

Heartless Killer

The relative ease of targeted drone strikes carries with it the risk of strengthening the ideological appeal of extremists.



‘We cannot kill our way out of this’

After 9/11, did the urge to strike with vengeance seriously weaken effective intelligence gathering, analysis and espionage? *By Chris Whipple*

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hortly before his confirmation hearing as Barack Obama's CIA director, David Petraeus dropped by the home of one of his predecessors, Michael Hayden, for advice. "As he was leaving," recalls Hayden, "I just kind of tugged at him and I said, 'Dave, one more thing I want to tell you. CIA has never looked more like OSS than it does right now. But it's not OSS.'" Not since the swashbuckling, Nazi-hunting days of the Office of Strategic Services, Hayden warned him, had the CIA been so focused on lethal covert paramilitary operations at the expense of intelligence gathering. As Gen. Petraeus departed, Hayden told him: "You're going to have to work every day to make CIA the nation's global espionage service too."

Has the world's most powerful intelligence service morphed into a lethal paramilitary force, a killing machine? It's a question at the heart of a spirited debate among the former directors about the CIA's mission, a battle for the soul of the agency. Over the past 10 months, in more than 100 hours of interviews, my partners Jules and Gedeon Naudet and I talked with Petraeus, Hayden and the 10 other living CIA directors for *The Spymasters: CIA in the Crosshairs*, a documentary airing on Showtime.

It was on CIA director George Tenet's watch, in 2001, that drones, once just eyes in the sky, became lethal birds of prey, changing the calculus of counterterrorism. Combative and fidgeting in his chair at our Washington, D.C. studio, Tenet had a lot to get off his chest. One week before the 9/11 attacks, he told me, the subject of arming drones with missiles came up at a Principals meeting (the gathering of George W. Bush's top national security officials). "I had a question," he recalls. "And it is a question that still needs to be asked today. 'Do you want the civilian head of an intelligence organization firing a weapon outside the chain of military command?' It's a big question. They needed to answer the question. We never got the answer. And off we went." The attacks on 9/11 rendered that question moot. Henceforth the CIA would wage undeclared aerial war against Al Qaeda—with a remotely piloted weapon that strikes with impunity and otherworldly accuracy.

When he became President Barack Obama's CIA director in 2009, Leon Panetta was shocked to discover that he confronted life-and-death decisions every day. Standing in Arlington Cemetery, at the funeral of a CIA officer killed (along with six colleagues) by a suicide

bomber at Khost, Afghanistan, Panetta was informed that the bombing's mastermind was in the crosshairs of a CIA drone. "We knew who the individual was," Panetta says. "This was a bad guy." Panetta's dilemma: "Unfortunately, this individual had family and wife and children around him, so the question was what should we do?" The judgment call fell to the devoutly Catholic Panetta, once an altar boy. "The White House said, 'Look, you're going to have to make a judgment here,'" he recalls. "Suddenly, I was making decisions on life and death as director. And those are never easy, and frankly they shouldn't be easy." In the end, Panetta gave the green light; the lethal strike killed the terrorist, but also his wife and family. "What you do has to be based on what your gut tells you is right," Panetta said. "You have to be true to yourself—and hope that ultimately God agrees with you."

Executive Order 12333, signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, prohibits the CIA from engaging in assassination. But are drone strikes—known as "targeted killings"—prohibited? "You know, it's curious," John Deutch, Bill Clinton's CIA director, muses. "Certain kinds of activity are called 'assassination.' Others are not. The use of drones going after particular targets is not termed an assassination in the sense of this executive order." Why not, I asked him. "I don't know," he replied. "You could answer the question as well as I do." Former director Hayden says the difference is grounded in the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, passed by Congress one week after 9/11. "There is a distinction between a political assassination and a targeted killing of an enemy combatant after Congress has declared war against Al Qaeda. It's as close to a declaration of war as we will ever get in this country again. And we are going after enemy combatants consistent with the laws of armed conflict."

