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In recent years much has been written by journalists and scholars about Washington’s increasing use of drone warfare in North Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. Four themes have tended to dominate these discussions: whether or not ‘targeted killing’ by drone strikes is effective, the scale of and possible over-reliance on drone warfare and its impact on U.S. national security strategy, the moral, legal, and humanitarian implications involved in using this type of warfare, and technical considerations about a military campaign supported by such distinctive (but not necessarily new) technology.¹ The vast majority of the burgeoning literature focuses on the use of drones during the presidential administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and the underlying assumption tends to be that although reconnaissance drones were used before the War on Terror, the origins of the targeted killing campaign are rooted in the terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001.

It is refreshing then that in “The Eagle Comes Home to Roost” Christopher Fuller takes us beyond these dominant discourses of 9/11 as pivot and the ensuing drone campaign under Bush and Obama. As Fuller rightly sets out in the abstract to his article, “there has been little attempt to explain the origins of the program and place it within wider U.S. counterterrorism practice” in the existing scholarship (769). According to

Fuller, the historic origins of the CIA’s lethal drone warfare campaign are rooted not in 9/11 but in U.S.
counter-terrorism policy in the Middle East and North Africa during the 1980s. In particular, he pinpoints
the U.S. response to terrorist threats posed in Lebanon and by Muammar Gaddafi’s Libyan regime in the
Reagan era. It was the development of a counter-terrorism policy against these threats during the mid-1980s
that paved the way for the future lethal drone warfare campaign on organisational, policy, and technological
levels.

First, Fuller demonstrates that Director of Central Intelligence Bill Casey’s establishment of the CIA’s
Counterterrorism Center (CTC) under Duane Clarridge was significant in creating the Agency’s bureaucratic
apparatus for waging counter-terrorism activities on an international scale. Fuller argues that this was “a
revolution that provided the blueprint for the drone campaign today, suggesting that politics rather than
technology is the driving force” (780). In other words, the establishment of the CTC in 1986 marked an
organisational precedent for the CIA to play a leading role in this aspect of national security policy in future
years, but that the extent of its input would also continually be shaped and constrained by the political will of
Langley’s masters in Washington. Fuller illustrates that the CIA came full circle with its importance
rejuvenated under Obama through its operation of the drone campaign: “the Obama administration did not
revolutionize the CTC; rather it restored to it the role it had been intended to perform – that of a war room
taking the offensive against terrorism” (792).

Second, a justification for pre-emptive surgical strikes against terrorist threats abroad was rationalised in
National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 138, signed by President Ronald Reagan in April 1984. This
directive provided a policy-level case for the CIA to take the lead in lethal counter-terrorism operations
overseas despite the shadow cast by revelations of CIA impropriety culminating in the Church Committee
investigation in the mid-1970s and the official U.S. government prohibition on assassination. Moreover,
Fuller explains that “the gathering of intelligence to enable precision strikes into terrorist safe havens,
targeting specific leaders and their associates whilst stressing low levels of collateral damage and the
international legality of the actions are the corner stones of the drone campaign, and reflect the approach set
out in NSDD138” (791). Although NSDD 138 might never have been extensively implemented by the
Reagan administration, Fuller demonstrates that its rationalisation of lethal pre-emptive strikes against
terrorists targets “provides a clear link between the approach pushed by the counterterrorism hardliners with
the Reagan administration and the drone campaign today” (778).

Third, Fuller also charts a direct technological link between Reagan-era counter-terrorism policy and the more
recent drone warfare campaign under Bush and Obama. He describes the development of five prototype
drones by the CTC under the highly secretive Eagle Program and the Amber I unmanned aircraft developed
by the U.S. Army in the mid- to late-1980s. Just as the prototypes were nearing completion the political will
to draw on this new technology was sapped – by Casey’s demise, the scandalous revelations around Iran-
Contra, and a general diminishing of international tensions as the Cold War entered its end phase.
Nonetheless, the firm tasked with developing Amber I was taken over by General Atomics Aeronautical
Systems (GA-ASI) which eventually developed the RQ-1 Predator – the same drone that was acquired by the
CIA in 1995 to provide intelligence during the U.S. intervention against Serbia. As the threat posed by
Osama bin Laden and his affiliates in al-Qaeda emerged in the late 1990s, U.S. counter-terrorism chief
Richard Clarke pushed for arming the Predator to facilitate a “see it/shoot it” capability. Fuller observes that
the ensuing debates in the Clinton administration that eventually found favour after 9/11 echoed those
involving Clarridge and the Reagan administration more than a decade earlier (786).
In drawing links and parallels to U.S. counter-terrorism policy in the 1980s, this illuminating article very usefully extends the congealing lines of discourse in the existing discussions about U.S. drone warfare in the post-9/11 age. Although not an aim of this article, arguably the parameters of debate could be extended further still. For instance it would be helpful to place drone warfare within the history of CIA covert action including (but not limited to) CIA assassination plans and paramilitary operations of the pre-Church Committee era. CIA covert action in the Cold War very often sought to secretly extend the hand of American influence, often through lethal force, into territory in which overt U.S. political and military influence was limited such as the communist bloc regimes of Eastern Europe, China, and Cuba. Parallels and precedents to this aspect of the drone campaign could therefore also be drawn from an era preceding Reagan.

Although not the primary focus of this article, it would also be interesting to gain the author’s perspective on the effectiveness of Reagan-era counter-terrorism policy upon which the parallels with drone warfare are drawn. This would enable Fuller to evaluate the wisdom (or not) of the return to many of these precedents by Bush and Obama in their pursuit of terrorist suspects in remote regions far beyond America’s borders.