Obama's Shadowy Drone War

Taking Out the Terrorists by Remote Control

By Klaus Brinkbäumer and John Goetz

Under former US President George W. Bush, the CIA used dubious methods, including the kidnapping and torture of suspects. President Barack Obama promised to clean things up, but instead he has turned to joystick warfare. These days, the CIA does its killing with the press of a button, with high-tech drone aircraft.

He had stood in Hyde Park and had spoken of a new America, of a ruptured world that he intended to fix and unite. Then, two days after the election, when he was still at home in Chicago, Barack Obama was asked to attend a meeting in a downtown office. He was asked to come alone, without advisers, his wife or any other witnesses.

His predecessor George W. Bush, who was still in office, had made it clear to Obama that the meeting was extremely important. It was November 2008, 75 days before Obama's inauguration as US president.

Then-Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell was expecting Obama. McConnell was also alone, and the room in which they met was soundproof, windowless and bugproof. On that Thursday, Obama was told that the US government had a secret program called "Sylvan Magnolia," which involved using unmanned aircraft, or drones, to hunt down terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The program was going well, McConnell said.

The reason it was going so well, he added, was that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had such good sources, courageous men who had the trust of the al-Qaida and Taliban leadership. These wonderful informants would provide the necessary tips, allowing the drones to do their work.

Veteran investigative reporter Bob Woodward has documented the meeting in his new book, "Obama's Wars," based on information from CIA sources. It is the story of a beginning -- because McConnell was apparently very persuasive.

Centerpiece of the War on Terror

In the 21 months since his inauguration, President Obama has ordered or approved 120 drone attacks on Pakistan. There were 22 such attacks in September 2010 alone, reportedly killing more than 100 people. In contrast, Obama's predecessor Bush ordered just 60 attacks in eight years.

Obama has made drones the centerpiece of his strategy in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida. These terrifying weapons circle over Afghanistan and Pakistan, changing the war and making it colder and more anonymous than before. They pose a constant threat, can be operated with the push of a button and, according to the CIA, are precise -- at least most of the time.

The drone war is being waged by the US Army, by the US Air Force and, most of all, by the CIA. It is taking place in a shadowy realm beyond the reach of war tribunals, public debate and the media. The only time it made headlines recently, and then only for a day, was when it resulted in the deaths of a number of German citizens. The men, who were killed in a drone attack on Oct. 4, were presumed terrorists who were passing through the town of Mir Ali in the Pakistani region of North Waziristan.

No Americans Killed

The CIA's drone war allows the government in Islamabad to act as if it had no knowledge of what is going on, and it allows Obama to wage a military campaign on the territory of an ally without having to send troops to the country.

When it comes to their support for the program, the two main American parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, are in rare agreement -- mainly because the drone war doesn't claim American lives.

The CIA doesn't release any numbers -- not about its successes and certainly not about civilian casualties. It attacked Baitullah Mehsud, the head of the Pakistani Taliban, 16 times. In other words, either informants or the drones' cameras identified Mehsud's location 16 times and the drones fired 16 times. The first 15 tries failed. Then, in the last attempt, when the report was correct and Mehsud was in fact at his father-in-law's house, Mehsud and 10 friends and relatives were killed. According to sources in Islamabad, CIA drones killed some 700 civilians in 2009.

The New Face of the CIA

The CIA is reinventing itself once again. It was established in 1947 to gather information about foreign countries. The reconnaissance flights over China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s, during the Cold War, are still regarded as a triumph of modern espionage by people at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. But even then, the CIA was more than that. In fact, it has always been an instrument of politics.

The agency has collaborated with former Nazis. It has supported dictators like Manuel Noriega in Panama, but only as long as the dictator in question remained useful and a strong ally in the struggle against communists. It helped bring down democratically elected leftist leaders like Chile's Salvador Allende and paved the way for dictators like Augusto Pinochet to take power.

In retrospect, it is clear that there have been times when the CIA acted and agitated in a fatally shortsighted manner. In the early 1980s, when it funded the Afghan mujaheddin and the tribal leaders now referred to as warlords, arms shipments were part of the overall package America was providing. The CIA's job was to help drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan, and the agency was successful -- the war became costly and miserable for the USSR. Now the US's allies in that war are today's enemies, trained and equipped by the old CIA and currently being fought by its new incarnation.

Throughout the decades, there was always a difference between official policy and the work of the intelligence agencies. It would be naïve to expect anything else, because operating in a gray zone is what intelligence agencies do. Bush's CIA developed the drone strategy and used it only sparingly. But Bush's CIA also kidnapped and tortured terror suspects.

