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The Dangerous Precedent of POTUS Picking Targets

By *J. Michael Barrett*

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Washington is abuzz over the presumed political pandering behind the White House's fostering the image of the Commander in Chief as the final arbiter of which among our terrorist enemies abroad is or is not a legitimate target for U.S. drone strikes. While regrettably self-serving if true, the outrage misses the more important point: the President's limited time is better spent on strategy than on tactics.

Simply stated, civilian control of the U.S. military is a foundational concept of our democracy, but it doesn't mean the President needs to pull the trigger himself. It is inescapable that briefs getting to the President are short, often consensus-driven, and lack some details because they have been filtered and reviewed by dozens of people. That is fine for delivering information to support strategic decisions, but insufficient for tactical go/no-go decisions that require both a deeper background in military and intelligence affairs and appreciation of subtle differences within snippets of intelligence reports than any President could or should have. We must protect the kinds of tactical and operationally sensitive information otherwise not written down because it could compromise sources and expose tradecraft and relationships with foreign intelligence services. Also, the President need not personally weigh the personality of the field officer filing the report or institutional rivalries that shade conclusions this way or that. Unless the target is Bin Laden himself, isn't it better that the President be setting policy, delegating to trusted professionals, and spending his time working to resolve other major issues?

Three related concerns also arise:

First, even if he had all the details he doesn't have decades of on-the-ground experience in intelligence to rely upon in making tactical-level life and death decisions. We live in a harsh and changing world, one where a decision today to use a drone kills a man without trial or appeal. In a world where a couple dozen people can kill three thousand and cost billions in damage and decades of war, such summary executions may have become necessary. As a realist I can accept that because the other option is to let these terrorists kill untold hundreds or thousands of innocent lives. But it is not appropriate for the President to be seen as picking specific names and setting the conditions under which specific strikes occur; he is neither qualified nor sufficiently protected to be doing such tactical tasks.

Second, we cannot afford a President overly-wedded to any specific decision nor forget the need to protect the Oval Office from repercussions following inevitable mistakes, collateral damages, killing a source by accident, or potentially politically-motivated International Criminal Court (ICC) actions.

Third, any executive must build out his team, empower subordinates, and rely on others with more experience, perspective, and time to spend making the tactical decisions and doing the legwork. President

Lincoln famously got involved in the Civil War by hiring and firing generals but he didn't point the

cannons himself or set the time of a given battle; he set forth orders and held subordinates accountable because the President's role is in to craft strategy with the execution done via duly appointed subordinates. Taking away these decisions isolates a leader from developing trusted aides who can act in his stead - a critical force multiplier needed for any complex operation, and doubly so for a White House.

For these reasons and more the President should set policy and let someone else make the call. This could be the head of the Special Operations Command, Director of National Intelligence, or a special panel convened for making such decisions.

Meanwhile, the President should focus on serious strategic issues like the impacts of the current laws requiring 'sequestration' cuts of another \$500 billion from the national security budget, strengthening ties with NATO and other allies, and addressing frictions on issues like Syria, re-supply lines thru Pakistan to Afghanistan, and the rise of China as a true naval power.

In a rough and tumble world sometimes realism dictates a certain amount of plausible deniability. The President would do well to remember that and leave the sorting of specific targets to those under his command and acting in due regard to his specific guidance. The intelligence and military professionals at senior levels have spent decades developing their instincts and either they are up to the job or they should be replaced with people who are. Either way, the President needs to operate strategically and set policy by focusing on the big picture.

About the Author



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