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How the CIA Became ‘One Hell of a Killing Machine’

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On April 14, 2004, CIA Director George Tenet looked so impotent he might have starred in a Viagra commercial. Tenet had come before the 9/11 Commission for what was sure to be a public flogging. In response, he alternately apologized for the agency’s failure to stop 9/11 and explained it away. Finally, the exhausted panelists posed him a bottom-line question: how long would it take Tenet to get the CIA in a position to counterattack al-Qaida?

“[It’s going to take another five years](#),” Tenet confessed, “to build the clandestine service the way the human intelligence capability of this country needs to be run.”

Seven years later, no one views the CIA as anything resembling impotent. The drone strikes it operates are the most important counterterrorism tool the Obama administration uses, battering a [relatively small section of Pakistan](#) so intensely that in 2010 they struck an average of once every three days. [Osama bin Laden is dead](#) as the result of a military operation the CIA commanded, highlighting the unprecedented coordination between CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). In the words of the head of CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, its central nervous system for counterterrorism: “[We are killing these sons of bitches faster than they can grow them now](#).”

9/11 Commission Chairman Thomas Kean judged Tenet’s admission “[one of the most appalling comments we heard](#).” But as it turned out, Tenet’s timetable was prescient. A [remarkable Washington Post story](#) explores the rejuvenated CIA, which one veteran calls “one hell of a killing machine.”

CIA’s fleet of 30 Predators and Reapers — the *Post* gives the total — get the most attention, and understandably so. But it’s easy to forget that the drones are a lagging indicator. Every

intelligence operation, even the ones that go wrong and kill civilians, is the result of the CIA's cultivation of a network of spies it didn't possess back during Tenet's testimony. Drone strikes need spotters; the CIA has them in a [group of Pashtun informants](#) who cross the Afghanistan-Pakistan border with news of militant activity.

It's never been publicly acknowledged. But without that network, it's impossible to understand the massive and sustained rise in drone strikes. The *Post* reports that the program "has killed more than 2,000 militants and civilians since 2001." That's not really the whole story. The vast majority of those kills have come since 2008, according to [data collected by the New America Foundation](#), with only 112 estimated deaths maximum occurring between 2004 and 2007. Last year, the drones killed as many as 993 people; the body count is as high as 453 so far in 2011.

Why? Two reasons. First, President George W. Bush [relaxed secret restrictions](#) on special operations and intelligence activities in Pakistan. And second, the spy network that Tenet didn't have came to fruition. Waziristan tribesmen described [getting money to plant homing beacons for drones](#) in the houses of targeted militants. al-Qaida and Pakistani Taliban mouthpieces started [sounding paranoid](#) about infrared devices powered by 9-volt batteries and tattletale chips planted in SIM cards. Unlike earlier in the decade, the CIA had *data* about where the terrorists were and their "patterns of life" — or, at least, data about people it *thought* were terrorists.



Touring the Counterterrorism Center's Pakistan-Afghanistan Department — note the listed order of those countries — the *Post* observes, "Every paid informant is given a unique crypt' that starts with a two-letter digraph designating spies who are paid sources of the CTC." It's replicating that bureau's work with an "equivalent department for Yemen and Somalia," the major centers of the [U.S.' expanding shadow wars](#) — which have already featured drone strikes.

Then comes the tight collaboration with JSOC. So-called “Omega” or “Cross Matrix” teams comprised of CIA and JSOC operators travel Afghanistan and Iraq in civilian clothes and cars. Mostly they meet with their local sources of information. But on “at least five occasions,” the *Post* reports, they’ve tested their ability to sneak into Pakistan undetected to execute raids — “early rehearsals” of the bin Laden hit.

They’re also not so into apprehending terrorists. While the CIA still maintains secret prisons like the one [Danger Room pal Jeremy Scahill exposed in Somalia](#), President Obama ordered most of the “black sites” closed in 2009. As former JSOC commander William McRaven recently testified, there [aren’t any long-term detention facilities for terrorists anymore](#), leading to improvised solutions like [the brigs of U.S. warships](#). When the CIA’s Pashtun snitches get used for attacking terrorists, they’re “‘more kill-capture’ than capture-kill,” the *Post* reports.

That raises the biggest question of all surrounding the new post-9/11 CIA. If it’s acting like a military organization, shouldn’t it have the (relative) transparency and accountability of a military organization? Most members of Congress don’t have the security clearances necessary to know anything at all about CIA operations, preempting effective oversight. Congress is basically reliant on the CIA to check its own work, content to believe the CIA director when he says that the drones kill terrorists, not innocent people. Meanwhile, the *Post* reports that CIA proxies have “used more indiscriminate means, including land mines, to disrupt insurgent networks.”

Two analysts who’ve closely studied the drone program, Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, recently argued in *Foreign Affairs* that [the military should take over the drones](#) in order to introduce accountability into their operations. It wouldn’t impact the drone operations at all: Air Force pilots fly them for the CIA, the *Post* confirms. But it would bring the shadow wars at least marginally out of the shadows.

At the same time, the 2011-era CIA is the direct descendent of the CIA that existed on April 14, 2004. It was a moment of abject humiliation for the agency, called to account for 9/11 even *after* warning the Bush White House in the spring and summer of 2001 that it was perceiving [an imminent, unspecified terrorist attack](#). The 9/11 Commission accurately channeled a sense of outrage around the country over the fact that the CIA lacked — to strip it of euphemism — a killing machine. Now the agency has built one. Will new director David Petraeus be willing to give it up?