Unconstrained by International Law

Obama promised to close Guantanamo, where many of those kidnapped and interrogated by the CIA were imprisoned after Sept. 11, 2001. He promised an end to the kidnapping and torture. But the reality had already changed. Today, Obama's CIA no longer carries out kidnappings -- it carries out killings. This means that the CIA can assume a military role and wage a war unconstrained by international law or the laws of war. It is waging that war in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan and Yemen, where officially there is no war.

The advantage of the CIA's new approach is simple. Prisoners have to be released at some point, or at least put on trial. Prisoners mean the possibility of facing investigations or having to address journalists' questions. Killing is easier.

Obama's CIA decides who lives and who dies. It spreads fear in faraway countries through its control of drones that can turn up at any time and, when they do, are sufficiently precise to hit a bed or a bathroom with their missiles.

Are the CIA's actions permissible? From the standpoint of its agents, the question is naïve. Perhaps a better question would be: Are the CIA's actions smart?

Will the drone program benefit the United States and the West, or will it merely motivate new enemies? And will it legitimize copycats, other governments that could just as easily find reasons to justify killing their enemies and instruct their intelligence agencies to use the same methods?

How Armed Drones Were Invented

Milan was the turning point, says former agent Sabrina De Sousa, sitting in a hotel bar in Miami. Milan was a fiasco for the CIA, says De Sousa. It was a disaster for the agency. After Milan, the CIA needed a new strategy.

On Feb. 17, 2003, 22 agents kidnapped Egyptian cleric Abu Omar in Milan -- and left traces. As a result, an Italian court sentenced Robert Lady, the CIA's then-station chief in Milan, to an eight-year prison term in November 2009. Sabrina De Sousa received a five-year sentence and was ordered to pay a fine of €1.5 million ($2.1 million). None of the agents convicted by the Italian court ever showed up to serve the sentence. The CIA doesn't extradite its people, but it does abandon them. De Sousa is no longer with the agency.

The new CIA doesn't like things being dirty. It wants a clinical war.

The Potential of Drones

Retired US Air Force General John Jumper, 65, is a military visionary and a creative force of war. A former fighter pilot in Vietnam, Jumper also served in Europe during the Balkan wars. At that time the Americans, hoping to improve their reconnaissance capabilities, formed a task force at the Pentagon that was called "Predator 911." The orders were issued, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the US military's R&D division, designed the first "Predator" drone, an unmanned aircraft that was 9 meters (29.5 feet) long and propelled by a small engine.

The device was quiet and barely visible from the ground. It flew at an altitude of about 3,000 meters, and it could stay up in the air for 24 hours without having to refuel. The cameras were the most important feature of the early drones, which, as intelligence-gathering tools, were intended to provide information. Jumper's job was to figure out what else the device could do.

He had the propellers replaced and gasoline engines installed. Then he had new wings made, with small perforations through which chemicals could flow to protect the drones from icing up. At the time, no one thought of arming the drones.

But then, in 1999, during the Kosovo war, Jumper saw his drones taking off and delivering high-resolution photos. He saw Air Force pilots climbing into their jets and flying into battle. And he saw all the information the drones provided. The only problem was that the pilots flying into the combat zone didn't see the information obtained by the drones until later, when it was much too late to do them any good.

'Just Go Do It'

Jumper realized that things had to go faster and be more effective. He had an automatic laser guidance system installed, still with the goal of pinpointing targets for the fighter pilots. But then, as he recalls today, it suddenly clicked in his head: If the drones were equipped with laser-guided targeting systems and weapons, then the whole cycle -- from finding a target and analyzing it to attacking and destroying the target and analyzing the results -- could be carried out by one aircraft.

The engineers told him it would take five years. "You have three months," Jumper replied, and then he said: "Just go do it." It became a slogan for the entire program. The innovative weapon was finished within six months.

The missiles that were now attached to the Predator drones were called Hellfire missiles. At a price tag of $10.5 million, the armed Predator drones were significantly cheaper than manned jets. A single F-22 Raptor fighter jet cost as much as 14 drones.

Too Precise

This is a new war, and it's undoubtedly a modern war. The pilots sit at their stations, 12,000 kilometers (7,500 miles) away from the battlefield. The Air Force has its drone pilots stationed at Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, while the CIA operates from Camp Chapman in Afghanistan and from offices in the basement of its headquarters in Langley.

The drones were an immediate success, hitting all of their targets -- trees, houses, cars -- during testing

in Nevada. The only problem was something that soldiers would normally like: The weapons were too precise. A scattering mechanism was installed to make sure that shrapnel would kill everything within a 20-meter radius of the impact site.

