“Home of the Hunters”—the words inscribed atop Creech’s entrance gate. This is not a metaphor. Drone pilots and operators are literally hunters. Drones are hunter-killers, named after animals: “predator,” “hawk,” “raven,” “drone.” Former pilots’ memoirs refer to their killing of humans on the ground as hunting “rats,” “pigeons,” “chickens,” “mice.” The generic result is bugsplat. Killing another human being is the hardest act—unless it’s translated into a fantasy of hunting, and then it’s animals, not people, you are killing. At the sensory, conceptual, symbolic, and emotional levels, killing by drone turns into designated hunting, which doesn’t have to be hard. Hunting and killing prey can even be sport, can be fun. Hunting is the Lacanian real of what drone pilots do.

Lieutenant Colonel Matt J. Martin’s memoir, Predator, describes his years as a drone pilot at Creech. The idea of hunting echoes in almost every page of his narrative: “I was a patient, silent hunter;” “We were always hunting, day and night.”1 Pilots’ main activity consisted of “watching from the sky like a bird of prey ready to strike.”2 Martin uses the biblical bestiary to explain his frame of mind: “I sometimes pondered how Adam might have gone back to the Garden of Eden and whacked the serpent.”3 Drone pilot Martin said of his victims: “Insurgents were like
having a house infested with rats; the more of them you killed, it seemed, the more they bred.” Drone pilots are told in training, “The bastards never know what hits them.”

Like hunters for whom the trepidation of their first kill is forever imprinted in their memory, Martin talks of “my first kill” when “I drew in a deep breath, felt sweat stinging my eyes, tasted the bile of excitement in my mouth.” The military term for this hunting is going kinetic, and there is a “general eagerness in Nevada [at Creech] to ‘go kinetic.’” Killing can be exciting. It’s just hunting.

Beginning with the general name drone, coined by two naval scientists in 1936 “after analyzing various names of insects and birds,” the metaphoric links between drones and the bestiary are consistently preserved: “Global Hawk,” “Raven,” “Wasp,” “Dragon Runner,” “Eagle Eye,” “Vampire Bat,” “SnakeBot,” “Big Dog,” “Centaur,” “Polibot” (shifting from the form of a snake into a spider), “RoboLobster,” “Polecat,” “Peregrine UAV Killer” (after the peregrine falcon), “Marsupial” robots (one robot carried inside another). “Predator” was the name for the hero of them all until 2016. The latest generation of drones are mostly “Reapers.” The Iraqis’ name for drones is “vultures.”

Grégoire Chamayou’s paradigm for drone warfare is manhunting. He argues that by eliminating all sense of reciprocity, by killing without any danger of the killer being killed as well, drone warfare “becomes absolutely unilateral. What could still claim to be combat is converted into a campaign of what is, quite simply, slaughter.” After 9/11 Bush declared that the new kind of warfare required “us to be on an international manhunt,” while Rumsfeld asked, “How do we organize the Department of Defense for manhunts?” Researchers called for a “national manhunting agency,” “manhunting perfected and, most of all, made invisible.” Hunter-killer drones are instruments of such manhunting, “so asymmetrical that it is more like hunting than war”—to the point that many in the Pentagon feared that such “preemptive manhunting” could turn into another Phoenix Program of torture and murder.

A RADIO EXCHANGE

The declassified radio transcripts below between the sensor, the pilot, the MC (mission coordinator), the joint terminal attack controller (call sign
“Jaguar 25,” or Jag25), and the safety observer of a drone operation can be taken as a sample of drone hunting. They are reenacted in the film *National Bird*, which Brandon Bryant and Cian Westmoreland screened for us in Las Vegas. The drone operators have just noticed three trucks driving on an Afghan country road. Here are extracts of the exchanges:

**sensor:** Looks like people on the back of a pickup, one, two, three, at least five dudes so far. . . . That truck would make a beautiful target.

**pilot:** Yeah.

**mc:** Screener said at least one child near SUV.

**sensor:** Bullshit. Where? I don’t think they have kids out at this hour, I know they’re shady but come on.

. . . .

