

Under Panetta, a more aggressive CIA

By Peter Finn and Joby Warrick
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The plan was a standard one in the CIA's war against extremists in Pakistan: The agency was using a Predator drone to monitor a residential compound; a Taliban leader was expected to arrive shortly; a CIA missile would kill him.

On the morning of Aug. 5, CIA Director Leon Panetta was informed that Baitullah Mehsud was about to reach his father-in-law's home. Mehsud would be in the open, minimizing the risk that civilians would be injured or killed. Panetta authorized the strike, according to a senior intelligence official who described the sequence of events.

Some hours later, officials at CIA headquarters in Langley identified Mehsud on a feed from the Predator's camera. He was seen resting on the roof of the house, hooked up to a drip to palliate a kidney problem. He was not alone.

Panetta was pulled out of a White House meeting and told that Mehsud's wife was also on the rooftop, giving her husband a massage. Mehsud, implicated in suicide bombings and the assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto, was a major target. Panetta told his officers to take the shot. Mehsud and his wife were killed. Panetta, an earthy former congressman with exquisitely honed Washington smarts, was President Obama's surprise choice to head the CIA. During his 13 months in the job, Panetta has led a relentless assault on al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives in Pakistan, delivering on Obama's promise to target them more aggressively than his predecessor. Apart from a brief stint as a military intelligence officer in the 1960s, little in Panetta's résumé appeared to merit his nomination to become the 19th director of the CIA, but his willingness to use force has won over skeptics inside the agency and on Capitol Hill. Said one former senior intelligence official: "I've never sensed him shirking from it."

The stepped-up drone strikes, Panetta's opposition to the release of information about CIA interrogation practices, and his resistance to greater oversight of the agency by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) have prompted criticism that he is a thrall of the agency's old guard. In the meantime, the strikes have begun to draw greater scrutiny, with watchdog groups demanding to know more about how they are carried out and the legal reasoning behind the killings.

In an interview Wednesday at CIA headquarters, Panetta refused to directly address the matter of Predator strikes, in keeping with the agency's long-standing practice of shielding its actions in Pakistan from public view. But he said that U.S. counterterrorism policies in the country are legal and highly effective, and that he is acutely aware of the gravity of some of the decisions thrust upon him.

"Any time you make decisions on life and death, I don't take that lightly. That's a serious decision," he said. "And yet, I also feel very comfortable with making those decisions because I know I'm dealing with people who threaten the safety of this country and are prepared to attack us at any moment."

Mehsud's followers and their al-Qaeda allies vowed to avenge his death, and within months they put into motion a plan that culminated in a Dec. 30 suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers and contractors at a base in eastern Afghanistan.

On the Monday after the bombing, the regular 8:30 a.m. meeting of senior staff members at CIA began with a minute of silence. Then the director spoke.

"We're in a war," Panetta said, according to one participant. "We cannot afford to be hesitant. . . . The fact is we're doing the right thing. My approach is going to be to work that much harder . . . that we beat these sons of bitches."

Drone strikes scrutinized

At the end of the George W. Bush administration, the CIA could keep seven Predators in the air round-the-clock, but the number will double by the end of this year, according to the senior intelligence official. Like other current and former officials interviewed for this report, this source spoke on the condition of anonymity because the agency does not acknowledge its actions in Pakistan.

Since 2009, as many as 666 terrorism suspects, including at least 20 senior figures, have been killed by missiles fired from unmanned aircraft flying over Pakistan, according to figures compiled by the New America Foundation as of mid-March. From 2004 to 2008, the number was 230.

According to the foundation, 177 civilians may also have been killed in the airstrikes since 2009. Intelligence officials say their count of noncombatants killed is much lower and noted that on Aug. 5 only Mehsud and his wife were killed, despite reports that other family members and bodyguards died in the attack.

Panetta authorizes every strike, sometimes reversing his decision or reauthorizing a target if the situation on the ground changes, according to current and former senior intelligence officials. "He asks a lot of questions about the target, the intelligence picture, potential collateral damage, women and children in the vicinity," said the senior intelligence official.