Campaigning for the presidency, Senator Barack Obama had pledged to undo almost every instrument of George Bush's "War on Terror." And yet on President Obama's watch, drone strikes escalated dramatically. "National security looks a lot different from the Oval than it does from a hotel room in Iowa," reflects Hayden. "Look, I'll be completely candid with you. An awful lot of what we now call analysis in the American intelligence community is really targeting. Frankly, that has been at the expense of the broader, more global view. We're safer because of it, but it has not been cost-free." Michael

Morell, who served as acting director under presidents Bush and Obama, echoes Hayden's view. "There's no doubt that CIA has a much larger paramilitary mission than it ever has, going all the way back to its roots," he says. "There's no doubt that over the long term that's not a healthy thing, because the primary job of the Central Intelligence Agency is to collect secrets."

Robert Gates rose through the ranks as an analyst to become CIA director under George H.W. Bush. "There's a tendency to get so caught up in the scintillating covert world, that we forget that it's on the analytical side and the espionage side that CIA actually earns its money," he argues. While targeting terrorists, Gates points out, the agency has missed major strategic developments right under its nose: "Why was CIA unable to find the Syrian nuclear reactor (secretly built by the North Koreans in 2007)? That's the kind of thing we're supposed to be really good at. Why did we have to be told about it by the Israelis? These are the things that really matter strategically. CIA's got to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. Whether it's the Middle East or Russia or the South China Sea, that's where espionage, intelligence collection and intelligence analysis are so critical."

Once a year, the present and former CIA directors—ranging from George H.W. Bush, 91, to the current boss, John Brennan, 60—are invited to a private gathering at CIA headquarters. The ostensible reason is a briefing on the state of the world. But the real purpose is to renew bonds forged in the trenches of spy craft—and to debate the agency's purpose in the world.

On the issue of covert paramilitary action, and many others, the directors are profoundly torn: What is fair game in the fight against a ruthless enemy that targets civilians? Is torture ever acceptable? "I would bring it back," declared Donald Trump on the presidential campaign trail. "I think waterboarding is peanuts compared to what they do to us." Trump's fellow candidates Carly Fiorina and Jeb Bush also said they would consider reviving this notorious "enhanced interrogation technique." But Mike Hayden warns the agency will never go down that road again: "If some future president is going to decide to waterboard, he'd better bring his own bucket—because he's going to have to do it himself."

The architect of the George W. Bush administration's enhanced interrogation program, former head of the agency's Counterterrorism Center, Jose Rodriguez, believes the CIA's emphasis on paramilitary operations is misguided. "This administration

prefers killing terrorists rather than holding them captive," he insists. "And the reason is because it's hard to capture [terrorists]. It's hard work. And many would consider it dirty business." James Woolsey, President Bill Clinton's CIA director, says: "They're killing a lot of people with drone strikes that would better be captured and interrogated—so that we might have a chance of learning what the terrorist group is going to do next. You can't question somebody you've killed."

Hayden warns that for all its short-term effectiveness, drone warfare comes with a price. "Some of the things we do to keep us safe for the close fight—for instance, targeted killings—can make it more difficult to resolve the deep fight, the ideological fight. We feed the jihadi recruitment video that these Americans are heartless killers." Indeed, to a man, all the living directors agree that the CIA cannot kill its way out of the problems that confront the agency and the world. "Sometimes I think we get ourselves into a frenzy—believing that killing is the only answer to a problem," says Tenet. "And the truth is, it's not. That's not what our reason for existence is."

