

# Framing Al-Awlaki

## How Government Officials and Corporate Media Legitimized a Targeted Killing

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by Andy Lee Roth

*A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.*

—Max Weber<sup>1</sup>

*The US government has the right to order the killing of American citizens overseas if they are senior al-Qaeda leaders who pose an imminent terrorist threat and cannot reasonably be captured, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. said Monday.*

*“Any decision to use lethal force against a United States citizen—even one intent on murdering Americans and who has become an operational leader of al-Qaeda in a foreign land—is among the gravest that government leaders can face,” Holder said in a speech at Northwestern University’s law school in Chicago. “The American people can be—and deserve to be—assured that actions taken in their defense are consistent with their values and laws.”*

—The Washington Post<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

As the United States pursues a global program of targeted killings unprecedented in the nation's history, thus flaunting "a capacity for violence [that] undermines its own standards of justice and individual rights," corporate media profoundly fail to inform the US public about targeted killings, contributing to an unaware populace who overwhelmingly support the Obama administration's international assassination program.<sup>3</sup>

According to a February 2012 opinion poll conducted by the *Washington Post* and ABC News, 83 percent of Americans approve of Obama's use of drone strikes against terrorist suspects overseas.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, 65 percent of Americans (including 58 percent of Democrats) approve of drone strikes "if those suspected terrorists are American citizens living in other countries." As suggested by this poll and others like it, the Obama administration does not have to worry about public opinion when it comes to drone strikes and even the targeted killing of American citizens suspected of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Progressives, who have been highly critical of both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama for extraordinary rendition, detainee mistreatment, and the suspension of habeas corpus, have not been equally vocal in their criticisms of targeted killings.<sup>6</sup>

Popular support for targeted killing begs the question of whether US citizens actually understand President Obama's counterinsurgency program, since, in the words of one critic, "The scale of our state-sponsored murder is masked from public view."<sup>7</sup> This chapter examines how corporate media, in consort with government officials, mask the use of drones in targeted killing from public attention. I argue that corporate media coverage of drones contributes to the public understanding of targeted killings as within the state's claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.<sup>8</sup>

Claiming a monopoly on legitimate use of force only becomes necessary when there are competitors to challenge it. Since 9/11, the United States and other national governments have identified terrorists as the most significant challenge to such claims, most obviously and consequentially in President Bush's (unratified) declaration of a "global war on terror."

Based on Barack Obama's campaign rhetoric, many expected (and hoped) that he might break with the Bush administration's approach to counterterrorism. Indeed, in February 2009, shortly after Obama took office, a panel of sixty eminent judges and lawyers from around the world, convened by the International Commission of Jurists, called on President Obama to "immediately and publicly renounce" the "immense damage" done to international law by the Bush administration's war on terror.<sup>9</sup> Despite this and other appeals, Obama has, as president, in fact intensified and expanded Bush's global war on terror.<sup>10</sup> In Weberian terms, Obama's use of drones to target suspected terrorists far from any battlefield constitutes a significant expansion of the state's claim to a monopoly on the legitimate use of force "within a given territory": Where Weber theorized geographic limits to such claims, President Obama has defined the "given territory" claimed by the United States to include all of the world. Consequently, some critics now postulate an "Obama doctrine," premised on killing, rather than detaining, the nation's perceived enemies.<sup>11</sup>

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) reports that, as of June 2012, the Obama administration has overseen 281 of the 333 drone strikes in the US's secret bombing campaign in Pakistan. The US does not officially acknowledge this campaign, although TBIJ reports that it has resulted in a death toll of somewhere between 2,490 and 3,194 people, including 482 to 832 civilians and 175 children.<sup>12</sup> In Somalia, TBIJ reports as many as 21 US military strikes since 2007 with a toll of up to 169 people, including 11 to 57 reported civilians.<sup>13</sup> Covert US strikes by the US military and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Yemen have killed between 326 to 931 people, including 58 to 146 civilians since 2003. At least 35 strikes have taken place since May 2011, leading TBIJ researchers to conclude that the US campaign of covert strikes in Yemen is "currently at the same level as the CIA's controversial drone campaign in Pakistan."<sup>14</sup>

These sobering figures expose a fundamental tension in the Obama administration, which has simultaneously sought to (1) distance itself from the Bush-Cheney administration, by denouncing government secrecy and excesses of executive power, while (2) refusing to inform the American public about its covert, global program of

targeted killings. The tension between the two aims is aptly described as a “mind-bending philosophical conundrum.”<sup>15</sup>

Given both the scope of Obama’s targeted killing program and the US public’s apparent support of it, this chapter undertakes a content analysis of corporate news coverage of targeted killings, and in particular the assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki. The aim of this content analysis is to assess the extent to which corporate news coverage contributes to the legitimization of targeted killing, or whether this coverage might call into question the US government’s authority to execute suspected terrorists without due process. To do so, this chapter addresses three specific questions:

### **1. Whom do corporate journalists treat as authorized sources of information and opinion about targeted killings?**

I examine direct quotations as an index of the range of perspectives offered by corporate media. This analysis provides one basis for understanding how corporate news coverage contributes to a false sense of consensus about the legitimacy of drone strikes as a means of targeted killing.