Killing by drone has drawn increased scrutiny from human rights activists, who say such strikes raise legal questions when used outside the traditional battlefield. Some critics worry that the antiseptic quality of drone attacks, in which targets are identified on a video screen and killed with the press of a button, is anesthetizing policymakers and the public to the costs of war. The ACLU sued the government this month to compel the disclosure of the legal basis for its use of unmanned aircraft overseas.

"The government's use of drones to conduct targeted killings raises complicated questions -- not only legal questions, but policy and moral questions as well," said Jameel Jaffer, director of the ACLU's National Security Project. "These kinds of questions ought to be discussed and debated publicly, not resolved secretly behind closed doors."

After weathering a number of storms on Capitol Hill, including a face-off with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi after the California Democrat accused the CIA of lying, Panetta has studiously cultivated his old colleagues, holding informal get-togethers with the Senate and House intelligence committees.

"It's Krispy Kremes and coffee," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee. "People are relaxed, the conversation is free-flow, and I think that is very useful."

Last summer, Panetta shut down a still-embryonic Bush-era plan to create an assassination team that would target terrorism suspects and was irritated that Congress had never been informed of the plan. "He found it offensive," said the former senior intelligence official, recalling that it was one of the few times he had seen Panetta visibly angry.

Panetta has impressed the ranking Republican on the Senate intelligence committee. "I'm from the Show-Me State. He's done a pretty good job of showing me," said Sen. Christopher S. Bond (Mo.), an early doubter of Panetta's ability to lead the CIA. "I think the CIA knows . . . at least their director is supporting them even though other elements of the administration [are] causing them pain and grief."

Another former senior intelligence official, who served under Bush, commends Panetta for his aggression but noted that the current successes are built upon agreements made with Pakistan in the final year of the previous administration. The Obama administration has "been operating along the same continuum," the former official said.

Retired CIA officer Henry Crumpton, who pioneered the use of armed Predator drones in Afghanistan and was a top counterterrorism official at the State Department under Bush, said the number of strikes tells only part of the story.

"You have to know where to put the bird to begin with," Crumpton said. "It's a dynamic process. . . . Once you have a strike, you have disruptions and you have more intelligence to collect. It's a wonderful cycle that involves all-source collection and analysis, and the Predator is only part of it."

Advocate for his agency

Expectations were low when Panetta arrived at CIA headquarters in February 2009. One recently retired officer recalled that some of his colleagues were initially angered by the appointment of a liberal politician who lacked extensive experience in the intelligence world and had publicly equated waterboarding with torture.

But almost from the first week, Panetta positioned himself as a strong advocate for the CIA, even when it put him at odds with the White House and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Panetta lobbied fiercely against the release of Justice Department memos that spelled out how the Bush administration had authorized the use of waterboarding and other coercive interrogation measures. He famously unleashed an epithet-laden tirade at a White House meeting over Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr.'s decision to investigate CIA officers who participated in the interrogations.

Panetta has refused to yield to the ODNI over the CIA's independence and preeminence in overseas intelligence-gathering. The long-simmering conflict came to a head last spring when Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair asserted that his agency should directly oversee the CIA's covert operations, while also deciding who would serve as the chief U.S. intelligence officer in overseas locations. Traditionally, the top CIA officer in each country automatically assumed that title.

Vice President Biden, Panetta's longtime friend, was summoned to referee the dispute, which was resolved mostly in the CIA's favor: The CIA station chief would continue to be the top intelligence officer, and the agency would be required only to consult with the ODNI about its covert missions.

"Panetta was not only standing up for the agency, but he was seen as a guy who could just go and talk to the president," the recently retired officer said. "He doesn't have to bow 18 times. It's really valuable for the CIA to have someone who can do that."

Since becoming director, Panetta has visited more than 20 CIA stations worldwide, where he holds all-hands meetings and works the room with his easy charm, according to insiders. "Morale is good, especially downrange" in forward areas, Crumpton said. Critics worry that Panetta has become a captive of the agency he leads.

"To survive in the CIA, he had to become more Catholic than the pope," said Anthony D. Romero, executive director of the ACLU. "He opposed important public disclosure of past use of torture and abuse, and has worked to limit the scope of criminal investigations into any crimes committed by CIA officials."

