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TERRORISM

Drone Ops: Getting Better All the Time

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The dust has settled near the North Waziristan village of Hassu Khel, where a U.S. Hellfire missile killed al-Qaeda's No. 2, Abu Yahya al-Libi, on Monday. The recent flurry of unacknowledged U.S. drone attacks scored its biggest prize since Navy SEALs took out Osama bin Laden 13 months ago, leaving the White House to flex its might without divulging its methods.

"As commander in chief, as president, protection of the United States, protection of American citizens, protection of our allies and our interests, are a high priority, the highest," spokesman Jay Carney said Wednesday after confirming al-Libi's death. But, in a strange twist highlighting this growing way of war, the White House spokesman declined to say how al-Libi met his end: "I can't get into details about how his death was brought about."

But by all accounts, al-Libi met his end as a CIA-commanded General Atomics MQ-1 Predator – an ungainly-looking unmanned aircraft powered by a puny 115-horsepower engine and kept aloft on a 55-foot wingspan – received a signal to attack. A split-second later, one of its two wing-mounted AGM-114 Hellfire missiles – five-foot-four, and tipped with an 18-pound warhead – drilled into al-Libi's lair from two or three miles away.

That, strange as it seems, was the easy part. The hard part was finding the right mud house among the tens of thousands in Pakistan's tribal areas, where al-Libi was thought to have been since he embarrassed the Americans by escaping from its Bagram prison in 2005.

The death of the al-Qaeda deputy is the latest in more than a dozen targeted killings of top al-Qaeda leaders in secret U.S. drone strikes since bin Laden's death.

Wednesday's papers are busy describing the significance of the drone strike like glowing opening-night reviews of a Broadway play:

U.S. intelligence officials said the death of the Libyan jihadist, who escaped from U.S. custody in Afghanistan in 2005, leaves al-Qaeda's leadership ranks in Pakistan so depleted that there is no obvious successor.

– *Washington Post*, front page news [story](#)

Mr. Libi's death would be another dramatic moment for an American covert war in Pakistan that has been particularly active over the past year, starting with the death of the group's founder, Osama bin Laden, in May 2011 and followed up by drone strikes against several senior lieutenants, including Atiyah Abd al-Rahman... Unlike many of the relatively unknown figures killed in other drone strikes, Mr. Libi, who had a \$1 million bounty on his head, was a virtual ambassador for global jihad.

– *New York Times* news [story](#), page 1

Even the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page – usually a chilly place for President Obama – warms up to his terrorist blood lust in a Wednesday [editorial](#):

President Obama's decision to expand the drone program into Pakistan and Yemen — which are difficult for U.S.



A Predator drone unleashes a Hellfire missile

USAF

troops to access — is one of his finest accomplishments. These precision strikes are also the most humane weapon invented to date in aerial warfare, producing relatively few civilian casualties. Monday's success adds a military and moral exclamation point.

Is the jubilation justified?

Like time spent over a target, the outline of success is becoming clearer:

Even as the number of drones strikes on targets in Pakistan is falling, according to this [accounting](#) maintained by the *Long War Journal*, they seem increasingly to be striking pay dirt.

Why?

It's obvious that it's not the *number* of Hellfire missiles the Predator and Reaper drones fire that counts — it's the thousands of hours they have spent quietly lurking over the Waziristans, *looking* for anything that moves.

Such movements are loaded into computers where they are screened for significance. Do this for years, and “patterns of life” emerge that point, inevitably, to targets. The longer the Pentagon and the CIA do this, the more precise their targeting becomes.

Think of the drones as California's '49ers — the more river sand they sift through, the more they're likely find glints of gold. True, there will be fool's gold amid the muck. Civilians, inevitably and unfortunately, are dying. An airstrike in Afghanistan's Logar province killed at least 21 on Wednesday, apparently a mixture of Taliban militants and wedding-party attendees.

This way of war isn't perfect by a long Hellfire shot. But it offers a path other than deploying hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops overseas to hunt the terrorists down, or simply waiting at home for them to try to strike again.

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