### **2. How do corporate media describe al-Awlaki?**

Descriptions of al-Awlaki in corporate news coverage contribute to the framing of him as a true threat to the US and therefore a valid target.

### **3. What relevant aspects of the story do corporate media omit?**

This is an “elephant outside the frame” issue. By considering sources of information and opinion outside the narrow range favored by corporate journalists, I show that corporate news coverage ignores the powerful economic interests driving the boom of drone use, domestically and worldwide.

Underlying these three specific questions is a fourth, broader issue that this chapter also addresses, even though the issue goes beyond the scope of the present analysis: *What does it mean to identify an action as “terrorism” or a person as a “terrorist”?* Is terrorism a crime, an act of war, or some new category of action?<sup>16</sup> In analyzing the lessons from a decade of counterterrorism legislation and its relation to

national and international human rights law, Dr. Alex Conte of the International Commission of Jurists reports that “the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of terrorism has resulted in the use of broad, over-reaching definitions of the term.”<sup>17</sup>

For the most part, our leaders in Congress and the White House do not address these questions—and the corporate media follow their lead. So, I intend this study to contribute to a larger project, collectively undertaken by independent journalists, organizations such as Project Censored, and patriotic citizens across the US—to ask fundamental questions about our government’s response to terrorism, and to hold our leaders accountable for those responses when they ignore due process, the rule of law, and international human rights.

## METHODOLOGY

The database includes news stories published or broadcast between July 2010 and March 2012. The data include print stories from newspapers, including the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post*; from weekly newsmagazines, including *Newsweek* and *US News and World Report*; and from three wire services: the Associated Press, the State News Service, and Reuters. Broadcast data includes televised stories by ABC, CNN, CBS, Fox, and NBC; and radio by NPR. The date range spans the time from when the US Department of the Treasury placed Anwar al-Awlaki on its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (July 16, 2010) to Attorney General Eric Holder’s highly anticipated speech defending the Obama administration’s claim that it can lawfully target American citizens (March 5, 2012).

Using the LexisNexis Academic database, I searched for references to the term “targeted killing” and its variants in the headlines and leads of print, broadcast, and wire stories during this time period. I conducted similar searches for “Anwar al-Awlaki” and the variant spellings of his name (e.g. al-Aulaqi). These searches generated eighty-six records. I excluded four of these from analysis because they were not news stories (e.g. editorials, opinion pieces, letters to the editor) or because they mentioned targeted killing or al-Awlaki only in passing. This left a data collection of eighty-two relevant news sto-

ries. Roughly estimated, this database encompasses just over 71,000 words of reporting, or approximately 2,000 to 2,400 column inches of newspaper text.<sup>18</sup>

For each relevant story, I coded (1) people whom journalists quoted directly, in print or through “sound bite,” and (2) descriptions of al-Awlaki. I identified 288 instances of direct quotations and sound bites. I coded these by source type (e.g. executive branch, civil liberties advocates, etc.) and, when relevant, by their position on (a) the specific killing of al-Awlaki and/or on (b) the Obama administration’s more general claims about the legitimacy of targeted killing. Because determining a quote’s position on these two matters sometimes involved subjective interpretation, I sought to minimize ambiguity by only coding “pro” or “con” positions when the quotation under analysis clearly took one position or another; I coded ambiguous positions as “neutral” (See Tables 2 and 3, below).

In addition to analyzing quoted sources, I also tracked descriptions of al-Awlaki, whether these were produced by quoted sources or by reporters themselves. Following the sociological method of grounded theory, I identified every description of al-Awlaki and then began to cluster these descriptions into categories that emerged and developed as I read and re-read the collection of descriptions.<sup>19</sup> I explicate the resulting categories—including, for example, “American,” “Superlatives,” and “Target”—in more detail, below.

## **THE PREDOMINANCE OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AS QUOTED SOURCES**

Prior research by sociologists on news production demonstrates that elites, and especially government officials, are both “the sources and subjects of most political stories” because, for news workers, “‘news’ is about what those in power say and do.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in periods of political crisis, “establishment journalism” focuses even more “firmly on official views of American policy.”<sup>21</sup>

The range of sources quoted in stories on targeted killings is—with one important exception—typical of establishment journalism: it reflects the strong journalistic bias for government officials as authorized sources. Table 1 summarizes these findings:

**TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF QUOTATIONS BY SOURCE TYPE**

<b>Source Type</b>	<b>Quotes*</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Executive	119	41
Civil Lib./Human Rights	42	15
Academic	24	8
Former Executive	17	6
Judicial	15	5
Former CIA	15	5
Congress	12	4
Think Tank	12	4
Other**	32	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>100</b>

\*“Quotes” include direct quotations from print news and sound bites from broadcast news.

\*\*“Other,” a residual category, includes legal counsel for the *New York Times*, presidential candidates not currently holding office, sources identified as “experts” but without an institutional affiliation, as well as foreign government officials, members of a Virginia mosque where al-Awlaki once preached, and sound bites of al-Awlaki himself.

