

# Norm transformation and the institutionalization of targeted killing in the US

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## Abstract

This article explains the emergence and institutionalization of the US's targeted killing practices as a case of norm transformation. I argue that international and domestic US prohibitions on assassination have not disappeared, but have changed as a result of practitioner-led changes in the conventions, technologies, and bureaucratic structures governing the use of force in counterterrorism activities. After discussing the limits of alternative explanations, and drawing inspiration from practice theory, pragmatist social theory, and relational sociology, I posit three causal mechanisms as responsible for the transformation: convention reorientation, which was the redefinition of targeted killing to distinguish it from assassination; technological revision, which was the development and use of unmanned aerial vehicles (“drones”) to bypass normative and strategic concerns over precision; and network synthesis, which was the support of the Bush administration and especially of the Obama administration, overruling dissenters from within the Central Intelligence Agency (who were often very highly placed). I trace the processes by which these mechanisms operated and interacted in simultaneous and mutually reinforcing ways from the start of the millennium until now. Finally, I discuss some of the ways in which this contributes to institutional analysis and the study of norm change more generally, and, in particular, how it considers the role of technology and the reciprocity of means and ends.

## Keywords

Historical sociology, norms, pragmatism, security, targeted killing, War on Terror

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## Introduction

The institutionalization of targeted killing in the US suggests a significant transformation in its interpretation of, and adherence to, norms of war-fighting and security-seeking. For two decades, the US has used unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) — “drones” — as platforms for small-scale airstrikes on specific individuals, increasingly relying upon this method of counterterrorism and counter-insurgency, with numbers of strikes and casualties now in the thousands. The evolution of targeted killing in the US is already the subject of a number of recent examinations (see, among others, Carvin, 2015; Fuller, 2017; Grayson, 2012, 2016; Zenko, 2013), and these establish key ways in which changing legal discourse and re-conceptualizations of the geography of counterterrorism were facilitating factors.<sup>1</sup> This concerns the particular definition of assassination under international law (Beres, 1991; Pickard, 2001; Thomas, 2001), questions of imminence and pre-emption (Gordon, 2006; Kasher and Yadlin, 2005), the space in which a formal armed conflict is occurring, and the status of combatants (Blum and Heymann, 2010). Mostly unexamined, however, is a normative dimension linking all of these, distinct from — though certainly entangled with — formal or legal rules, and extending throughout the practices and institutions composing the US’s counterterrorism apparatus.<sup>2</sup>

Significant actors involved in that apparatus articulated concerns over what was right or proper, making reference not just to laws, but to embedded institutional norms, organizational history, and experience with scandal, professionalism, and other dynamics warranting focused sociological investigation. In particular, their concerns pertain to the salience and nature of international and domestic prohibitions on assassination *as interpreted* by ranking figures in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and in the Bush and Obama administrations. This establishes *prima facie* the value of examining this case through an approach oriented around the origins and effects of norms and normativity. If so, the case may be a puzzle of norm “death” or “disappearance” — a subject that has garnered recent attention from International Relations (IR) scholars (D’Ambruoso, 2015; McKeown, 2009; Panke and Petersohn, 2011). Did prior “norms” cease to guide or regulate practice?

I address two parts of this puzzle. First, I show that in the US’s counterterrorism apparatus, targeted killings do represent a normative change. However, this is not the demise of a single norm against assassination, but a transformation of its contents and referents, reaching across a range of interacting formal and informal structures and standards. It indicates not a sweeping change of norms at an international level, but rather the ways in which one major power has arranged its military and security practices. Second, I explain how that change came about, identifying three interacting causal mechanisms as the drivers of a process of institutional evolution, in which new normative and strategic logics became embedded in new bureaucratic structures, most notably, in the CIA. This again diverges from existing scholarship on this subject not only by focusing on normative factors, but also by employing a more formal approach to distinguishing causal mechanisms by type and by placing them within a process-tracing framework.

In the first section of the article, I lay out the empirical puzzle, offering a brief history of the US’s use of targeted killing. I state three possible explanations: the prohibition on assassination has either eroded or disappeared (“norm death”), never meaningfully existed in the first place for the actors in question (“norm dissociation”), or still exists but

has changed in form (“norm transformation”). I draw on public documents and testimonies on the case to show that the first two explanations are not consistent with key facts of the case. The correct explanation is norm transformation.

In the second section, I propose that three interacting causal mechanisms explain how norm transformation actually occurred: convention reorientation, technological revision, and network synthesis. These mechanisms rest on a pragmatist view of social action and change: actors, in confronting problematic situations, revise their existing habits, practices, and repertoires to synthesize new ways of navigating the world, transforming their sense of their environment and their position. Here, pragmatism, epistemologically and ontologically, is a theory of situated human creativity, placing the potential for transformation in the transactional relations knitting together actors and environments (Dewey and Bentley, 1949; Gross, 2009; see also Pratt, 2016).<sup>3</sup> After outlining how the mechanisms work, I trace them within a theoretically informed chronology of the case, using a range of government, media, and interview sources to pinpoint practices, technologies, and bureaucratic mutations behind the targeted killing program.

Methodologically, this is a form of process tracing, inflected with insights from practice theory and relational sociology. It provides a single case analysis of the over-time operation and interaction of the three posited mechanisms, showing how normative obstacles to targeted killing were overcome through a mixture of technological, discursive, and bureaucratic-political maneuvers.<sup>4</sup> I define a causal mechanism as a specifiable arrangement of unfolding actions — what Guzzini (2011: 336) has called an “action-complex” — that will produce an observed outcome when triggered. Focusing on practitioners as drivers of institutional change, my approach takes cues from practice theory but is more focused in its account, serving not to map the structure and history of a field, but to pinpoint bundles of actions as they proceed and evolve over time. While technology, rhetorical contestation, and bureaucratic politics already feature in scholarship on norm change, they drove transformation in this case in simultaneous and mutually reinforcing ways — a causal interaction not currently well studied or theorized in the field. The outcome is that a prohibition on assassination still persists but in changed form.

In the third section, I discuss how my approach fits into existing research programs in the field. I point to a productive, growing conversation between scholars of norms and those associated with recent “turns” toward practices and relational sociology to theorize institutional change. *Contra* accounts that view these turns as theoretically supplanting norms research (McCourt, 2016), practice and relational theorizing fits well within current trends in norms research, and provides theoretical goods that scholars of norms already seek. They are helpful for theorizing the role of technology, and of the reciprocity of means and ends — of morality and strategy — in shaping prevailing norms and practices. I then conclude the article with brief remarks on the “portability” of the three mechanisms and their relationship to other high-profile cases of transformation of the US’s security apparatus.