In the worst of times

On Dec. 30, a couple of hours before dawn, Panetta was awakened by his security detail at his home in California and informed that something had gone wrong at a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan. By about 8 a.m., Panetta was told that nine people had been killed there: seven CIA officers and contractors, including the base chief, one of the agency's leading al-Qaeda experts; a Jordanian intelligence officer; and an Afghan driver. The attack also wounded several others.

Panetta has launched an internal review of the episode, in which, Feinstein said, "clearly tradecraft wasn't followed." A report is expected next month.

In the interview, Panetta said he recognized that the administration's strategy entailed risk. "You can't just conduct the kind of aggressive operations we are conducting against the enemy and not expect that they are not going to try to retaliate," he said.

Panetta has led the mourning at the CIA, holding a service at headquarters attended by more than 1,000 people, including the president. The tenor John McDermott sang the wistful ballad "Danny Boy."

"The workforce takes a shot like this in the stomach, it takes the wind out of them," said John O. Brennan, Obama's principal counterterrorism adviser. "Leon showed his leadership by engaging the workforce from the very beginning and overseeing the mourning that goes on."

On Feb. 3, at a snow-blanketed Arlington National Cemetery, Panetta attended the funeral of the base chief, a 45-year-old mother of three. Just before the playing of taps, he handed a folded American flag to the family and later watched one of the woman's young sons carry it away from the grave. As Panetta took his seat in his car after the service, an aide said, he exhaled deeply.

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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Drones Are Weapons of Choice in Fighting Qaeda

By Christopher Drew
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A missile fired by an American drone killed at least four people late Sunday at the house of a militant commander in northwest Pakistan, the latest use of what intelligence officials have called their most effective weapon against Al Qaeda.

And Pentagon officials say the remotely piloted planes, which can beam back live video for up to 22 hours, have done more than any other weapons system to track down insurgents and save American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The planes have become one of the military's favorite weapons despite many shortcomings resulting from the rush to get them into the field.

An explosion in demand for the drones is contributing to new thinking inside the Pentagon about how to develop and deploy new weapons systems.

Air Force officials acknowledge that more than a third of their unmanned Predator spy planes — which are 27 feet long, powered by a high-performance snowmobile engine, and cost \$4.5 million apiece — have crashed, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pilots, who fly them from trailers halfway around the world using joysticks and computer screens, say some of the controls are clunky. For example, the missile-firing button sits dangerously close to the switch that shuts off the plane's engines. Pilots are also in such short supply that the service recently put out a call for retirees to help. But military leaders say they can easily live with all that.

Since the height of the cold war, the military has tended to chase the boldest and most technologically advanced solution to every threat, leading to long delays and cost overruns that result in rarely used fighter jets that cost \$143 million apiece, and plans for a \$3 billion destroyer that the Navy says it can no longer afford. Now the Pentagon appears to be warming up to Voltaire's saying, "The perfect is the enemy of the good."

In speeches, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has urged his weapons buyers to rush out "75 percent solutions over a period of months" rather than waiting for "gold-plated" solutions.

And as the Obama administration prepares its first budget, officials say they plan to free up more money for simpler systems like drones that can pay dividends now, especially as fighting intensifies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A rare behind-the-scenes look at the use of the Predator shows both the difficulties and the rewards in pushing out weapons more quickly.

“I’ll be really candid,” said Col. Eric Mathewson, who directs the Air Force’s task force on unmanned aerial systems. “We’re on the ragged edge.” He said the service has been scrambling to train more pilots, who fly the drones via satellite links from the western United States, to keep up with a near-tripling of daily missions in the last two years. Field commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Air Force is in charge of the Predators, say their ability to linger over an area for hours, streaming instant video warnings of insurgent activity, has been crucial to reducing threats from roadside bombs and identifying terrorist compounds. The C.I.A. is in charge of drone flights in Pakistan, where more than three dozen missile strikes have been launched against Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in recent months.

Considered a novelty a few years ago, the Air Force’s fleet has grown to 195 Predators and 28 Reapers, a new and more heavily armed cousin of the Predator. Both models are made by General Atomics, a contractor based in San Diego. Including drones that the Army has used to counter roadside bombs and tiny hand-launched models that can help soldiers to peer past the next hill or building, the total number of military drones has soared to 5,500, from 167 in 2001.