Sources representing the executive branch (which includes not only the White House, but also the justice, defense, treasury, and state departments) are most frequently quoted. Within this broad category, justice department officials predominate (N=39, or 14 percent of the total quotes), followed by anonymous administration officials (N=33, 11 percent) and the president (N=16, 6 percent). Treasury and state department officials were each quoted four times.

Including sources from the judicial (N=15, 5 percent) and legislative (i.e. Congress, N=12, 4 percent) branches, current government officials account for the majority of quoted sources (N=146, 51 percent). Former executive officials, including members of prior presidential administrations (N=17, 6 percent) and retired CIA members (N=15, 5 percent) constitute a significant number of quoted sources. Reporters often quote former government officials as newsworthy sources that offer relevant insights on current events, based on their own past experience.<sup>22</sup> Journalists rely more heavily on former officials as news sources when current officials are reluctant to speak on record. When former government officials are included, the total for government



officials quoted (N=178) reaches nearly 62 percent. Officials representing civil liberties organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), and human rights groups, such as Human Rights First, constitute the next largest group of sources (N=42, 15 percent). Overall, non-governmental sources constitute approximately 38 percent of quoted sources.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the patterns depicted in Table 1. First, insofar as the majority of quoted sources are government officials, this shapes the range of perspectives on the validity of al-Awlaki's killing, and more broadly on the legitimacy of targeted killings. Of course, not all within the US government share a single position on these issues, but as media scholars who examine news coverage of military conflict recurrently demonstrate, in dealing with news about the United States' enemies, actual or perceived, the corporate media tend to reproduce the views of the White House and Pentagon.<sup>23</sup>



Second, insofar as government officials might differ on policy, Congress has historically been an important source of dissent with executive policy. For example, in studying news coverage of Vietnam, Daniel Hallin has shown how the US news media did not take an oppositional stance toward American policy in Vietnam until members of Congress began to question White House policy publicly.<sup>24</sup> The media's shift to an oppositional stance is best explained as "a reflection of and a response to a collapse of consensus—especially of elite consensus—on foreign policy."<sup>25</sup> Hallin's finding is especially relevant in the current context.

Members of Congress almost never appear as quoted sources in the current data. Quoted just twelve times, Congress accounts for a scant 4 percent of the 288 quotes analyzed. By comparison, congressional leaders were quoted only slightly more often (N=12) than members of the Virginia mosque where al-Awlaki once preached (N=8).

When quoted, members of Congress typically offered statements that betrayed the restrictions imposed on them by White House claims of national security, as can be seen in the following example: Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) believed al-Awlaki was "a lawful target" but called on the administration to provide details about its legal rationale in order "to maintain public support of secret operations."<sup>26</sup> This is the most critical quotation by a member of Congress in the data collected for this chapter—and in this quote Feinstein calls the administration to account only in order "to maintain public support of secret operations."

The low profile of congressional sources among those quoted is not only striking, but also consequential for the legitimization of targeted killing. As Hallin's research on news coverage of Vietnam shows, establishment news organizations did not adequately cover opposition to war in Vietnam until congressional elites publicly expressed opposition to administration policy. In the case of the Obama administration's policy of targeted killings, a paralyzed Congress yields to the administration, allowing corporate media to portray government consensus on that policy.

Why are members of Congress not more vocal on the issues of al-Awlaki's assassination and targeted killings? Whether they are supportive or actually opposed, Congress members have been muzzled

by executive claims of secrecy to protect national security and/or co-opted by lobbyists representing drone manufacturers.<sup>27</sup> Greg Miller of the *Washington Post* reported how “divided oversight” of congressional committees “has failed to keep pace with the way military and intelligence operations have converged,” with the result that disclosure of drone operations is generally limited to relevant committees in the House and Senate and sometimes only to their leaders. Those briefed must abide by restrictions that prevent them from discussing what they have learned with those who lack the requisite security clearances. The vast majority of lawmakers receive scant information about the administration’s drone program.<sup>28</sup>

Miller details a bureaucratically organized distribution of knowledge in which divided oversight and limited knowledge effectively preclude most congress members from acting as checks on executive power or from informing the public. His report is exceptional: no other news story in the data examined for this chapter addressed these issues.

The third conclusion to be drawn from Table 1, and from the pattern of quoted sources it summarizes, is that civil liberties and human rights organizations constitute the primary alternative to official governmental perspectives on targeted killings. This is not inherently problematic, of course, since the ACLU, CCR, and similar organizations position themselves publicly as watchdogs against government abuses of power. However, a closer examination of *when* corporate media grant standing to representatives of the ACLU, CCR, and other organizations as authorized news sources gives cause for concern.