## Norms and targeted killing

Beginning in late 2002, under the Bush administration, the CIA began strikes on a small number of “high-value targets” comprising al-Qa’ida and Taliban leaders (Plaw, 2006). Under the Obama administration, these strikes increased in frequency, reaching a peak of

at least 128 in Pakistan alone in 2010, then declining as US involvement in Afghanistan diminished and the focus of the War on Terror shifted to Yemen and the Horn of Africa.<sup>5</sup> These killings also became more expansive in terms of who was targeted and who carried them out. The US military began a parallel targeting program while, at one point, the CIA briefly considered using private contractors to carry out some killings (Mazzetti, 2013). There is no indication that these kinds of actions will cease in the future, even if they may scale with strategic needs proportional to larger US military commitments abroad.

Prominent commentators, both academic and public, claim that these “targeted killings” constitute assassinations, and indicate the erosion or change of international and domestic norms prohibiting assassination. Among scholars, these range from historical examinations of state practices (Thomas, 2000) to detailed legal analyses of US policy (Banks and Raven-Hansen, 2003). Journalists have made similar claims (Meyer, 2009; Scahill, 2013), while some experts have editorialized on the supposedly dishonorable connotations of targeted killing (Kilcullen and Exum, 2009). Others have disagreed, denying that targeted killing fits legal definitions of assassination (Kretzmer, 2005), or questioning whether assassination, in an ordinary sense, is prohibited in the first place (Fuller, 2017; Pratt, 2015).

This debate thus offers three possible explanations of what has taken place, each with distinct evidentiary implications. “Norm death” holds that the prohibition has disappeared, either because the historical circumstances that established and reinforced it no longer obtain, or because it has been eroded by the deliberate efforts of pro-assassination “norm entrepreneurs.” Norm death proceeds through escalating non-compliance, driven by inadequate incentives to self-regulate (Morrow, 2014) or strategic benefits to transgression (Evers, 2017), psychological pressures to reinterpret norms until they no longer regulate in any meaningful sense (Shannon, 2000), and the presence of alternative new norms that can inspire moral defection (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The end result is that a norm that did regulate, constitute, or otherwise dispose actors in significant ways ceases to exist. If this is true here, then the evidence should show that targeted killing was initially considered by US officials to be prohibited under the assassination ban but, with the rise of a new counterterrorism regime, those officials saw assassination itself as increasingly justifiable. Crucially, the evidence would show that the link between targeted killing and assassination remained but ceased to present a normative problem for those involved.

“Norm dissociation” holds that a prohibition on assassination either did not actually exist, except perhaps as an unenforced formality, or (more plausibly) that US officials did not care whether or not they violated it from the start. Dissociation (as I term it) is another form of non-compliance.<sup>6</sup> It is a product of organizational culture oriented toward violations (Legro, 1997), the absence of specific domestic resonance for a particular norm (Cortell and Davis, 1996), or ineffective norm “localization” (Acharya, 2004), such that a norm nominally exists but is weakly institutionalized in practice. The end result is that a norm may exist in name or in law but without extension. If this is true here, then the evidence should show that discussions of targeted killing within the US policy and security apparatus either never made reference to a prohibition on

**Table 1.** Competing explanations for the US's use of targeted killing.

Explanation	Observable implications
Norm death	Key actors considered targeted killing to be assassination, initially found this a good reason not to engage in it, but over time stopped caring whether or not assassination was prohibited.
Norm dissociation	Key actors considered targeted killing to be assassination but never cared in the first place whether or not assassination was prohibited.
Norm transformation	Key actors considered targeted killing to be assassination <i>at first</i> but then their definition of assassination changed to no longer include it. Assassination, however, <i>remains prohibited</i> .

assassination or were oblique or summarily ignored. On this view, simple violation of the prohibition is an instance of norm dissociation — a methodological assumption is that actors consistently believe in the normative correctness of their actions even if they are aware that their interpretations and justifications may deviate from those typically accepted by a broader community. If those responsible for the US's targeted killing apparatus knew about, but simply chose to ignore, norms prohibiting it, then this would attest to their dissociation from that norm — it simply was not something embedded into their institutions or practices. The history of the US's targeted killing program would show that everyone important involved in its establishment did not know or did not care if they were breaking assassination norms.

Finally, “norm transformation” holds that a prohibition on assassination did exist in ways that mattered for US officials but changed such that targeted killing ceased to *be* assassination in their perspective. This emerges out of a change in *how* rather than *whether* to comply — one that may be driven by discursive contestation (Kornprobst, 2007; Wiener, 2008) but also by technological or bureaucratic imperatives, as I show in this article. If this is true here, then the evidence should show that debates over targeted killing initially considered the question of whether or not it would constitute assassination. Crucially, the evidence should then show that as targeted killing became a significant part of US counterterrorism efforts, proponents of it engaged in successful and ongoing attempts to differentiate it from assassination, outmaneuvering or out-arguing opposition based on assassination prohibitions (see Table 1).

This final explanation, I argue, is the correct one. According to available accounts, the possibility of using drones to carry out targeted killings was first raised by Cofer Black, the director of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center (CTC), in mid-2000. However, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet was opposed, and he was joined in his opposition by other high-ranking members of the CIA. This shows an institutional normative divide over what the standards of appropriate action should be (see NCTAUS, 2004b: 210, note 241; see also Mazzetti, 2013). Assassination was contentious for the CIA to perform, at least before September 11, 2001, both under US law and by bureaucratic conventions.<sup>7</sup> As James Pavitt, Deputy Director for Operations (1999–2004), would explain, “we don't do policy from Langley ... and you don't want us to” (NCTAUS, 2004a).<sup>8</sup> Testimony in the 9/11 Commission report states:

[T]wo senior CIA officers told us they would have been morally and practically opposed to getting CIA into what might look like an assassination. One of them, a former CTC chief, said he would have refused an order to directly kill Bin Ladin [sic]. (NCTAUS, 2004a)

As Richard Clarke, adviser to the White House on counterterrorism under both Clinton and later Bush, explained:

The corporate view inside CIA was, “We don’t want to do covert action. And if we do covert action, we want it to be neat and clean. We don’t want to be involved in killing people. Because we’re not like that. We’re not Mossad.” (Mazzetti, 2013)<sup>9</sup>

These statements are consistent with “norm dissociation.” Assassination was meaningfully prohibited, and opponents of targeted killing within the US’s security apparatus made meaningful reference to that prohibition. Yet, after September 11, 2001, the CIA did develop a targeted killing program and began strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. So, that prohibition either died or changed in content.