The "Predator B," which Jumper, speaking almost affectionately about his creation, says has "a lot more endurance and persistence," was developed shortly before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The Predator B could now remain airborne for 36 hours instead of just 24 hours. Guided by GPS and laser technology, and with 500-pound bombs suspended from its wings, it could kill in a less bloody way than its precursor. The new version was dubbed the "Reaper."

Not Properly Tested

Part of the software used for target programming, called "Geospatial," takes data supplied by the drones and combines it with values from a database and coordinates transmitted by mobile phones. The developer, Marshall Peterson, says that he didn't know that his software was being used for targeted killing. "This software has to be properly tested before being used for targeting and it has not been," he says. "We also understand that this software was improperly installed. This is dangerous."

Peterson, a decorated Vietnam veteran, says that he refused to cooperate, arguing that the program wasn't ready yet. But then, according to Peterson, a partner company took his data and sold it to the CIA. The dispute is the subject of a lawsuit. "It is exactly this experience which causes me to be very skeptical about the accuracy in general of the targeting systems being used with the drone," says Peterson.

The documents of the lawsuit pending in a Massachusetts court could lead some people to conclude that there is a connection between children dying in faraway Pakistan and the CIA's unwillingness to wait until a computer program was ready for use. Agents in Afghanistan have reported that a drone periodically drops out of the sky, and that troops are then sent out to collect the parts.

'Nobody Takes This Lightly'

But retired General Jumper believes in the technology. When he talks about his vision for the future of war, he talks of "a network that orchestrates these platforms around a mission result." He describes a system in which a man on the ground would no longer be piloting only one drone, but four or five at a time, the goal being to capture the best image possible. Jumper compares it to the director of a telecast of a World Cup soccer match: "He doesn't care whether the picture comes from one of the cameramen on the field with a camera on his shoulder or the camera that's suspended on a wire above the stadium, or the blimp that's staying overhead. He cares about the result."

Under his vision, Drone 1 might supply data about terrorists in Islamabad, Drone 2 monitors the houses in the neighborhood, Drone 3 watches the car in which a terrorist is traveling, and Drone 4 descends and prepares for attack. Manned aircraft are nearby, in case they are needed, and a satellite can be repositioned if necessary.

And then the drone operators open fire? By pressing a button in Langley, Virginia?

"People who haven't experienced it really shouldn't comment on it," says Jumper. "There is a process that you go through for each and every target, and it is not offhand in any way. These are not instant decisions that are made. The consequences are thoroughly considered by commanders, people who are in charge, in every case. … Nobody takes this lightly. This is serious stuff."

The Accountability Vacuum

The evolution of warfare means that many countries are now building drones. Some 40 nations already have them. Did the United States open a door, once again? Sounding somewhat cautious, Jumper says that naturally the weapons are attractive.

On what basis, and by what right, is the CIA acting in Pakistan, on the territory of an ally? "I don't think that this (new kind of warfare) imposes any new strains on the legal system that don't already exist today," says Jumper.

There are others who aren't just concerned about the legal implications, but also the moral consequences of Jumper's idea. The United Nations has a "special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions," a post held until a few weeks ago by the Australian Philip Alston, a clever man who also teaches law at New York University. Alston is soft-spoken and parts his white hair on the left, and his glasses are constantly sliding off his nose. In a 29-page report he wrote for the UN Human Rights Council, he argues forcefully that the United States should exercise restraint in the use of drones.

His line of thought is clear, ending in the theory that if everyone starts using drones, it will spell the end of civilization. International law will no longer exist, because any nation will take it upon itself to declare person X a terrorist or a trainer of terrorists or a sponsor of terrorism, and then person X will simply die -- without so much as a trial or any further investigation.

Alston singles out Israel, Russia and above all the United States as trendsetters. According to Alston, all three countries argue that they are fighting "asymmetrical wars" and "terrorism," stretching the law in the process. "The result has been the displacement of clear legal standards with a vaguely defined license to kill, and the creation of a major accountability vacuum," he writes in the report.

'Quantum Leap'

The term "targeted killing" has been around for many decades. In 2000, Israel began liquidating Palestinians from the air. In November 2002, the CIA sent its first armed drone to Yemen, where it killed al-Qaida leader Ali Kaid Sinjan al-Harithi and five of his men.

Is this state-sponsored murder?

As a lawyer, Alston is hesitant to use such strong words, but he says: "It tends to be assumed in good faith almost, that intelligence agencies exist in a complete legal vacuum. That, of course, we couldn't do certain things in terms of the official police or other agencies of the state. But if it's carried out by intelligence agencies under cover, then by definition there can be no possible accountability."