During the time period covered by the data, the ACLU and CCR joined together to bring a series of lawsuits against the US government, challenging it to release basic, accurate information about its targeted killing program, contesting its position that individuals who have been designated as terrorists cannot obtain legal representation, and ultimately arguing that the government cannot execute its own citizens, far from any battlefield, without due process.<sup>29</sup>

The lawsuits made ACLU and CCR officials newsworthy: each time one of the cases entered a new phase (e.g. filing, motions, testimony, decision), ACLU and CCR representatives became newsworthy because journalists orient to the distinct, bureaucratic phases of

court cases as one basic way of reporting a developing news story.<sup>30</sup> Across the thirty-three times that news coverage directly quoted CCR or ACLU sources, I found just two that were not specifically associated with some phase of the ACLU and CCR lawsuits against the US government. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in the absence of those lawsuits, ACLU and CCR sources would have been quoted much less frequently—despite the reality that these organizations were consistently speaking out against the government’s targeted killing program through their own publications and events, and in independent media outlets.<sup>31</sup> This finding underscores Herman and Chomsky’s analysis that “non-routine” sources (like the ACLU and CCR) struggle for access. The lawsuits forced corporate news “gatekeepers” to include the oppositional perspectives of the ACLU and CCR. Without these sources, corporate news coverage seldom included perspectives critical of the government for al-Awlaki’s death and other targeted killings.

I also analyzed quotations that took an explicit position on the killing of al-Awlaki. Table 2 summarizes these findings and suggests two conclusions.

**TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF QUOTES BY POSITION ON LEGITIMACY OF KILLING AL-AWLAKI**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Quotes</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Legitimate	12	50
Illegitimate	10	42
Neutral	2	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100</b>

First, there is a rough balance between quotes treating al-Awlaki’s killing as legitimate (N=12) and those treating it as illegitimate (N=10). With such a small sample size, not too much can be inferred from these figures. At the very least, they reflect professional journalism’s commitment to objectivity, especially as it is achieved through “balance,” the practice of presenting “the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute” and providing “both sides with roughly equivalent attention.”<sup>32</sup> Quoted sources that

questioned the legitimacy of al-Awlaki's killing included representatives of the ACLU, CCR, academics, and a statement from the family of Samir Khan, an American citizen who was killed alongside al-Awlaki; by contrast, I found no direct quotations by current or former government officials that questioned the legitimacy of al-Awlaki's killing.

Second, it is noteworthy how few of the direct quotes specifically address the killing of al-Awlaki—just over 8 percent of the 288 direct quotes, in fact—even though the government's intent to kill him, or its having done so, were the central focus of many news stories. The significance of this finding is best understood in comparison with the distribution of quotes by position on the legitimacy of targeted killings in general, as summarized in Table 3:

**TABLE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF QUOTES BY POSITION ON LEGITIMACY OF TARGETED KILLINGS**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Quotes</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Legitimate	58	46
Illegitimate	51	40
Neutral	17	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>100</b>

A similar pattern of balance between “pro” and “con” positions is evident here, reinforcing the argument that journalistic commitments to balance and objectivity drive the selection of quoted sources.

Notably, many more quotations address the legitimacy of targeted killings in terms of the relatively abstract issue of executive privilege (Table 3, N=126), compared to the number of quotes focused on the legitimacy of the targeted killing of a specific person, Anwar al-Awlaki (Table 2, N=24).

The significance of this contrast is highlighted by a closer assessment of these direct quotes, in which two important patterns of argument become clear. Advocates for the legitimacy of targeted killing tend to express their support in abstract terms, as matters of counterterrorism policy or executive privilege. They do not identify al-Awlaki by name or address the targeting of him specifically. The following quotations exemplify this pattern:

“It’s a counterterrorism success for the United States and Yemeni and global counterterrorism forces.” —Rick “Ozzie” Nelson, director of the Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies<sup>33</sup>

“[The Awlaki hit] was a good strike.” —Dick Cheney<sup>34</sup>

“It’s something we had to do. . . . The president is showing leadership. The president is showing guts.” —Rep. Peter King (R-NY), chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security

“It’s legal. . . . It’s legitimate and we’re taking out someone who has attempted to attack us on numerous occasions. And he was on that list.” —Maryland Rep. C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger, the ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Intelligence<sup>35</sup>

In quotes by Nelson, Cheney, and King, the human victims disappear, even as their demise is evaluated in positive terms (“a success,” “a good strike,” “something we had to do”). In the fourth quotation, Ruppersberger acknowledges that a human being was targeted (“we’re taking out someone”) but quickly justifies it (“. . . has attempted to attack us. . . . He was on that list”).

President Obama’s initial statement on al-Awlaki’s death is one significant exception to the pattern of advocates for al-Awlaki’s death not mentioning him by name. “The death of Awlaki is a major blow to al-Qaeda’s most active operational affiliate,” Obama said hours after the September 30 strike.<sup>36</sup>

Notably, insofar as Obama identified al-Awlaki by name, he avoided claiming US responsibility for the killing, even as he praised the result.

