

White House releases “guidance” for targeted killings

Obama’s drone-missile machinery of murder

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Late Friday evening, the Obama administration released a previously secret policy document that gives general instructions to those engaged in preparing, approving and carrying out the drone-missile assassinations that have become the hallmark of Obama’s eight years in the White House.

The document, a President Policy Guidance, or PPG, was made public, albeit with extensive redactions, as the result of a protracted legal battle by the American Civil Liberties Union. Federal Judge Colleen McMahon ordered the Justice Department to release the document no later than Friday, August 5. The ACLU posted the PPG on its web site the next morning.

The 18-page document makes clear that what has taken place since Obama entered the White House is the routinization and bureaucratization of state killings. Literally any individual on the planet could be targeted for assassination by a Hellfire missile fired from a US Reaper drone.

Derek Chollet, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs from 2012 to 2015, described the atmosphere inside the Obama administration in an interview last month with the *Washington Post*. “[T]he use of military power—the United States killing people overseas—occurs so frequently now that it just kind of washes over the debate,” he said. “It has become almost too easy. No one even notices it any more. It’s just a constant.”

While US citizens and resident aliens (“US persons” in the language of the PPG) require specific approval by the president—unlike citizens of foreign countries, where only notice to the president is required, but not his approval in advance—there is no geographical restriction whatsoever. Nothing stops the CIA from proposing, and the president from approving, the drone missile assassination of someone within the borders of

the United States.

And even the restrictions that are supposedly imposed by the document are subject to waiver at the president’s discretion. The document declares, in one of its most important passages:

“Nothing in this PPG shall be construed to prevent the President from exercising his constitutional authority as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive, as well as his statutory authority, to consider a lawful proposal from operating agencies that he authorize direct action that would fall outside of the policy guidance contained herein, including a proposal that he authorize lethal force against an individual who poses a continuing, imminent threat to another country’s persons.”

In other words, the document spells out what the president requires his subordinates to do in order to receive his approval, while reserving the right of the “Commander in Chief” to do anything he wants.

The document is filled with bureaucratic jargon reassuring the officials involved that their actions are in compliance with the law, that lawyers for the “nominating agencies”—the agencies drawing up the death lists—will review each candidate and provide assurances that their targeting is “lawful.” Moreover, assassination strikes will be authorized only if there is “near certainty” that there will not be civilian casualties.

The only “certainty,” however, is that the guidance document has been drawn up to create a paper trail exonerating the decision-makers against future prosecution at a war crimes tribunal. These officials will argue that they were assured no civilians would be killed. In turn, lower-level officials have been told what type of assurances they must provide in order to have their “nominations” to the death lists approved.

A footnote on the second page explains, “This PPG does not address otherwise lawful and properly authorized activities that may have lethal effects, which are incidental to the primary purpose of the operation.” In other words, unintended deaths, what was termed “collateral damage” during the Vietnam War, are simply not an issue. This is nothing but a blank check for killing civilians on a mass scale, as long as the deaths are explained as “incidental” to the main operation.

The PPG spells out a complex approval process. It starts with the “nominating agency,” usually the CIA or Pentagon, with recommendations approved by the CIA director or secretary of defense, then reviewed by the staff of the National Security Council, which works at the direction of the president, and finally signed off on by the “deputies committee,” a group consisting of the No. 2 officials of the Pentagon, CIA, State Department and other national security agencies, and then the “principals committee,” which brings together the senior officials of the same agencies. In the event of inter-agency disputes, or if the target is a “US person,” the final decision is reserved to the president.

The role of the NSC in this process is particularly important. This body has quadrupled in size under the Bush and Obama administrations, as day-to-day direction of national security policy has been concentrated in the White House. Besides giving the president and his closest aides a direct line to the military-intelligence apparatus, the NSC insulates the drone assassination program from outside scrutiny.

Considered part of the White House, the NSC is exempt from any congressional scrutiny as well as the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act, under the interpretation of “executive privilege” embraced by Bush and Obama and accepted by Democrats and Republicans in Congress. NSC officials, up to and including current National Security Adviser Susan Rice, cannot be subpoenaed by a congressional committee or otherwise held accountable for their actions.

According to former Obama administration officials, there are currently seven countries where drone missile killings are taking place: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. But Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as active war zones, do not require advance approval. They are essentially “free-

fire zones” for the drone missile operators. It is unclear whether Libya was given the same status when Obama last week signed an order authorizing US bombing of supposed ISIS bases in the country.

Last month, the White House released data for the first time on civilian deaths caused by drone missile strikes, but its figures were widely dismissed as a gross underestimation by journalists and human rights groups that have investigated the program. The “official” figure of 116 civilians killed in drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya is only one-tenth the estimate of the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, for example.

Like the redacted text of the President Policy Guidance document, the civilian death estimate was released late on a Friday, in a signal to the corporate-controlled media that this was information the US government preferred to downplay.

The media obediently followed orders. A few perfunctory articles appeared in newspapers on Saturday and Sunday, but there was no outcry, there were no editorials denouncing the assertion of a presidential “right to kill” without judicial process, and the Sunday television interview programs did not so much as mention the word “drone.”



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