A significant indication that “norm death” is also not what happened may be seen in the Obama administration’s approach to targeted killing — which differentiated targeted killing from assassination, rather than defended assassination itself. One clue to this process is a State Department White Paper confidentially provided to members of the Senate Intelligence and Judiciary Committees in June 2012, which outlined much of the Obama administration’s case for targeted killing in general. Besides establishing a regulatory framework, it fulfilled another key purpose: to explicitly differentiate such killings from “assassinations” (Department of Justice, 2011) on both international and domestic legal grounds.

The evidence suggests that for this case — and perhaps for similar possible cases<sup>10</sup> — relevant norms persisted in name but came to define or extend to different practices over time. They transformed. In the next section, I posit an explanation emphasizing the role of ethical and strategic innovation as drivers of transformation.

### Three mechanisms of normative transformation

I propose that three causal mechanisms drove the normative transformations underlying the emergence and institutionalization of the US’s targeted killing program. This proposal rests on two bases. One is a *prima facie* plausibility test: the evidence I have collected suggests that some interaction of technology, normative framing, and bureaucratic politics propelled the rise of targeted killing. Actors revised institutional norms alongside their practices in recursive ways, meaning that counterterrorism efficacy influenced normative discourses, just as norms influenced discourses on strategic choice. Meanwhile, norms provided both guidance to actors and institutional resources for contesting various practices. As these forces stand out as important, I offer a theory that gives them adequate analytical attention. The second basis lies in existing literature on norm change and on institutional transformations. To varying degrees, technology, framing and discourse, and bureaucratic politics are all part of existing theories of norm change. This scholarship provides guidance on how best to more formally and systematically specify and trace how they worked in this case.

The first mechanism, *convention reorientation*, refers to the reframing of a situation to entail different obligations, actor identities, and local ends. Unlike in norm contestation, actors are not disputing the legitimacy of a rule or principle, but instead repositioning themselves so as to be outside its scope. Versions of this appear in the literature on framing (Barnett, 1999; Payne, 2001) and “rhetorical coercion” (Krebs and Jackson, 2007), ontological security-seeking (Rumelili, 2015), and securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998). Shannon (2000), in particular, explores debates over whether an action falls within the regulatory scope of a norm, termed “justification,” through a psychological framework.<sup>11</sup> The common thread is that the way in which a situation is classified situates it in particular normative configurations, and reclassifying that situation often moves it to a completely new such configuration. As classifications are the outcomes of creative and competitive transactions, they fit well within a relational theoretical framework such as the one I use here. Moreover, a pragmatist perspective takes this beyond a purely instrumental account of framing or of strategic speech-acts to include how actors are themselves changed along with their situations.

This mechanism is most salient to situations where actors’ options, such as the employment of political violence, are highly defined by conventions; switching the *context* of those conventions reveals a new horizon of possible action. For example, by framing its counterterrorism practices as a war, rather than policing, the US placed them within the broader normative framework of Just War theory and outside of the domestic justice system, which, in turn, implies certain obligations of proportionality and discrimination, codified in international law and liberal political thought (Crawford, 2003). This was facilitated by widespread anguish and anger in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which helped unsettle or shock the existing institutional environment. When critics of US practices employ the language of crime and punishment, such as by referring to killings as “extra-judicial executions” (see, e.g., Kretzmer, 2005), they are also seeking to reorient the situation such that a different set of conventions apply — ones that permit far less extensive violence and entail far greater institutional oversight. Over time, these discursive maneuvers generate broader transformations, with changed classifications and their associated conventions crystallizing into new normative configurations.

The second mechanism, *technological revision*, refers to the shifting of action through new media of intervention into the world — both new objects *and* skills — which carry different normative connotations and enable new forms of transactions subject to different regulative conditions. As noted, technological innovation is directed by value-driven and cultural processes, and is only one part of a broader set of enabling conditions making normative transformation possible at a systematic scale. Technological determinism is alone wholly inadequate to understand this, but an analysis that omits technology ignores key instrumental factors — on this view, technology *does not determine* actors’ choice of actions, but rather offers *new possibilities* to them, for them to evaluate, select, or synthesize as they see fit.

Again, IR scholars have attended to some aspects of this mechanism in existing work. Macro-historical research into the material foundations of international systems (Deudney, 2000) and into the complexification of war (Bousquet, 2008) are two such examples, while Carvin and Williams (2014), who take an explicitly practice-theoretical approach to look at the emergence of a liberal way of war, offer a third. A fourth lies in

the IR-adjacent literature in political geography on materialism and war (Grayson, 2016; Holmqvist, 2013; Shaw, 2013). The pragmatist take on this mechanism differs from others through its emphasis on the relationship between technological development and creative possibility, with new means of action disclosing new horizons of ends and values. As technological change makes it possible to do things differently, it produces new ethical solutions and problems.

The third mechanism, *network synthesis*, refers to the synthetic combination of social networks into new coalitions able to authorize new actions and reform social arrangements, entailing new normative configurations. When new relationships are formed between actors, they generate new authorities, such as through chains of command, crossing bureaucratic boundaries, or the delegation of tasks. This mechanism is most salient to situations where insurgent actors emerge or where existing networks are, as with convention reorientation, unsettled by exogenous shocks. In many respects, network synthesis has already been the subject of sustained attention by norms scholars. For example, in their account of the demise of the transatlantic slave trade, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) study the successes of Christian activists in influencing the British government to employ naval power against ships involved in transporting slaves. Acharya (2004) also examines a form of network synthesis in how individual states “localize” international conventions, gaining influential foreign support but reshaping those conventions in the process. More recently, studies of private security companies show how closer ties between government elites and corporate executives challenge and transform perceptions of mercenaries and of legitimate combatants (Avant, 2005, 2016; Percy, 2007). Network synthesis has thus been well studied as a mechanism of alliance building. Yet, it also builds worlds, resulting in often sweeping transformations of norms as actors engage the novel situations.