By contrast, opponents of targeted killing were more likely to refer to al-Awlaki’s death specifically, and to identify him by name overtly, as exemplified in the following pair of quotations:

“The executive is claiming the power to go ahead and target al-Awlaki for assassination without going through anything that resembles traditional legal process.” —New York University law professor Sam Rascoff, on National Public Radio<sup>37</sup>

“Upon information and belief. . . . Anwar al-Awlaki is now subject to a standing order that permits the CIA and JSOC to kill him.” —ACLU and CCR’s lawsuit<sup>38</sup>

Whether quoted sources mention al-Awlaki by name or not might seem too fine a distinction when the subject’s life hangs in balance. But a handful of news stories treated precisely this point as newsworthy in its own right when reporting on Attorney General Eric Holder’s March 2012 speech, which sought to justify the Obama administration’s policy of targeted killings. Just twice in the text of his speech did Holder mention al-Awlaki by name, and neither time did he make reference to al-Awlaki’s killing.<sup>39</sup> *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, respectively, reported:

Holder’s discussion of lethal force against US citizens did not mention any individual by name, but his address was clearly animated by the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>40</sup>

Holder did not mention the September slayings of Awlaki or Kahn, or the reported slaying of Awlaki’s 16-year old son, Abdulrahman.<sup>41</sup>

In justifying the government’s program of targeted killing, Attorney General Holder and other quoted government officials consistently avoid identifying al-Awlaki by name. This evasion is part of a broader pattern in which quoted sources legitimating US drone strikes speak in ways that make the strikes’ human victims effectively disappear.<sup>42</sup>

## A “TERRORIST” AND A “TARGET”: DESCRIPTIONS OF AL-AWLAKI

Although government officials seldom identified al-Awlaki by name in direct quotations, they and others frequently formulated descriptions of him. Person-description is a rich sociological topic because description is *selective*, involving choices about what to describe and how to describe it.<sup>43</sup> This is especially true in institutional settings such as courts, where descriptions of identity, biography, and character feature prominently in determinations of innocence or guilt.<sup>44</sup>

This section analyzes how corporate journalists, and the sources that they select, describe Anwar al-Awlaki. The absence of public legal ruling for the September 30, 2011, extrajudicial execution of al-Awlaki makes print and broadcast news descriptions of him all the more significant. For want of official, legal justification, news reports become the primary, if not the sole, means available to the American public for understanding al-Awlaki’s identity and judging the validity of the government’s decision to kill him without formal charge or trial. This section analyzes four recurrent ways that corporate media described al-Awlaki, and argues that in aggregate these descriptions of al-Awlaki frame him as a true threat to the US and therefore a valid target.

### 1) “Yearbook” Descriptions

A number of the descriptions of al-Awlaki initially appear flattering and therefore harmless, the kinds of person-description one might more readily associate with high school yearbooks, rather than with a terrorist whose existence threatens the United States. Thus, al-Awlaki is repeatedly described as “charismatic,”<sup>45</sup> “inspirational,”<sup>46</sup> and “articulate.”<sup>47</sup> He was “popular,” a “rising star” who “used social media.”<sup>48</sup> On the surface, these descriptions appear positive.

However, when combined with other frequently employed descriptions of al-Awlaki, especially those identifying him as a “militant” or “radical cleric,”<sup>49</sup> otherwise positive characteristics like charisma, popularity, and articulateness become sinister: the recurrent use of the term “cleric” is telling. By definition, “cleric” can refer to priests or leaders in any religious tradition, but in combining the term with “militant” or “radical,” descriptions of al-Awlaki index his Muslim

faith in ways that can invoke and perpetuate popular conceptions of terror carried out by Muslim zealots, including especially the 9/11 attacks. This specification of al-Awlaki's identity exemplifies a basic finding from Solomon Asch's classic study of how we form impressions of personality.<sup>50</sup> In Asch's terms, descriptions such as "militant" or "radical cleric" transform the overall impression of the person. Moreover, in al-Awlaki's case, a radical or militant Muslim cleric who is also charismatic, popular, and articulate poses a greater threat, because these otherwise positive attributes can be put to evil purposes, especially in deceiving the innocent and recruiting the gullible. Thus, Fox correspondent Catherine Herridge, describing al-Awlaki's use of the Internet, referred to him as "the Facebook friend from hell. He really leveraged social networking to spread this ideology of hate."<sup>51</sup>

## **2) American-born/American citizen**

Much of the controversy surrounding the government's targeted killing of al-Awlaki derives from his status as a US citizen. Among the news reports examined for this research, every story that mentioned al-Awlaki by name also identified him as an American citizen or as having been born in the United States. Variations in how these reports formulate that important aspect of al-Awlaki's identity are subtle yet significant.

A number of reports identify al-Awlaki as American- or US-born. For example, in July 2011, after several US attempts to kill al-Awlaki had failed, ABC's Diane Sawyer introduced a segment titled "Fighting Terror" by saying: "US officials tell ABC News that top al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and American-born terror leader Anwar al-Awlaki will soon announce what amounts to a terrorist merger . . ."<sup>52</sup> Describing al-Awlaki as an "American-born terror leader" may evoke pervasive government propaganda and policy regarding "individuals radicalized at home" and "homegrown terrorism."<sup>53</sup> The formulation "American-born" may also position him as expatriate who has forsaken his country of birth.

