By Evelyn Crunden

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The legacy of former President Bush is still felt in many areas, in part due to efforts by his successor. Under the direction of President Obama, a record number of drone strikes have been ordered in the on-going "war on terror," a trend that has increasingly drawn ire from the rest of the world. The CIA has grown to rely more and more on drones as a quick and supposedly less damaging means of achieving an end, and as such a greater number of suspected and wanted terrorists have found themselves at the mercy of sudden and swift killers operated by assassins thousands of miles away. The virtual "hit list," which targets individuals scheduled to be "blown to bits," has become part of a relatively simple and straight-forward pattern   :

The broad outlines of the CIA's operations to kill suspected terrorists have been known to the public for some time—including how the United States kills Qaeda and Taliban militants by drone aircraft in Pakistan. But the formal process of determining who should be hunted down…has not been previously reported. A look at the bureaucracy behind the operations reveals that it is multilayered and methodical, run by a corps of civil servants who carry out their duties in a professional manner. Still, the fact that [agents are]…involved in "murder,"…and that operations are planned in advance in a legalistic fashion, raises questions.

Backlash against torture and interrogation within the US have led many on the inside to view swift assassination as a less scandal-ridden means to an end; in short, they are seeking to kill rather than to question. Potentially "messy questions of surrender" are also removed by the presence of drones, which decrease danger for the assassin and increase the odds of successfully removing a target. This situation has drawn significant [public attention to John Rizzo](), the man responsible for approving drone attacks in Pakistan, beginning in 2004. An estimated 2,500 people are presumed to have been killed in drone attacks in the time since then. Accused of "flaunt[ing] international law", Rizzo and the U.S. as a whole have come under heavy criticism for a policy which ignores legal requirements for an assassination to take place in a combat zone. Areas of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border which do not meet such standards have nevertheless been the site of bloodshed, and the source of rampant controversy.

Going off of these criticisms, the process boils down to a question of legality. Rizzo was only one of a set of lawyers concerned with the drone decisions, and post-retirement, his recollection of the steps involved [shed light]() on the process as a whole.

The hub of activity for the targeted killings is the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, where lawyers—there are roughly 10 of them, says Rizzo—write a cable asserting that an individual poses a grave threat to the United States. The CIA cables are legalistic and carefully argued, often running up to five pages. Michael Scheuer, who used to be in charge of the CIA's Osama bin Laden unit, describes "a dossier," or a "two-page document," along with "an appendix with supporting information, if anybody wanted to read all of it." The dossier, he says, "would go to the lawyers, and they would decide. They were very picky." Sometimes, Scheuer says, the hurdles may have been too high. "Very often this caused a missed opportunity. The whole idea that people got shot because someone has a hunch—I only wish that was true. If it were, there would be a lot more bad guys dead."

Sometimes, as Rizzo recalls, the evidence against an individual would be thin, and high-level lawyers would tell their subordinates, "You guys did not make a case." "Sometimes the justification would be that the person was thought to be at a meeting," Rizzo explains. "It was too squishy." The memo would get kicked back downstairs.

The point remains, however, that a more extensive process is involved when the government chooses to wiretap someone than when a lethal operation is being conducted. The rest of the world has caught on: a protest in Islamabad displayed support for the killing of two men who

died in drone attacks, and Karim Khan, a man who has filed a lawsuit against the U.S. to protest the event. Arguments concerning the legal foundation of the attacks continue to fly back and forth, as well as debate over their validity in international disputes. The question remains, however, as to whether or not anything will be done about it.