In line with a Bayesian approach to process-tracing, I identify key observations that, if they obtain, should increase confidence in my explanation over others, such as norm dissociation, norm death, or the predominance of one mechanism over the others (Humphreys and Jacobs, 2015; Musgrave and Nexon, 2018). While process-tracing may take a range of methodological forms (Bennett and Checkel, 2015), this approach makes transparent my selection of single case-study evidence: I focus on the institutional processes especially likely to yield evidence of the operation of these three mechanisms in particular — the presence of which is enough to warrant some confidence in the explanation I offer. In other words, the more the case evinces these mechanisms, the more confidence is warranted to accept that they account for the underlying causal story. Convention reorientation implies key discussions around definitions. Specifically, there should be clear evidence of a definitional dispute, the outcome of which determines the essential normative valance of a contested practice — whether the practice is permissible will depend on its place within an already articulated set of conventions, and thus discourse revolves around not whether an action is right or wrong, but which conventional framework should apply. Technological revision implies that the development of new tools plays a notable role in making normatively contentious action more palatable — that it resolves moral or strategic dilemmas in ways that empower proponents of the action over opponents. Finally, network synthesis should imply clear evidence of bureaucratic alliance-making as a key component to the triumph of a “winning coalition” of

**Table 2.** The mechanisms of normative transformation and their observable implications.

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Normative effect</b>	<b>Observable implication</b>
Convention reorientation	Redefines the <i>frame</i> of a situation to involve a new set of laws, authorities, agents, and agencies, changing its normative dimensions.	Definitional disputes over action classification, rather than over overarching legal/moral principles.
Technological revision	Shifts action onto new media of intervention into the world, establishing new means with different normative connotations to their use.	Use of new tools to reduce the moral/strategic costs of a contentious action.
Network synthesis	Brings actors together in new ways, creating new alliances able to authorize new kinds of action.	Partnerships of actors from different institutional networks to push a common agenda.

proponents of a normative transformation, and of the new practices or actions associated with it (see Table 2).

## **The War on Terror and the transformation of the prohibition on assassination**

Here, I give a phased account of targeted killing by the US, reviewing the institutional history of each phase and discussing the ways in which the evidence on this case attests to the operation of the three causal mechanisms. I outline what the prohibition on assassination actually *is*, and describe how it was embedded within US institutions, with particular attention to where it was strong and weak in terms of how disposed officials or practitioners were to avoiding actions proscribed under it. Then, I trace the emergence of targeted killing through the early normative and organizational changes accompanying it during its gradual development as a regular practice under the Bush administration. Finally, I trace the full normalization and institutionalization of targeted killing as a major military and counterterrorism instrument under the Obama administration.

### ***Phase zero: The prohibition on assassination and targeted killing***

Initially, targeted killing too closely resembled assassination to be embraced as a military or counterterrorism instrument. In international convention, formal and informal, the prohibition on assassination dates back several centuries and has been a factor in discouraging the killing of both political leaders (Thomas, 2001) and military officers (Solis, 2010), as hunting/killing “named” individuals lay outside the boundaries of permissible killing in war. This was bound up in operational assumptions about how assassination would work: while ambushes were permitted in times of war, the infiltration of undercover operatives appeared “perfidious” and was therefore forbidden. Moreover, assassination was associated primarily with political disputes between conflicting elites, wherein the method and the target sat outside normative military affairs (Thomas, 2001). Without technology or tactics that allowed uniformed forces to target specific persons,

Western military norms cemented assassination as illegitimate by nature, nearly impossible to perform honorably.

Meanwhile, although this international prohibition has not stopped the US government from getting involved in “assassination-like” activities in the past, strong legal and informal conventions against the practice developed by the late 1980s. A history of scandal — mainly associated with the CIA’s involvement in Latin American coups — and a lack of institutional memory surrounding the use of assassination in counter-insurgency meant that CIA officials “grew up” in an environment where targeted killing was seen as prohibited in the minds of many within the CIA and in other arms of government, at least before September 11, 2001.<sup>12</sup>

Assassination was explicitly forbidden by *Executive Order 11905*, signed into law in 1976 by President Gerald Ford — “No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination” — and reinforced by *Executive Order 12036*, signed in 1978 by President Jimmy Carter. The 1976 ban on assassination came after the public investigation and exposure of a number of unsuccessful CIA operations to assassinate foreign leaders, and established firm boundaries constraining the scope available to the US intelligence community for covert action. As Grayson (2016: 54) notes, this ban was “generously narrow” and geared more toward mechanisms of transparency and executive control rather than permanent prohibition; indeed, employing the legal instrument of an executive order may have been to specifically pre-empt a legislative ban, which would have denied future presidents the power to approve of assassinations should they see fit. Nevertheless, until overridden, the executive order carried legal and institutional weight, redirecting the CIA away from any routine paramilitary operations.

Beyond its apparent illegality, assassination also fell within the range of activities associated with “policy” rather than intelligence collection, which ran afoul of the principles internalized by the CIA in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal. As previously quoted, James Pavitt’s testimony to the 9/11 Commission was that “we don’t do policy from Langley” (NCTAUS, 2004a), and further testimony suggests that senior CIA officials would have refused direct orders to engage in assassination. To repeat Richard Clarke’s claim: “We don’t want to be involved in killing people. Because we’re not like that. We’re not Mossad” (quoted in Mazzetti, 2013).

Finally, the targeted killing or assassination of terrorists ran a high risk of unacceptable harm to bystanders. This is well illustrated by the way in which President Clinton approached an opportunity to kill Bin Laden in mid-September 2000. In a trial run for expanding Predator UAVs as a surveillance platform, one pilot observed a figure apparently matching Bin Laden’s description at Bin Laden’s Tarnak Farms compound outside Kandahar (NCTAUS, 2004a: 190). Clinton was unwilling to approve a cruise missile strike as the settlement likely contained children (Coll, 2004). By refusing, at least up until that point, to engage in targeted killing, the executive branch of the US government lent the prohibition strength, hitching it to other conventions regarding the distribution of powers across the arms of the state — according to which the CIA was not to engage in killing — and to a particular, liberal vision for US military activities in a post-Cold War era. It was not just the direct prohibition on assassination that forbade targeted killing, but broader cosmopolitan norms concerning interventions abroad.

This is consistent with expectations stemming from the explanation that this article advances. First, it shows how key actors both defined targeted killing as assassination and were opposed to it on that basis, as well as on the basis of deeper institutional conventions concerning the appropriate powers of the CIA versus other arms of the US defense and security apparatus. Second, it shows that despite the obvious role that advanced technology has since then played in the US's use of targeted killing, major objections also revolved around propriety rather than solely the absence of adequately precise means. The form that opposition to targeted killing took thus makes norm dissociation unlikely, while suggesting that whatever changes later took place cannot solely be a product of the technological revision mechanism alone.

