

Drone Knowns and Drone Unknowns

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It has been a big month for Predator drones.

On Friday, September 30, Anwar al-Awlaki – described variously in the press as “Senior Al Qaeda leader,” “firebrand cleric,” and “Al Qaeda’s rising star” – was killed by a Hellfire missile launched from a Predator drone as al-Awlaki approached his Toyota Hilux pickup truck in eastern Yemen. The missile weighed 100 pounds, and the strike took place at 9:44 a.m.; al-Awlaki had just eaten breakfast. These details, and many others, were reported immediately around the world. The Guardian [ran a helpful sketch of a drone](#), accompanied by the text, “Al-Awlaki’s position was tracked for several days before the attack on his vehicle by a drone armed with Hellfire missiles.” [Page three of the New York Post](#) was even more informative. It included a map, a timeline (“How We Got Him”), a photo of a Predator, another photo of a Hellfire missile, and some pinup-girl stats about the drone itself, including “Cost: \$5M” and “Size: 27 feet long, 55-foot wingspan.”

Three weeks later came another Predator success, and another orgy of detail. On Thursday, October 20, Muammar Qaddafi’s fleeing convoy of 100 vehicles was captured on camera by a drone patrolling the skies above Sirte. Then, as the [Telegraph reported](#), “The Predator drone, flown out of Sicily and controlled via satellite from a base outside Las Vegas, struck the convoy with a number of Hellfire anti-tank missiles.” Other western news sources reprinted these details with only minor changes in syntax. Wired’s [Danger Room blog reported](#) that it was the 145th Predator strike in Libya, according to the Pentagon.

I teach in the English department at a college in upstate New York, which every now and then means teaching freshman comp, a kind of crash course on writing coherent papers. On the first or second day of classes, I ask everyone to think up examples of the passive voice. Sighing and rolling their eyes, the students offer a few by rote: “The ball was thrown.” “The window was broken.” “Lunch was eaten.” And why, class, should we avoid this pernicious habit when we write our papers? Because – more sighing and eye rolling – passive voice hides who is doing the thing, or, more technically, because it obscures agency. We must pay attention to who is performing the action, I tell the class.

The press coverage of Predator drones routinely and systematically conceals agency – obscuring, if you’ll forgive the pun, one very specific agency. For all the facts given in the news – the plane’s Sicilian base, the missile’s weight and length and breadth and cost – one simple detail is left out: Who is in charge of the bombing?

- “The Predators have launched 145 strikes . . .” (Wired)
- “Convoy bombed by drone . . .” (The Telegraph)
- “The officials said the Predator fired on the convoy Thursday.” ([AP](#))

Such awkward syntax is common to coverage of drones: these do not, by definition, fire by act of will. Coverage that specifies who is running the drone strikes – the Guardian, for instance, called it “the CIA-operated drone programme” – share the same turns of phrase, and more than this, the same basic information about the raids.

This repetitiveness is not a coincidence. In a new report entitled “The CIA and Targeted Killings Beyond Borders,” Philip Alston, a professor at NYU law school, and until last year the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary execution, writes, “Precise information about almost all aspects of how the CIA’s drone program actually functions are available only from journalistic sources, which in turn are dependent almost entirely on information selectively leaked by officials involved in the program.” Alston goes on to note that the leaked estimates of numbers killed in the raids contradict one another.

The notion of the CIA leaking unreliable and yet oddly precise information sounds like paranoia. Why wouldn't they just say nothing? As Alston writes, "While the government can deny the accuracy of any given leak, it can also rely generally upon those sources to ensure that sufficient information makes its way into the public domain in order to placate those who would otherwise be concerned that such programs were being run in complete secrecy."

In other words, CIA leaks create a useful illusion of disclosure. In this light, the Guardian's graphics and the New York Post's strange specificity appear a little more sinister, helping the CIA avoid the question of who is doing what, and how many people are dying because of it.

The CIA's drone program is huge. According to Alston, it has thus far killed in excess of 2,000 people in Pakistan, and has operated in at least four additional countries. Extraterritorial assassinations facilitated by unmanned drones have become, he writes, "an integral part" of national security strategy.

Why does it matter who is doing what, so long as bad guys are getting killed? Well, what law is applied to the program depends upon the agent. As Alston explains, covert intelligence activity – the kind of activity traditionally pursued by the CIA – "is governed by a strict legal regime beginning with the need for a 'presidential finding' declaring that the activity is necessary to 'support identifiable foreign policy objectives' and is 'important to the national security of the United States.'" Military activities, on the other hand, require neither a presidential finding nor congressional review:

'Military' action can thus be initiated much more readily and will be subject to little if any specific congressional review, assuming that it does not cross the threshold of engagement in hostilities. On the other hand, covert action, while requiring specific approval and notification, is not then subject to the sort of constraints, either territorially or jurisdictionally that would apply to a military operation...Viewed in this light, it is not difficult to see the attractions from the perspective of the executive of a 'mixed' regime.

Passive voice, and its attendant obscurity, turn out to be very useful.

This matters for two main reasons. First, extraterritorial assassinations are going to happen more and more. The Department of Defense budget for 2012 includes \$4.8 billion for unmanned aerial vehicles, of which more than half – \$2.5 billion – is dedicated to Predator and Reaper drones. Second, and more simply (Alston again), "A permissive policy on drone-fired targeted killings will come back to haunt the United States."

For now, the US and its allies have the drones, but this monopoly will end. Forty countries already possess the basic technology, among them Israel, Russia, Turkey, China, India, and Iran. Alston concludes his report with an anecdote: "On 'Defense Industry Day,' August 22, 2010," he writes, "the Iranian President unveiled a new drone with a range of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) and capable of carrying four cruise missiles."