John Brennan, the CIA's current director, has the lugubrious air of an undertaker as he surveys the scourge of terrorist threats from ISIS to cyber warfare. "We're not going to see an end to terrorism in my lifetime or my children's lifetime," he told me. "The best we can do is give time and space to our policy makers, diplomats and negotiators to resolve the tensions that exist in the world." Brennan insists the agency has struck the right balance between the hard slog of intelligence gathering and the tip of the spear, paramilitary action. His fellow directors are not so sure. "One of the reasons we ended up in a war in Iraq is because of flawed intelligence about weapons of mass destruction," says Bob Gates. "So that's an analytical failure. Just think about the past decade or more had we not gone to war in Iraq. We have all these covert ops that get all the attention—and the truth is they have limited strategic consequence. But an intelligence failure such as that changes history." ★

Chris Whipple is the writer and executive producer of the documentary film, The Spymasters: CIA in the Crosshairs, which premiered on Showtime and will be broadcast on CBS May 21. He is currently writing a book on the White House chiefs of staff and their influence on the presidency.



David Petraeus
Director of the CIA
2011-2012

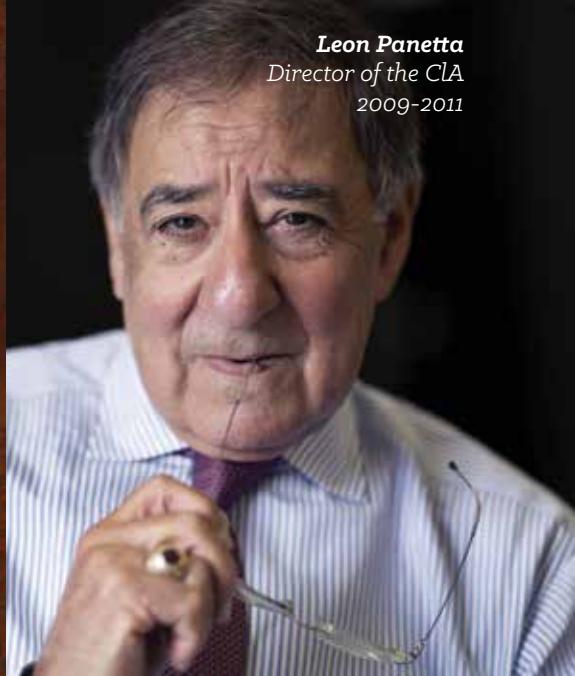


Michael Hayden
Director of the CIA
2006-2009



George Tenet
Director of the CIA
1996-2004

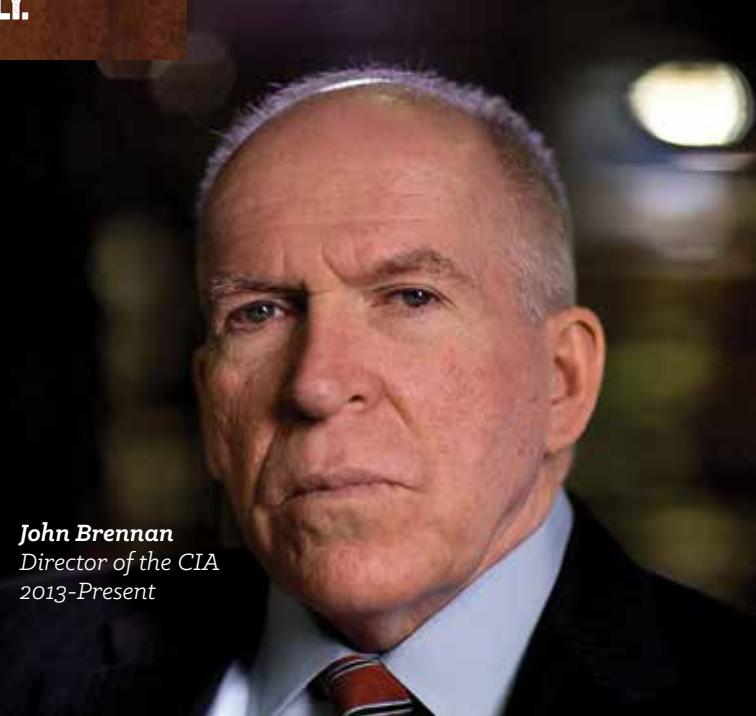
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Director of the CIA
2009-2011



Robert Gates
Director of the CIA
1991-1993



John Brennan
Director of the CIA
2013-Present