However, the prohibition was weaker in the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center (CTC). Established during the Reagan administration, its first director, Duane "Dewey" Clarridge, was chosen precisely for his bellicose and action-oriented reputation. Clarridge pushed for a pre-emptive, global counterterrorist doctrine making use of elite military forces, and even appears to have proposed the use of armed drones, though this project did not come to fruition before he was sacked in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal (Fuller, 2017). Thus, the CTC was established from its outset to approach terrorism through more bellicose means, and to employ and train personnel to accept targeting and direct action as legitimate. It diverged, in normative make-up and practical orientation, from the rest of the CIA. The global orientation of the CTC, and its mandate to target violent non-state groups rather than to conduct more traditional intelligence duties, placed it at the seam between espionage and military action, in a unique, novel, institutional space where the conventions of neither were clear. Hence, it was constituted in ways at odds with the conventions and practices on which normative opposition to assassination rested.

### *Phase one: The emergence of targeted killing*

The potential for significant transformations in the US's stance toward targeted killing lay in a combination of new technology and a new executive orientation toward the use of military force abroad. Attempts to arm the MQ-1 Predator — initially designed for surveillance — proceeded throughout the late 1990s, with successful tests taking place throughout 2001 (Whittle, 2014). A Predator armed with a Hellfire anti-tank missile offered a far more discriminating use of force than did a cruise missile, which had previously been considered and rejected as a means of targeting Bin Laden (Fuller, 2017). As one source explained, it offered a "little boom" rather than the "big boom" produced by larger ordnance (Roger Cressey, interview with author), and, crucially, did not require commandos to invade another sovereign country, which did not entail the risk of dead American personnel. Also significant were improvements in electronic and signals intelligence collection, offering new opportunities to learn the locations of targets in time to strike them (Miller et al., 2013).<sup>13</sup> These technological developments reassured the US government of its ability to remain within the normative parameters of cosmopolitan warfare, and, in turn, allowed the CIA to remain within its own normative aversion to high-profile military or paramilitary adventures — an institutional legacy still potent outside of the CTC.

Yet, technological advances were not the only factors enabling normative change. According to available accounts, the possibility of using drones to carry out targeted killings was first raised by Cofer Black, the director of the CTC, in mid-2000. Black, alongside Clarke, had been searching for a way to damage al-Qa'ida and Osama Bin Laden. However, the suggestion that the CIA should engage in targeted killing met with strong bureaucratic opposition (Mazzetti, 2013). DCI George Tenet, in particular, was highly resistant to the prospect of his organization engaging in what appeared to be assassination:

Tenet in particular questioned whether he, as Director of Central Intelligence, should operate an armed Predator. "This was new ground," he told us. Tenet ticked off key questions: What is the chain of command? Who takes the shot? Are America's leaders comfortable with the CIA doing this, going outside of normal military command and control? Charlie Allen told us that when these questions were discussed at the CIA, he and the Agency's executive director, A. B. "Buzzy" Krongard, had said that either one of them would be happy to pull the trigger, but Tenet was appalled, telling them that they had no authority, nor did he. (NCTAUS, 2004b: 210, note 241)

Tenet's reticence, though not shared by all beneath him in the CIA's hierarchy, represented settled institutional norms concerning authority and the use of force, and delayed further serious consideration of the use of CIA resources to engage in any killings for over a year. Indeed, in July 2001, the US government made a firm public statement against targeted killings when its ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, condemned Israel's targeting of Palestinians suspected of terrorism: "The United States government is very clearly on record as against targeted assassinations.... They are extrajudicial killings, and we do not support that" (Meyer, 2009). Thus, publicly and internally, significant normative transformation had yet to take place.

However, even prior to the 9/11 attacks and the "War on Terror," the new Bush administration sought to circumvent the opposition of the CIA leadership to targeted killing by soliciting ideas from lower-ranking members of the Agency. Despite opposition to extensive CIA involvement in "policy," Clarke was looking into ways of striking Bin Laden by mid-2000. He went as far as holding a meeting including targeted killing's main advocates in the CIA and the Department of Defense but excluded Tenet (Mazzetti, 2013). Nevertheless, Clarke's enthusiasm for targeted killing was not limitless:

We didn't want to create a broad precedent that would allow intelligence officials in the future to have hit lists and routinely engage in something that approximated assassination [and] create an American hit list that would become an ongoing institution that we could just keep adding names to and have hit teams go out and assassinate people. (Quoted in Scahill, 2013)

Black's standing enthusiasm for paramilitary counterterrorism, however, was well known to his colleagues, representing the more bellicose disposition of the CTC. With the Bush administration interested in aggressive responses, he became a popular figure at the White House. Black and the CTC were given the authority to begin targeted killings, following a White House briefing to which only Black, senior CTC personnel, and select foreign intelligence officials were invited (Scahill, 2013). Moreover, the legal

permissions offered by the new *Authorization for the Use of Military Force* (AUMF), passed on 14 September 2001 and authorizing the use of military forces against those responsible for the attacks, introduced a broad military logic to the CIA's counterterrorism initiatives — a point emphasized to me by a former counterterrorism adviser to the Bush administration (Roger Cressey, interview with author). In other words, executives in the Bush administration outmaneuvered Tenet to partner with a lower-ranking official from an insurgent, and until then relatively subordinated, subsection of the CIA who had no distaste for clandestine killing, and empowered those in favor with a new set of conventions governing the use of force against terrorists.

Here, it is helpful to explicitly revisit the observational implications of the proposed causal mechanisms, and consider whether they obtain. The use of new technology to overcome the disadvantages of previous means — both operational and normative — is the easiest to discern. This strongly attests to the role of technological revision. Moreover, the importance of executive enthusiasm for aggressive counterterrorism is consistent with network synthesis; the intervention of the White House in support of targeted killing proponents neutralized CIA officials opposed to it. Perhaps hardest to discern in this phase is convention reorientation. It may be possible to imagine all this taking place without redefinition of targeted killing; more consistent with norm death, this explanation would simply point to new technologies and executive impetus. There are, however, two indications of convention reorientation here. First is the importance of the AUMF in resituating counterterrorism activities within a logic of armed conflict. Second, though a weaker indicator, is that after the US government initially referred to Israel's targeted killings as “extrajudicial” executions, suggesting a criminal justice framework, this objection ceased to matter *within* the US's security apparatus and executive. Indeed, there is little evidence that it received serious consideration once the US began to set up its own targeted killing program, suggesting an easy shift into a “laws of armed conflict” normative framework. However, clearer evidence of convention reorientation can be found in the actions of the Obama administration.