He describes putting the CIA "in charge of major weapons systems in a program that is killing large numbers of people on a regular basis" as a "quantum leap." "And, of course, once you have made that leap, then with each controversial program that comes up, you simply say: 'Well, let it be done by the CIA.'"

For the US Air Force's drone attacks in Afghanistan, Alston writes that there is a list of future targets, and that two verifiable human sources and "substantial additional evidence" are required before a target can be placed on the list. (No one knows the level of proof that the CIA requires for its drone attacks in Pakistan.) The drones, according to Alston, have murdered al-Qaida members, Taliban fighters and even drug barons who had given money to the Taliban. Is this legal? Is it legitimate? And where does it stop?

On the Kill List

When Anwar al-Awlaki heard the whirring of a drone in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, he knew that he was the target. He left his wife and three children to hide in the desert, and a lawsuit has now been filed on his behalf to protest his impending assassination.

Al-Awlaki, a US citizen born in New Mexico, is on the Obama administration's kill list. He is a Muslim, was a radio imam and was in contact with Nidal Malik Hasan, the officer who shot and killed 13 people in Fort Hood, Texas in 2009. The CIA calls him a "recruiter." "The US government has decided to put this man on the 'kill list' and they refuse to tell us why and what proof they have against him," says Jameel Jaffer of the American Civil Liberties Union in New York.

Of course, many in Washington hold a completely different view of cases like these. They characterize the targeted killings as self-defense and insist that they represent the autonomous decisions of an autonomous nation at war.

It takes a while to reach the people in Washington who were instrumental in developing the push-button war. Roger Cressey helped to design the American counterterrorism strategy in the war on terror, as the Bush administration called it. As the director for transnational threats at the US National Security Council, Cressey had significant influence on the president.

The Ability to Take Out Bin Laden

Cressey has wavy hair and rosy skin, and he drinks "Vitaminwater," the drink of the moment among health-conscious Americans. He was in office on Sept. 7, 2000, when Osama bin Laden was spotted, through a drone camera, in a training camp in Afghanistan wearing a white robe. Cressey explains that at the time he asked himself what it would be like if they had the ability to take him out.

He argues that this, in fact, is all there is to say about the matter. "If we had developed the ability to perform a Predator-style targeted killing before 2000, we might have been able to prevent 9/11," he says. "We fought for the ability to take out known terrorists like Osama bin Laden and were only given permission after 9/11."

But there are those with different views. John Radsan, a former CIA legal adviser, says: "What is unique about targeted killings is that former President Bush seems to have delegated his trigger authority, his ability to order a killing, to the head of the CIA, who then delegated it to the head of the Counterterrorist Center. That means that someone who has not been elected, not been confirmed by the Senate, is able to determine if someone lives or dies."

John Rizzo, the CIA's acting general counsel from 2003 to 2009, finds the image of the drones bewildering. He cuts an elegant figure, with his yellow socks, yellow shirt, suspenders and white beard. Rizzo says that he is surprised that waterboarding, a method of torture, was so widely condemned, while hardly anyone questions the drone strategy. And then he asks: "Wouldn't it be safer, and cleaner, wouldn't it be better in terms of avoiding killing innocent civilians, wouldn't it actually be humaner if we had hit squads who followed high-value al-Qaida operatives and put a bullet in their head?"

The Limits of Drone Warfare

Robert Baer, a former CIA agent, says: "Targeted killings provide what seems like a clean and easy solution to a problem. But where does it stop? If we can perform targeting killings in Pakistan, a nominal ally, why can't we do it within the borders of allies like the UK or Germany? Should we be able to perform them to clean up our cities? When does it stop?"

There is undoubtedly a debate going on in Washington. But it is not being conducted openly, because any politician who questions the drones would likely be painted as unpatriotic and become unelectable in the current political climate.

Baer is a stocky man with a cynical streak. He once came up with a plan to assassinate former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but it never materialized. He was the inspiration for actor George Clooney's character in the film "Syriana." Today Baer is one of the few Washington insiders who is openly expressing what many people are thinking.

"Targeted killings are easier for the CIA or for the military to deal with than taking someone prisoner," Baer says. "No one really ever questions a killing, but when you take someone prisoner, then you are responsible for the person and then the headaches come. We have a logic which leads to more and more targeted killings."

Al-Qaida Strikes Back

No one had expected that those being hunted by drones would strike back. It is part of the very essence and definition of the drone war that the United States does the attacking while remaining inaccessible to the enemy.

