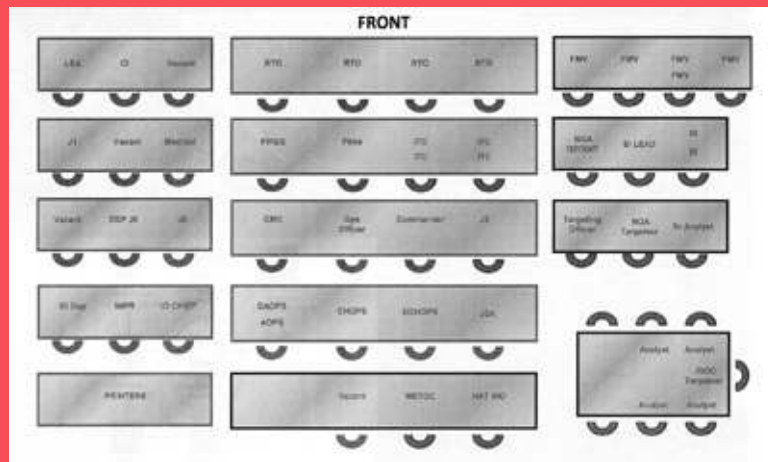
While flying over Ain Zara, Libya, Lt. Giulio Gavotti leaned out of his airplane, which looked like a dragonfly, and dropped a Haasen hand grenade. It landed “in the camp of the enemy, with good results.”

One hundred years later the bombing is done by pilotless planes. They are controlled remotely, often half a world away. We have come to call them “drones.”

People on the inside call them “birds.”

Operators can watch their targets for hours, often from air-conditioned rooms, until they receive the order to fire. When the time is right, a room full of people watch as the shot is taken.

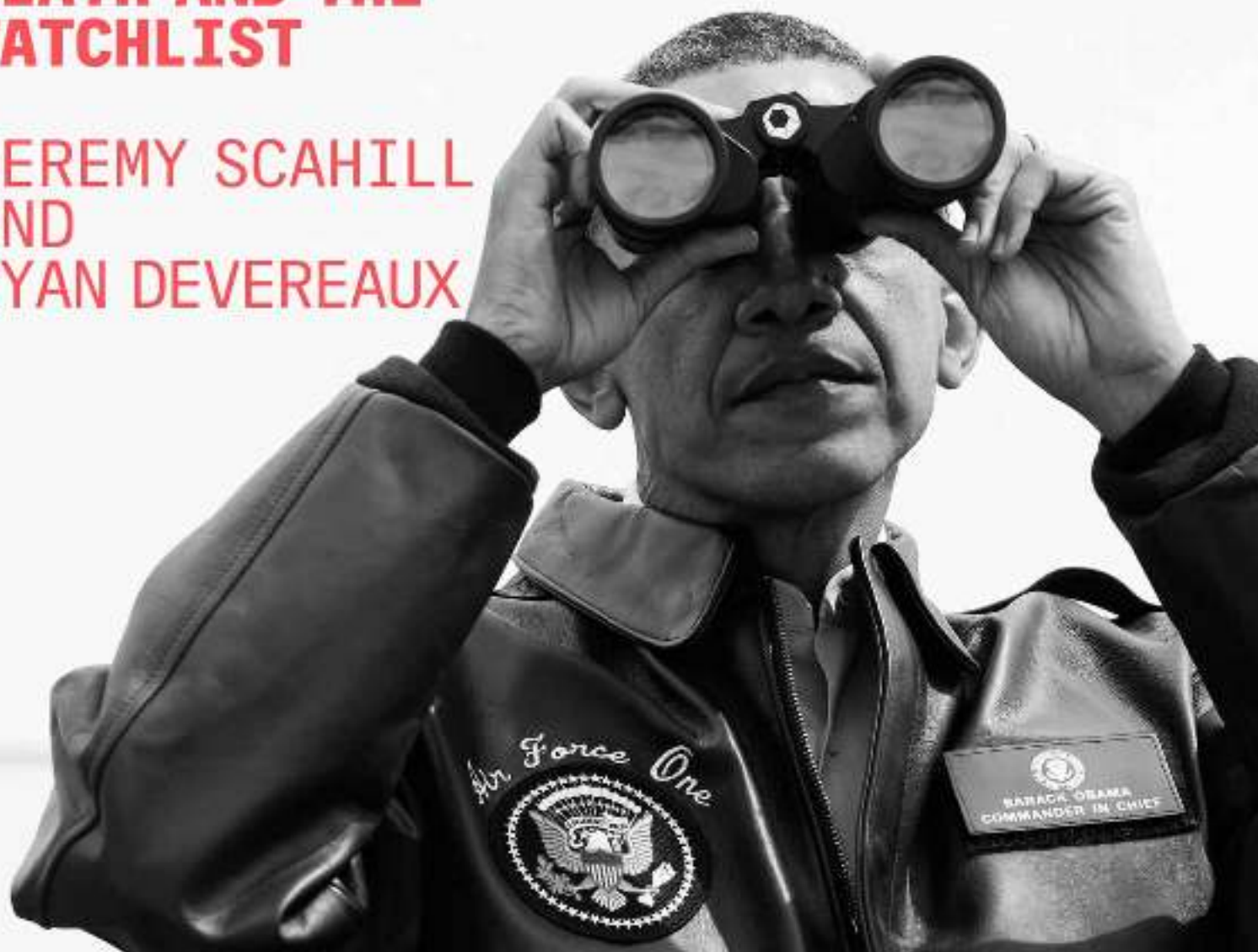
This is where they sit.



\*With thanks to Sven Lindqvist's A History of Bombing, which served as a template for this narrative.

# DEATH AND THE WATCHLIST

JEREMY SCAHILL  
AND  
RYAN DEVEREAUX





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