### *Phase two: The institutionalization of targeted killing*

Despite the reorientation of the CIA toward targeted killing engineered by the Bush administration, with its supporters within the CIA, the practice met with mixed reception from the defense community at large. As former CIA General Counsel Jeffrey Smith claimed in an interview with the *Washington Post*, targeted killings may “suggest that it's acceptable behavior to assassinate people.... Assassination as a norm of international conduct exposes American leaders and Americans overseas” (Meyer, 2009). However, the Bush administration and the CTC, which had significantly grown in size and influence within the CIA, were certain that drone strikes were dealing a significant blow to al-Qa'ida. Both the CIA and the Defense Department, with its own expanded counterterrorism infrastructure, had largely accepted their roles as counterterrorists fighting on a global battlefield. At this point, however, targeted killing was not yet as widespread and well institutionalized as it would become under the Obama administration.

As noted earlier, when President Obama took office, he might have limited or put a halt to further targeted killings, but he instead did the opposite: he escalated and expanded

the program. Within the first year, the Obama administration had presided over more strikes than the Bush administration had in its entire eight years in office (Meyer, 2009), and Obama took a far more personal role in the program, signing off on lists of targets in weekly meetings between himself and the director of the CIA. By micromanaging, Obama injected executive authority into the CIA's targeting practices, directly legitimating expansions in the scope and pace of targeting. There are two reasons why Obama may have done this. The first was to wage a "good" fight against al-Qa'ida while withdrawing from the "bad" fight that the Bush administration had started in Iraq. The second, at least according to some within the government, was that after Obama permanently shuttered the CIA's infamous "enhanced interrogation" program, targeted killings became a more significant defense against terrorism (Scahill, 2013). As less information was available to the CIA, the killings had to shift from a pre-emptive to a preventive mode, lest another major attack against the US take place and result in great political cost. Although this second reason may imply a rather more cynical calculus, both highlight the perceived value of targeted killing as a key instrument for the Obama administration to fight terrorism while differentiating their approach to the War on Terror from that of their predecessors.<sup>14</sup>

One of the clearest indicators of the Obama administration's attempts to legally normalize targeted killing is a leaked, undated State Department White Paper.<sup>15</sup> Entitled "Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a U.S. Citizen who is a Senior Operational Leader of Al Qa'ida or An Associated Force," it was confidentially provided to members of the Senate Intelligence and Judiciary Committees in June 2012. The memo went beyond simply outlining the circumstances under which a US citizen may be targeted and killed to state, in legal language, much of the Obama administration's case for targeted killing in general. First, it firmly differentiated such killings from "assassinations":

In the Department's view, a lethal operation conducted against a U.S. citizen whose conduct poses an imminent threat of violent attack against the United States would be a legitimate act of national self-defense that would not violate the assassination ban. Similarly, the use of lethal force, consistent with the laws of war, against an individual who is a legitimate military target would be lawful and would not violate the assassination ban. (Department of Justice, 2012)

Second, it stated when targeting is permissible, including a broad definition of imminent threat:

The condition that an operational leader present an "imminent" threat of violent attack against the United States does not require the United States to have clear evidence that a specific attack on U.S. persons and interests will take place in the immediate future. (Department of Justice, 2011)

Two other conditions must also be fulfilled: "law of war principles" must, in general, be followed, and capture, at least when an American citizen is the target, must be practically unfeasible without considerable risk to US personnel.

It is here that convention reorientation can best be observed as efforts to define targeted killing as something distinct from assassination are the clearest indication that this

mechanism is at work. Not just a move within legal discourse, this was a bureaucratic and institutional move as well given the formal and informal channels through which the law influences the normative sensitivities and orientations of the CIA. If the Obama administration could simply have decided, regardless of legal or conventional status, to escalate and institutionalize targeted killing, there would be no reason for the White Paper. By intervening in the definitional dispute over whether targeted killing was or was not assassination, therefore, the administration's actions attest to the operation of something other than just the network synthesis mechanism.

By this point, the case is complete, with the US's targeted killing program looking more or less as it does today: normalized, employed in numerous locales, and a fixture of political discourse on countering terrorism. Its development was first driven by technological change and institutional maneuvering in which the Bush administration partnered with "insurgent" CIA bureaucrats willing to flout conventions, and later by a new administration that saw the killings as an effective way to leave behind the unpopular security practices of its predecessor, while dealing with threats in regions where other military actions carried their own problems with them.

### *Summary*

All three proposed mechanisms generated institutional change — in norms, in organizational structure, and in practices. The first phase occurred over a period of successful institutional politicking during the initial years of the Bush administration, and most clearly shows these mechanisms operating not just simultaneously, but also synthetically. Convention reorientation occurred as counterterrorism shifted into a military institutional framework, constituted by legal and bureaucratic configurations more permissive of directed, lethal force as a legitimate first choice of action. Technological revision was a major enabling process, starting even before counterterrorism became a "war," and facilitated targeted killing by offering a means of remaining within liberal standards of discrimination and proportionality. Network synthesis, enabled by the entrance of a new administration, allowed CIA officials supportive of targeted killing to triumph over their previously more powerful internal rivals, providing the authorities and institutional pathways to reform the practices and structures of the organization. Crucially, it is hard to imagine any of these mechanisms working in isolation from the others in this case; the interaction effect of all three in concert explains how targeted killing first arose.

Further transformation took place during the initial years of the Obama administration, which sought to legally normalize and institutionalize targeted killing as a major policy instrument, beyond what Bush-era proponents such as Clarke had originally desired. Technological revision diminished in salience: although both UAVs and surveillance technology continued to increase in sophistication, the major development — a means of precision killing — had already occurred. Rather, convention reorientation and network synthesis interacted, with Obama's increased personal involvement injecting executive authority into the targeted killing program, and measures of legal normalization shifting the killings from a state of exception to a well-defined institutional role.<sup>16</sup> This transformation was not essentially tied to the use of armed UAVs — the killing of Bin Laden by a commando team in a highly risky and daring operation shows this;

nevertheless, it was closely bound up with the routine and relatively risk-free targeting capabilities afforded by aircraft that allowed for sustained surveillance, a relatively precise use of force (in comparison to a cruise missile or multi-party firefight), and a complete absence of US personnel on foreign ground and in the line of fire. Of the two periods of transformation, the first was undoubtedly the most major, but the second is nevertheless an illustration of how mechanisms of normative transformation work.