Thus, news reports frequently portrayed this aspect of al-Awlaki's identity as a basis for vilifying him. If citizenship protected al-Awlaki from targeted killing, one *Washington Post* editorial argued, then "in order for the kill order to stand, Awlaki should be stripped of his citi-



zenship.”<sup>54</sup> Others argued that, through words if not deeds, al-Awlaki had effectively renounced his citizenship, as exemplified in this exchange between CNN anchor Joe Johns and Rep. Mike Rogers (R-MI):

JOHNS: . . . Is it wrong or right to target an American citizen in this way who has not been given the due process and protections of the US Constitution?

ROGERS: Well, I think I’m going to argue with the premise of your question. Here is an individual who renounced his citizenship, who declared war on the United States, and openly joined an organization that had declared war on the United States . . .<sup>55</sup>

In point of fact, and contrary to a literal interpretation of Rogers’s claim, there is no evidence that al-Awlaki ever formally renounced his US citizenship.<sup>56</sup> But the real point of Rogers’s assertion seems to be that one cannot say what al-Awlaki repeatedly said and remain a US citizen. Regardless, in targeting al-Awlaki for death, the Obama administration has never denied his citizenship. Instead, they have shifted attention from al-Awlaki’s nationality to the beliefs he made public through his Internet speeches, in order to cast him as an imminent threat to the United States.

### **3) Superlatives/Extreme Case Formulations**

By describing al-Awlaki in superlative terms, such as “most wanted” or the “most serious terrorist threat to America,” government officials and corporate media contribute to the identification of him as a legitimate target. For example:

“A senior US government official described him simply as ‘one of al-Qaeda’s most dangerous terrorists.’” —*The Washington Post*<sup>57</sup>

“It is here on these dangerous streets where, over the years, we have watched al-Qaeda flourish. And leading

them? Anwar al-Awlaki, the terrorist officials say is most likely to launch the next successful attack against Americans.” —*World News with Diane Sawyer*<sup>58</sup>

“SAVANNAH GUTHRIE, anchor: And tonight one of America’s most wanted terrorists is dead. His name may not have been as well known as Osama bin Laden’s, but officials say Anwar al-Awlaki was just as dangerous . . .

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI: Savannah, al-Awlaki was considered so dangerous, President Obama put him on the US “kill or capture” list, the only American to be specifically targeted by American forces in the war against al-Qaeda. US intelligence officers considered al-Awlaki, the American-born cleric, the most serious terrorist threat to America.” —*NBC Nightly News*<sup>59</sup>

In sociolinguistic terms, superlatives like “most dangerous,” “most likely to launch the next successful attack,” “most wanted,” and “the only American” are “extreme case formulations.” Anita Pomerantz and others have analyzed how extreme case formulations serve to “legitimize claims,” especially by defending against or countering challenges to the “legitimacy of complaints, accusations, justifications, and defenses.”<sup>60</sup> In al-Awlaki’s case, by adopting government officials’ extreme case formulations of him, corporate media contribute to the portrayal of al-Awlaki as an imminent threat to the United States, thus legitimizing the government’s justifications for killing him.

In context, comparisons of al-Awlaki to Osama bin Laden—the embodiment of al-Qaeda and the leader behind the 9/11 attacks—constituted another sort of extreme case formulation. For example:

“Obama’s counterterrorism chief, Michael Leiter, has said al-Awlaki posed a bigger threat to the US homeland than bin Laden did.” —*CNN*<sup>61</sup>

“In some respects US officials consider Awlaki a more insidious threat than Osama bin Laden himself.” —*NBC Nightly News*<sup>62</sup>

Just as hyperbolic descriptions of bin Laden as a “terrorist mastermind” oversimplified the complexity of Islamist terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda,<sup>63</sup> so comparisons of al-Awlaki to bin Laden simultaneously oversimplify the real threats posed by those networks while exaggerating the importance of al-Awlaki to them.

Although government officials frequently used extreme case formulations to describe al-Awlaki, these descriptions do not provide any specific evidence of his having an active, operational role in al-Qaeda. A tension between the superlative descriptions of al-Awlaki (e.g. “most dangerous”) and the lack of conclusive evidence in support of those claims is clear in news reports describing al-Awlaki as a “suspected al-Qaeda operative,”<sup>64</sup> “an alleged member of al-Qaeda,”<sup>65</sup> or as someone “suspected of assisting in the attempted Christmas Day bombing of a commercial jetliner near Detroit.”<sup>66</sup> These descriptions, and others like them, express a lack of certainty regarding al-Awlaki’s links to al-Qaeda or his role in the Christmas Day bombing. Of course, use of terms such as “alleged” and “suspected” is conventional in news coverage of criminal cases, where the presumption of innocence holds unless and until guilt is proven in a court of law. By contrast, however, in al-Awlaki’s case, government officials recurrently used extreme case formulations to condemn him, without providing specific evidence that might prove their claims. The claims regarding al-Awlaki’s danger to the US may have been valid. But, as critics of his targeted killing argued, regardless of his guilt or innocence, the US Constitution required that he be charged and tried, as a matter of due process, before the state could legitimately execute him.