The urgent need for more drones has meant bypassing usual procedures. Some of the 70 Predator crashes, for example, stemmed from decisions to deploy the planes before they had completed testing and to hold off replacing control stations to avoid interrupting the supply of intelligence.

“The context was to do just the absolute minimum needed to sustain the fight now, and accept the risks, while making fixes as you go along,” Colonel Mathewson said. It is easier, of course, for the military to take more risks with unmanned planes. Complaints about civilian casualties, particularly from strikes in Pakistan, have stirred some concerns among human rights advocates.

Military officials say the ability of drones to observe targets for lengthy periods makes strikes more accurate. They also said they do not fire if they think civilians are nearby. The Predators were still undergoing basic testing when they were rushed into use in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s and then hastily armed with missiles after the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

But it was only after the military turned to new counterinsurgency techniques in early 2007, that demand for drones became almost insatiable. Since then, Air Force Lt. Gen. Gary North, the air-component commander for the combined forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, said the service has gone to “amazing lengths” to increase their use. The Predators and Reapers are now flying 34 surveillance patrols each day in Iraq and Afghanistan, up from 12 in 2006. They are also transmitting 16,000 hours of video each month, some of it directly to troops on the ground.

The strains of these growing demands were evident on a recent visit to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Ariz., one of four bases where Air National Guard units have been ordered to full-time duty to help alleviate crew shortages. The Guard members,

along with Air Force crews at a base in the Nevada desert, are 7,000 to 8,000 miles away from the planes they are flying. Most of the crews sit at 1990s-style computer banks filled with screens, inside dimly lit trailers. Many fly missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan on the same day.

On a recent day, at 1:15 p.m. in Tucson — 1:15 the next morning in Afghanistan — a pilot and sensor operator were staring at gray-toned video from the Predator's infrared camera, which can make even the darkest night scene surprisingly clear. The crew was scanning a road, looking for — but not finding — signs of anyone planting improvised explosive devices or lying in wait for a convoy. As the Predator circled at 16,000 feet, the dark band of a river and craggy hills came into view, along with ribbons of farmland.

“We spend 70 to 80 percent of our time doing this, just scanning roads,” said the pilot, Matthew Morrison. At other times, the crews monitor insurgent compounds and watch over troops in battle. “When you're on the radio with a guy on the ground, and he is out of breath and you can hear the weapons fire in the background, you are every bit as engaged as if you were actually there,” Major Morrison said.

When Predators spot possible targets, officers monitoring video at command centers in Iraq and Afghanistan decide whether to order an attack. Col. Gregg A. Davies, commander of the group that flies Predators for the Arizona Guard, said fighter planes with bigger bombs are often sent in to make the strikes. In all, the Air Force says, Predators and Reapers shot missiles on 244 of the 10,949 missions in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008.

Air Force officials said a few crew members have had a difficult time watching the strikes. And some pilots said it can be hard to transition from being a computer-screen warrior to dinner at home or their children's soccer games. Another problem has been that few pilots wanted to give up flying fighter jets to operate drones. Given the shortages, the Air Force has temporarily blocked transfers out of the program. It also has begun training officers as drone pilots who have had little or no experience flying conventional planes.

Colonel Mathewson, director of the Air Force's task force on unmanned aerial systems, said that while upgrades have been made to control stations, the service plans to eventually shift to simpler and more intuitive ground systems that could allow one remote pilot to control several drones. Now, pilots say, it takes up to 17 steps — including entering data into pull-down windows — to fire a missile.

And even though 13 of the 70 Predator crashes have occurred over the last 18 months, officials said the accident rate has fallen as flying hours have shot up. All told, 55 have been lost because of equipment failure, operator errors or weather. Four were shot down in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq; 11 were lost in combat situations, like running out of fuel while protecting troops under fire.

Given the demand for video intelligence, the Air Force is equipping 50 manned turbo-prop planes with similar cameras. And it is developing new camera systems for Reapers that could vastly expand the intelligence each plane can collect.

P. W. Singer, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution, said the Predators have already had “an incredible effect,” though the remote control raised obvious questions about whether the military could become “more cavalier” about using force. Still, he said, “these systems today are very much Model T Fords. These things will only get more advanced.”