## **Broader implications for theorizing institutional and normative change**

The explanation I advance here is consistent with the notion of “punctuated equilibrium” as an explanation of institutional change — a long-standing concept in historical institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996). As Fligstein and McAdam (2012) argue, exogenous shocks to a field upset its stability and give challengers opportunities when they would otherwise be defeated by incumbent actors defending the status quo. While major events can unsettle established norms and practices, there must still be a process of recognition and mobilization by challengers for change to take place. This occurred within the CIA. The 9/11 attacks profoundly influenced both the security bureaucracy and US politics in general, reducing the risk posed by the exposure to the public of aggressive covert operations and giving the Bush administration the impetus to bypass the CIA hierarchy. While Clarke’s concerns show the lingering power of the prohibition upon the attitudes even of officials in favor of the program, Black’s willingness to expand and restructure the CTC supplied the requisite institutional and technical means to overcome the prior conventions that guided Tenet and other objectors.

More than a case study of institutional change, however, this article is an enquiry into the origins and evolutions of a prohibition — it theorizes norm transformation. It shows that the targeted killing prohibition arose out of a constellation of normative bases. The relationship between a “norm” against assassination and the US’s use of targeted killing is not determinable absent the institutional context in which that norm is constituted, with local particularities shaping the limits and connotations of the prohibition. Moreover, it shows how changes in norm compliance and interpretation may arise from a range of discursive, technological, and bureaucratic factors, and that this is, effectively, a kind of normative transformation in itself.

The study of institutional change is thus relevant to one of the key research programs of IR research over the past two-and-a-half decades: the effects of existing international norms and the emergence of new ones. This literature began in the 1990s and early 2000s, and uncovered a normative dimension to the conduct of international politics in a discipline otherwise consumed by rationalist debates over the comparable merits of neo-realism and neoliberalism (Hoffmann, 2010; for examples, see, among others, Barkin and Cronin, 1994; Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996; Kratochwil, 1989; Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986; Nadelmann, 1990). At the forefront of this research program were studies into the emergence and spread of prohibitions (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Price, 1995; Tannenwald, 1999), and it grew to posit complex models of the “life cycles” of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; see also, among others, Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Klotz, 1995). In the early 2000s, a second wave of norms scholarship studied

how existing norms manifest in varying ways, and how norm compliance differs across contexts (Hoffmann, 2010; for examples, see, among others, Acharya, 2004; Krook and True, 2012; Sandholtz, 2008; Wiener, 2004, 2008), but, until recently, paid relatively little attention to intra-institutional factors and the role of practitioners. Some scholars have thus called for more investigation of local agency (Bucher, 2014; Hofferberth and Weber, 2015), and reached for increasingly sophisticated sociological perspectives on the dynamics of contestation and creativity within disputes over norms (Kornprobst, 2007; Schmidt, 2014; Wiener, 2008, 2014).

The approach I use here contributes to that effort, if understood in terms of practice theory and sociological pragmatism. Characteristic of both is a focus on practitioners, processes of transformation in single cases, and configurational analysis (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissan, 2013; Büger and Gadinger, 2015; Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Jackson and Nexon, 1999; see also Depéteau, 2013; Elias, 1994; Linklater, 2011), and scholars working from their premises have been critical of more mainstream research on norms (Jackson et al., 2004). Despite recent suggestions that these approaches are in opposition to dominant constructivist scholarship (McCourt, 2016), the three mechanisms traced in this article are sensitive to precisely those dynamics of contestation and agency, in large part, because they proceed from an understanding of practice based in pragmatism, rather than Bourdieu's more structuralist account.<sup>17</sup> They avoid reifying "norms" as theoretical objects — meaning that norms do not play an explanatory role as cognitive proxies for more primitive processes of institutionalization and legitimation, themselves driven by problem-solving action. Rather, my explanation focuses less on norms *per se* and more on the normative dimensions of a host of practices by officials concerned with the authorities and strategies they take to be necessary for effective security policies. This highlights the practical, complex, and often multivalent normative character of contentious actions in ways that can be obscured or shoved into an abstract ideational realm when encapsulated within the conceptual container of "norm."

Moreover, my explanation takes seriously the role of technology in the transformation of norms: not just a source of moral and strategic problems and solutions, it is a force for actors to remake themselves, entangled with broader processes of normative and institutional reformation. By orienting explanation around mechanisms attesting to these variables, rather than solely on discourse or decision theory, I take actors to be as plastic as structures. New technology alters identities and authorities in ways that may not change *which* norms are applicable, but does change *how* those norms are applied. Certainly, technology is part of existing accounts of norm change — one cannot talk about weapons taboos, for example, without talking about weapons — but its role in interpretation and contestation is especially clear given the emphasis that practice theory and pragmatism place on the materiality of cognition and social interaction. Granting a broader role to technology also ties in existing scholarship from other approaches already attentive to this dimension. Studies into liberalism and its attendant mode of warfare explicitly trace the history of drones and targeted killing (Carvin and Williams, 2014; Grayson, 2016; Shaw, 2013), and consider the cultural implications of their use (Holmqvist, 2013; Wilcox, 2017). Carvin and Williams (2014) examine the broad historical transformation of warfare, and the others focus on the normative implications of technology rather than the causal origins of its evolution and institutionalization. My approach shares their

sensitivities but operationalizes that normative dimension through a mechanism-based etiology applied to a specific case.

Finally, and most broadly, I foregrounded the reciprocal relationship between ends and means — between the normative and the strategic — by showing how perceptions of appropriate or legitimate conduct change in concert with political and practical problem-solving.<sup>19</sup> This illustrates the transformational potential lying even in local and immediate situations of social interaction — a subject of ongoing creative meta-theorizing (Adler, forthcoming) and political critique (Cochran, 2012). Studying the reciprocity of normativity and strategy orients recent attempts by scholars to revisit classical realism and critically evaluate the direction of mainstream constructivist research (Barkin, 2003; Levine, 2012). While these themes exist in more mainstream conversations in norms scholarship to a limited degree (see, e.g., Hofferberth and Weber, 2015; Schmidt, 2014; Wiener, 2014), they do so from first premises. In starting with an empirical rather than meta-theoretical puzzle, as I have done, scholars working in these new traditions can engage with and propel more mainstream research programs as a whole. The result should be a plurality of progressive approaches and a livelier conversation on the facets of the problems to which they may be applied, new or enduring.

## **Conclusion**

The emergence and institutionalization of the US's targeted killing program was not the demise of a norm, but its transformation. Drawing on insights from pragmatist and relational sociology, I traced the operation of three causal mechanisms — convention reorientation, technological revision, and network synthesis — to show how the prohibition on assassination changed. Initially, both opponents and proponents of targeted killing within the CIA were concerned that it would violate that prohibition, but as the CIA paramilitarized, as UAVs became more sophisticated, and as executive pressure mounted for aggressive counterterrorism, these concerns diminished. Then, under the Obama administration, targeted killing became institutionally entrenched, with an accompanying legal infrastructure that fully normalized it and differentiated it from assassination. All the while, however, actors averred that a prohibition on assassination existed and that they were not violating it.

This analysis does not just give an internal account of the history of a contentious practice; it offers a theory of norm transformation not focused on the life cycle of norms as reified social objects, but through an investigation of institutional change. Practices often evolve without neat divisions between old and new norms, knitting together a range of ethical and strategic problem-solving activities.<sup>18</sup> This approach is well suited to investigating the enormous shifts that the US security apparatus has undergone over the past two decades as they feature a complex entanglement of laws, threat adaptations, and advanced science and technology. Targeted killing is one case of the foregoing; others may include the CIA's use of torture and the widespread deployment of armed private military contractors in warzones. The latter two also feature not just new interpretations of old conventions, but also a similar embrace of new skills and devices.<sup>19</sup> If so, the approach may be “portable” beyond the idiosyncrasies of this one case, offering a

substantive theoretical and methodological addition to the research on norms and institutions in international relations.

At the same time, it locates a thematic overlap between discrete research programs on norms and on techno-social configurations (such as “new materialism” and its relatives). The latter accounts for a normative dimension to technology but does not focus on the way in which an arrangement of means and artifacts binds specific conventions to specific practices. Norm entrepreneurship can thus target or propel technological development, and the normative implications of techno-social configurations are not, so to speak, value-neutral — they favor some possible norm transformations over others. While this article primarily speaks to scholars of norms, it also shows where these other research programs have something to gain, especially when knitted together through a pragmatist sensitivity to creativity, evolutionary process, and configurational theorizing.

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### Notes

1. Comparisons may also be made with similar studies of Israel’s targeted killing program (Craig-Jones, 2015; Guiora, 2004; Pratt, 2013) but space constraints preclude their inclusion here.
2. With the exception of Jose (2017), who examines the status of the normative shift but not the institutional process leading to it.
3. This relational view of agency is drawn from Emirbayer and Mische (1998). It turns on an understanding of creativity and action developed by Joas (1996).
4. One methodological advantage of focusing on practices as “maneuvers” is that it overcomes the problem of concealed perceptions; intelligence officials, and political operators in general, are skilled at concealing or dissembling when questioned about their views, and the relational, “external” nature of practices fixes attention on what actors do rather than what they think.
5. For these statistics and others pertaining to the US’s use of armed UAVs, see: <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Every-confirmed-US-drone-strike-in-Pakistan-Yemen-and-Somalia-recorded-by-the-Bureau-2002-20121.jpg> (accessed May 1, 2017).
6. This bifurcation of non-compliance into death and dissociation is an atypical way of organizing disparate literatures on norms but highlights some deep commonalities in theme.
7. While the CIA had been involved in activities resembling assassination, it had never done so with great scale or systematicity. The closest thing to what the targeted killing would become was the “Phoenix Program,” in which US intelligence services cooperated with South Vietnamese security forces to locate insurgent cadres, but this program was not specifically devoted to killing, even if summary executions or lethal exchanges of fire led to the deaths of many of those targeted (Rosenau and Long, 2009).
8. Tenet’s reluctance is not unique; during the mid-1980s, President Reagan’s security executive made some attempts to establish CIA-run teams of local commandos to target and kill terrorists in Lebanon but was forced to scrap the plan in the face of strong resistance from both

- the CIA and the State Department, both of which cited the illegality of assassination and the likelihood of strong public relations blowback should the operation be exposed (Mazzetti, 2013).
9. As an editorial note, be aware that many of these sources are either unpaginated or digital, such as in the case of Mazzetti, whose “e-print” version of his book was the one I had access to.
  10. For example, of torture (McKeown, 2009) or of mercenarism (Panke and Petersohn, 2011).
  11. Shannon is, however, more interested in justification as a mental act of self-affirmation to resolve a value conflict, in which an act is reasoned to lie outside the scope of a norm. By contrast, convention reorientation is where an action is placed into a different normative framework as a positive redefinition, versus simply placing it outside the scope of a given norm (a negative argument).
  12. The CIA’s Vietnam-era Phoenix Program resembled a targeted killing program but it operated primarily through local partners — and left no institutional memory, as one self-described “old Agency hand” explained to me (John Rizzo, interview with author). The CIA similarly experimented with political assassination in partnership with Latin American allies, and had engaged in the limited, quasi-targeting of terrorists a small number of times under the Reagan administration, but without institutionalizing this approach (Fuller, 2017).
  13. Later advances in optical technology, and new aircraft such as the MQ-9 Reaper, contributed to the further use of unmanned airpower once the targeted killing program was underway (Coll, 2014).
  14. Whether this perception was accurate lies outside the remit of this article.
  15. Another memo, dated 2011, outlines a more specific justification for the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, an al-Qa’ida leader and US citizen. Here, the US government claims the authority to target him under the AUMF, positioning the operation as a military action directed at an imminent threat rather than a punishment for terrorist crimes, and acknowledges but dismisses civil liberties concerns surrounding extrajudicial execution (see: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/06/23/National-Security/Graphics/memodrones.pdf?tid=a\\_mcntx](https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/06/23/National-Security/Graphics/memodrones.pdf?tid=a_mcntx)).
  16. By comparison, this process of legal normalization took place with Israel’s targeted killing program far sooner, in part, because the program was led by the military and prosecuted in places visible to the public eye (Pratt, 2013).
  17. In this, I deviate from the bulk of existing “practice turn” literature in the field, which takes its cues more from Bourdieu (Büger and Gadinger, 2015).
  18. This contrasts with a strict separation of action theory into contrasting logics of appropriateness and consequences (March and Olsen, 1998).
  19. Documents on the CIA’s torture of suspected terrorists highlight the technological development supposedly offered by a new “science” of interrogation (Soufan, 2011), while the deployment of armed contractors became increasingly integrated into US force deployments in Iraq as a result of better communications technologies (Col. (ret.) Christopher Mayer, interview with author).

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