#### **4) A Terrorist and a Target**

Al-Awlaki’s status as a terrorist became official on July 16, 2010, when the US Department of the Treasury placed him on its list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.<sup>67</sup> At the time, the corporate media paid little or no attention to this crucial change in al-Awlaki’s status: Eileen Sullivan and Matthew Lee of the Associated Press filed a story that day, but otherwise the nation’s major news organizations did not report it until the ACLU and CCR brought a lawsuit against the treasury department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in order to obtain a special license to provide legal counsel

for al-Awlaki, as an American designated for targeted killing without due process.<sup>68</sup>

Regardless of the legal contests over al-Awlaki's status, once government officials formally identified al-Awlaki as a terrorist, this shaped journalistic descriptions of him as a *target*. Al-Awlaki was an "elusive," but "high-value" and "prime" target.<sup>69</sup> Even more so, news reports reproduced official government descriptions of him as a "legitimate" and "lawful" target, as can be seen in the following examples:

"Juan Zarate, a former deputy national security advisor in the Bush administration, says Awlaki's links to episodes like [the Christmas Day bombing] have made him a legitimate target." —National Public Radio<sup>70</sup>

"[T]he Justice Department concluded that Mr. Awlaki was covered by the authorization to use military force against Al Qaeda that Congress enacted shortly after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001—meaning that he was a lawful target in the armed conflict unless some other legal prohibition trumped that authority." —*The New York Times*<sup>71</sup>

Through practices of person-description, government officials and corporate media collaborated in framing al-Awlaki as a dangerous terrorist and, consequently, a legitimate and lawful target for killing.

### **THE TWO-BILLION-DOLLAR ELEPHANT OUTSIDE THE FRAME: TARGETED KILLING AS PROFITABLE**

A close examination of news stories about al-Awlaki's killing demonstrates how corporate news coverage often functions as propaganda on behalf of the Obama administration's program of targeted killings, but this critique is not complete without examining aspects of the program that corporate news coverage omits. This is, to borrow imagery from filmmaker Errol Morris, "the elephant lurking just at the edge of the frame."<sup>72</sup> In the case of the corporate media's coverage of the US government's killing of al-Awlaki, there are multiple elephants lurking outside the frame, including wishful thinking that

drones allow the US to wage “clean” or “costless” war,<sup>73</sup> recent and current administrations’ preference for military over political solutions to foreign policy dilemmas,<sup>74</sup> and the corporate media’s apparent amnesia regarding national and international law that predates (and invalidates) the congressional Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) on September 18, 2001.<sup>75</sup> A full analysis of these recurrent shortcomings in corporate media coverage of targeted killings awaits future study.

The remaining section of the present study examines another elephant lurking outside the frame of the corporate media’s coverage: the economic interests that indirectly influence the government’s program of targeted killing. Corporate media ignore the “blurring of lines between the highly profitable business of killing people and the legitimate defense of US security.”<sup>76</sup> Drones, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as General Atomics MQ-1 Predator, which launches Lockheed Martin’s HELLFIRE missiles, are big business, and a strong growth area in a sagging US economy. How big? US government drone purchases—which do not include contracts for an array of related UAV services and payloads—rose from \$588 million to \$2.1 billion over the past five years.<sup>77</sup>

Where does this money go? Consider four examples of private contractors who reap enormous profits based on federal expenditures for drone technology:

- ▶ Boeing, which produces the A-160 and Scan Eagle, is the third-largest government contractor on Washington Technology’s annual ranking of the top 100 government contractors. Boeing reported revenues of \$68.7 billion in 2011, up 7 percent from 2010.<sup>78</sup>
- ▶ Northrop Grumman, which produces the Fire Scout, Global Hawk, and Hunter drones, and is developing prototypes of the EuroHawk and X-47B, reported revenues of \$26.4 billion in 2011, a decrease compared to its 2010 revenue, but still leaving it as second in government contracts on Washington Technology’s list, with \$8.2 billion in military contracts for 2011.
- ▶ General Atomics, which produces the well-known Predator drone, is only #45 on Washington Technology’s top 100 list of

government contractors; however, its revenues have increased by 259 percent since 2008, reaching \$634.5 million in 2011.