But the enemy is learning. On Dec. 30, 2009, it responded by attacking the headquarters of the CIA's drone war in Afghanistan.

It was early in the afternoon, and the White House in distant Washington was waiting for a call from Afghanistan. The CIA people working there, near the Pakistani border, had already scheduled the call. Jennifer Lynne Matthews, a mother of three, was in charge of the drone program near the city of Khost. Camp Chapman, an inconspicuous collection of tents, containers and vehicles, was heavily guarded by three checkpoints and surrounded with NATO wire.

The use of an informant called Humam al-Balawi was about to become a significant achievement in the American program. Al-Balawi had provided the Americans with photos of him with al-Qaida members, and now he was on his way to Camp Chapman to tell them everything he had learned. The Americans hoped that al-Balawi might even be able to lead them to Osama bin Laden.

Waved Through

Fourteen happy CIA agents were expecting him.

They were so pleased, in fact, that they simply waved the red vehicle carrying al-Balawi through the base's three checkpoints, and they were so proud of their achievement that they turned out to greet him in a large group.

When al-Balawi stepped out of the car, one of his hands was buried in the pocket of his trousers. "Pull out your hand," someone yelled. It was probably one of the guards, Dane Paresi or Scott Robertson, but it's impossible to verify today.

What is clear is that al-Balawi did not remove his hand from his pocket. It is also clear that he had penetrated into the heart of the remote-controlled war. He was an enemy, not an informant. But by the time that had become clear, it was too late.

Al-Balawi was a doctor who had trained in Istanbul. He spoke Turkish, English and Arabic. He wrote a blog about jihad in which he called upon Muslims to fight against the United States. He was arrested in Jordan in 2007, and he was sitting in a prison cell in Amman when Abu Said, the king's cousin and an officer in Jordan's counterterrorism unit, came to see him. Had al-Balawi been tortured? He immediately agreed when Abu Said offered him his freedom in return for al-Balawi working as a double agent against the Taliban and al-Qaida. The goal, apparently, was to catch a senior al-Qaida official. The CIA allegedly offered al-Balawi $500,000.

Al-Balawi didn't think about the offer for long. He had wanted to travel to Pakistan but had been unable to obtain a visa. Now the Americans, the enemies, were paying him. But the biggest question is why the Jordanians and the CIA were so quick to trust him.

Triple Agent

There are two versions of the truth. One version, according to the CIA, is that the drone war is effective and that America's informants are working perfectly. "Those operations are seriously disrupting al-Qaida," CIA Director Leon Panetta said in an interview with the *Washington Post* in March 2010. "It's pretty clear from all the intelligence we are getting that they are having a very difficult time putting together any kind of command and control, that they are scrambling. And that we really do have them on the run." That is one version of the truth.

The other version of the truth is that the opposite is also true, and that the CIA was desperately proud of itself for finally having found someone who could help.

Al-Balawi became a triple agent. The CIA was paying him, but he confided in those he was supposed to betray. Meanwhile, al-Qaida trained him to stage an attack against the CIA's drone warriors. Al-Balawi disappeared for a few months into the mountains of Pakistan. When he turned up again, he had brought Abu Said videos, coordinates and photos. Abu Said wrote: "You've lifted our heads! You've lifted our heads in front of the Americans!"

Al-Balawi was considered to be the best source the CIA had ever had within the al-Qaida hierarchy. It wasn't difficult to imagine why the White House was waiting for the call from Camp Chapman.

'We Will Get You, CIA'

In a farewell video, al-Balawi says that he is happy. Sitting cross-legged with C-4 explosives already strapped to his belt, he smiles and says: "We will get you, CIA. We will bring you down. Don't think that just by pressing a button, you are safe." Then, pointing at his watch, he says: "Look, this is for you. It's not a watch. It is a detonator, to kill as many of you as I can."

And then there he was, standing in Camp Chapman with his hand in his pocket. At CIA headquarters in Langley, they are still asking themselves why all the rules were ignored at the time. One of the first of those rules is that only one agent should meet with informants, and another is that agents are not supposed to show their faces. Finally, security precautions are never supposed to be lifted. Why did the agents simply let al-Balawi in and then line up to greet him like a 14-member CIA receiving line?

Al-Balawi began to pray: "There is no God but Allah…"

It was 4:30 p.m. at Camp Chapman. Ten people died, including the guards Robertson and Paresi as well as Matthews, the mother of three, when al-Balawi pushed the detonator.

It was an old-fashioned suicide bombing -- al-Qaida's first counterattack in the new war.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan