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Strike Reflects U.S. Shift to Drones in Terror Fight

By SCOTT SHANE and THOM SHANKER

WASHINGTON — The C.I.A. drone strike that killed Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born propagandist for Al Qaeda's rising franchise in Yemen, was one more demonstration of what American officials describe as a cheap, safe and precise tool to eliminate enemies. It was also a sign that the decade-old American campaign against terrorism has reached a turning point.

Disillusioned by huge costs and uncertain outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration has decisively embraced the drone, along with small-scale lightning raids like the one that killed Osama bin Laden in May, as the future of the fight against terrorist networks.

"The lessons of the big wars are obvious," said Micah Zenko, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, who has studied the trade-offs. "The cost in blood and treasure is immense, and the outcome is unforeseeable. Public support at home is declining toward rock bottom. And the people you've come to liberate come to resent your presence."

The shift is also a result of shrinking budgets, which will no longer accommodate the deployment of large forces overseas at a rough annual cost of $1 million per soldier. And there have been improvements in the technical capabilities of remotely piloted aircraft. One of them tracked Mr. Awlaki with live video on Yemeni tribal turf, where it is too dangerous for American troops to go.

Even military officials who advocate for the drone campaign acknowledge that these technologies are not applicable to every security threat.

Still, the move to drones and precise strikes is a remarkable change in favored strategy, underscored by the leadership changes at the Pentagon and C.I.A. Just a few years ago, counterinsurgency was the rage, as Gen. David H. Petraeus used the strategy to turn around what appeared to be a hopeless situation in Iraq. He then applied those lessons in Afghanistan.

The outcome — as measured in political stability, rule of law and economic development — remains uncertain in both.

Now, Mr. Petraeus (he has chosen to go by his civilian title of director, rather than general) is in charge of the C.I.A., which pioneered the drone campaign in Pakistan. He no longer commands the troops whose numbers were the core of counterinsurgency.

And the defense secretary is Leon E. Panetta, who oversaw the escalation of drone strikes in Pakistan's lawless tribal area as the C.I.A. director. Mr. Panetta, the budget director under President Bill Clinton, must find a way to safeguard security as the Pentagon purse strings draw tight.

Today, there is little political appetite for the risk, cost and especially the long timelines required by counterinsurgency doctrine, which involves building societies and governments to gradually take over the battle against insurgents and terrorists within their borders.

The apparent simplicity of a drone aloft, with its pilot operating from the United States, can be misleading. Behind each aircraft is a team of 150 or more personnel, repairing and maintaining the plane and the heap of ground technology that keeps it in the air, poring over the hours of videos and radio signals it collects, and gathering the voluminous intelligence necessary to prompt a single strike.

Air Force officials calculate that it costs $5 billion to operate the service's global airborne surveillance network, and that sum is growing. The Pentagon has asked for another $5 billion next year alone for remotely piloted drone systems.

Yet even those costs are tiny compared with the price of the big wars. A Brown University study, published in June, estimates that the United States will have spent $3.7 trillion in Afghanistan and Iraq by the time the wars are over.

The drones may alienate fewer people. They have angered many Pakistanis, who resent the violation of their country's sovereignty and the inevitable civilian casualties when missiles go awry or are directed by imperfect intelligence. But while experts argue over the extent of the deaths of innocents when missiles fall on suspected terrorist compounds, there is broad agreement that the drones cause far fewer unintended deaths and produce far fewer refugees than either ground combat or traditional airstrikes.

Still, there are questions of legality. The Obama administration legal team wrestled with whether it would be lawful to make Mr. Awlaki a target for death — a proposition that raised

complex issues involving Mr. Awlaki's constitutional rights as an American citizen, domestic statutes and international law.

The Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel eventually issued a lengthy, classified memorandum that apparently concluded it would be legal to strike at someone like Mr. Awlaki in circumstances in which he was believed to be plotting attacks against the United States, and if there was no way to arrest him. The existence of that memorandum was first reported Saturday by The Washington Post.

The role of drones in the changing American way of war also illustrates the increasing militarization of the intelligence community, as Air Force drone technologies for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance — and now armed with Hellfire missiles for strikes on ground targets — play a central role in C.I.A. operations. The blurring of military-intelligence boundaries includes former uniformed officers assuming top jobs in the intelligence apparatus and military commando units carrying out raids under C.I.A. command.

As useful as the drones have proved for counterterrorism, their value in other kinds of conflicts may be more limited. Against some of the most significant potential threats — a China in ascendancy, for example, or a North Korea or Iran with nuclear weapons — drones are likely to be of marginal value. Should military force be required as a deterrent or for an attack, traditional forces, including warships and combat aircraft, would carry the heaviest load.

Of course, new kinds of air power have often appeared seductive, offering a cleaner, higher-tech brand of war. Military officials say they are aware that drones are no panacea.

"It's one of many capabilities that we have at our disposal to go after terrorists and others," one senior Pentagon official said. "But this is a tool that is not a weapon for weapon's sake. It's tied to policy. In many cases, these weapons are deployed in areas where it's very tough to go after the enemy by conventional means, because these terror leaders are located in some of the most remote places."

In some ways, the debate over drones versus troops recalls the early months of George W. Bush's administration, when the new president and his defense secretary, Donald H. Rumsfeld, envisioned how a revolution in military technology would allow the Defense Department to reduce its ground forces and focus money instead on intelligence platforms and long-range, precision-strike weapons.

Then came the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the wars, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, in which ground forces carried out the lion's share of the missions.

Mr. Zenko, of the Council on Foreign Relations, worries about the growing perception that drones are the answer to terrorism, just a few years after many officials believed that invading and remaking countries would prove the cure. The recent string of successful strikes has prompted senior Obama administration officials to suggest that the demise of Al Qaeda may be within sight. But the history of terrorist movements shows that they are almost never ended by military force, he said.

"What gets lost are all the other instruments of national power," including diplomacy, trade policy and development aid, Mr. Zenko said. "But these days those tools never get adequate consideration, because drones get all the attention."

Charlie Savage contributed reporting.