- ▶ AAI/Aerosonde, a subsidiary of Textron, Inc., produces the gasoline-powered Micro Air Vehicle (gMAV) and Shadow series drones. In 2011, Textron reported revenues of \$11.2 billion, a 7 percent growth in revenue compared with 2010.<sup>79</sup>

One might think that these financial giants would not need extra backing, but that would be wrong. In 2002, these four corporations and others in the UAV industry formed UNITE, the UAS (Unmanned Aircraft Systems) National Industry Team, a 501(c)(6) nonprofit corporation to:

1. promote and preserve the unique business case for unmanned aircraft (UA);
2. regain and retain US leadership and competitiveness in the unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) international marketplace; and
3. foster early adoption of UA and UAS for safe commercial, public, and private use.<sup>80</sup>

According to the UNITE website, the alliance “has been actively (but ‘behind the scenes’) collaborating on and coordinating support of” the deployment of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) in the national airspace (NAS):

Recently the UNITE Board of Directors instructed the UNITE Management Council to increase collaborative activity and to no longer work “behind the scenes.” This has resulted in what has been “perceived” as a re-emergence of UNITE when, in reality, it is just that UNITE has made a conscious decision to become more visible and more active.<sup>81</sup>

Recent reports on the domestic deployment of drones indicate that UNITE, and the corporations for which it serves as a front, are succeeding in their aims.<sup>82</sup>

Lobbyists such as UNITE and the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI) meet willing sponsors in Con-

gress: the House of Representatives has its own bipartisan drone caucus, with more than fifty members.<sup>83</sup> Formed in 2009 by Rep. Howard “Buck” McKeon (R-CA), the Unmanned Systems Caucus (formerly called the UAV Caucus), aims to “educate members of Congress and the public on the strategic, tactical, and scientific value of unmanned systems; actively support further development and acquisition of more systems, and to more effectively engage the civilian aviation community on unmanned system use and safety.”<sup>84</sup>

In an era when our leaders exhort us about the necessity of “austerity” regarding education, health care, and other social services, the enormity of the government’s contracts with defense industry giants including Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and General Atomics, not to mention the profits that these contractors reap, can be understood as obscene. In corporate news coverage of targeted killings, these profitable contracts, and the processes through which they get made, are just another elephant lurking outside the frame. Without the independent journalists who treat these latest developments in the military-industrial complex as an important beat, the American public would know little or nothing about this economic aspect of the United States’ “drone war.” As one astute critic summarizes, “Only corporations—the organizational mirror image of drones—profit from war.”<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates.*

—Simone Weil<sup>86</sup>

An informed public debate over when, where—and indeed whether—the US government can engage in targeted killing has yet to take place. Instead, in the news coverage examined for this study, corporate media present a narrow range of fact and opinion, drawn primarily from official government sources. The paralysis of Congress, due to divided oversight and economic conflicts of interest, aggravates the limitations of corporate media’s heavy reliance on government officials.

Consequently, establishment news coverage conveys to the American public a false, intoxicating impression of consensus around the government's global campaign of drone strikes and targeted killings. More specifically, such coverage appears to have convinced the American public that Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen, was so dangerous that the government could not afford to charge and try him in a court of law, as required by the US Constitution. The legitimacy of this claim, for which our rulers have given no adequate or convincing legal justification, has been accepted and represented by the corporate media to the American public, with nearly nothing in the way of critical assessment.<sup>87</sup>

This is not for lack of informed experts with diverse perspectives whose inclusion would make public debate on targeted killing more meaningful and robust than it has been—figures such as Philip Alston, law professor at New York University, and former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions (2004–2010), who reminds the American public and our leaders that “the serious challenges posed by terrorism are undeniable, but the fact that enemies do not play by the rules does not mean that the US government can unilaterally re-interpret them or cast them aside.”<sup>88</sup>

We can be grateful for public figures like Professor Alston, nongovernmental organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights, as well as independent journalists, all of whom continue to raise uncomfortable but necessary questions about the legitimacy of targeting killing by a nation that purports to distinguish itself by adherence to due process and the rule of law. We must join them in the urgent tasks of challenging the legitimacy of the government's targeted killing program and the inadequacy of the corporate media's coverage of it.

I am grateful to Liz Boyd, Steve Clayman and Nick Wolfinger for insightful suggestions on earlier versions of this chapter

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## Notes

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86. Simone Weil, *The Iliad or Poem of Force* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1956), 11.
87. Critical reporting by Karen DeYoung and Greg Miller of the *Washington Post* constitutes rare but welcome exceptions. See, for example, Karen DeYoung, "US Sticks to Secrecy as Drone

Strikes Surge,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2011:A1, where she writes: “At home, the drone program has escaped serious public questioning because it is widely perceived as successful in eliminating insurgent leaders, has not put US personnel at risk and has taken place largely out of sight. Abroad, no other government has offered public support for the program.” As previously noted, Miller has described how divided oversight of congressional committees has silenced members of Congress; see, Miller, “Under Obama.”

88. American Civil Liberties Union, “Statement of U.N. Special Rapporteur on US Targeted Killings Without Due Process,” August 3, 2010, <http://www.aclu.org/national-security/statement-un-special-rapporteur-us-targeted-killings-without-due-process>.

# **CENSORED 2013**

DISPATCHES FROM THE MEDIA REVOLUTION

The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2011–12

**Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth**  
with **Project Censored**

Foreword by

**Dr. Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed**

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**Khalil Bendib**



**Seven Stories Press**

New York

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Seven Stories Press  
140 Watts Street  
New York, NY 10013  
[www.sevenstories.com](http://www.sevenstories.com)

ISBN 978-1-60980-422-0 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-60980-423-7 (electronic)

ISSN 1074-5998

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Jon Gilbert

Printed in the USA