**mc:** They are reviewing.

**pilot:** Okay, review that shit. Why didn’t he say possible child, why are they so quick to call fucking kids but not to call a fucking rifle.

**sensor:** I really doubt that “children” call, man. I really fucking hate that.

**sensor:** Picked up a third vehicle on their train.

**mc:** Guilty by association.

. . . .

**sensor:** They’re praying. They are praying. Praying? I mean, seriously, that’s what they do.

**mc:** They’re going to do something nefarious.

. . . .

**mc:** Adolescent near the rear of the SUV.

**sensor:** Well, teenagers can fight.

**mc:** Pick up a weapon and you’re a combatant. It’s how that works.

**pilot:** . . . Be advised, all passengers are finishing up praying, and rallying up near all three vehicles at this time.

**sensor:** Oh, sweet target. I’d try to go through the bed [people lying on a bed at the back of the truck], put it right center of the bed.
MC: Oh, that’s perfect.

PILOT: . . . Our screeners are currently calling.

PILOT: Twenty-one MAMs [military-aged males], no females, and two possible children.

JAG25: Roger. When we say children are we talking teenagers or toddlers?

SENSOR: I would say about twelve, not toddlers. Something more towards adolescents or teens.

JAG25: We’ll pass that along to the ground force commander. But like I said, twelve-thirteen years old with a weapon is just as dangerous.

SENSOR: Oh, we agree. Yeah.

MC: What’s the master plan, fellas?

PILOT: I don’t know. Hope we get to shoot the truck with all the dudes in it.

SENSOR: Yeah. . . . Sensor is in, the party begins!

PILOT: Yeah. All right, so the plan is, man, uh, we’re going to watch this thing go down, the hells [Hellfire missiles] are going to take out as much as they can, and when they Winchester we can play cleanup.

SENSOR: Hey MC.

MC: Yes?

SENSOR: Remember, kill chain!

MC: Will do.

SENSOR: Roger. And

EXPLOSION

SENSOR: Oh . . . And there it goes!

PILOT: Our engagement.

SENSOR: Stand by.

. . .
pilot: They took the first [truck] and, uh, the last out. They're going to come back around.

sensor: Looks like they're surrendering. They're not running.

safety observer: Dude, this is weird.

sensor: They hit it. [Explosion of the third truck]. You . . . These guys are just . . .

pilot: Holy shit.

sensor: I don’t know about this. This is weird.

pilot: The lady is carrying a kid, huh? Maybe.

mc: No.

sensor: Huh, yeah.

mc: The baby, I think on the right. Yeah.

pilot: Since the engagement we have not been able to PID [identify] any weapons.14

Twenty-three civilian members of a family, including two children, were killed in that attack, their scattered body parts collected and taken to their village amid sobbing and wailing. The film shows images of survivors in the hospital, their limbs amputated. Family members of the killed explain to the interviewers how they had stopped at a roadside rest area to pray. When they left they heard a plane they couldn’t see. The mother of her dead boy says there were two black helicopters and a white drone. When their first vehicle was hit, everyone panicked and the men told the women and children to get out of the truck so that the attackers could see they were civilians. But the bombing continued. One woman raised her child above her head to show they were not fighters. One man asks: How can’t these allegedly precision weapons distinguish women and children from combatants?

Hunting involves looking for a “beautiful target.” A truck filled with people, “military-aged males” is perfect for a strike. “They were always trying to kill people,” explains Heather, a former drone pilot, in the film. “All these officers, it looks good on their résumé if they kill more people.” But there are children. Toddlers or adolescents? “Oh, sweet target!” Praying? Call the kill chain. “The party begins!” The Creech pilot hits the first, then
a second truck. A woman is showing her child to heaven. A third missile hits the third truck. No weapons. “This is weird.”

Some of these massacres were later claimed to be human errors. General Stanley McChrystal apologized to the country after the previously mentioned massacre. But massacres are built into the US policy of manhunting. Human rights researchers have documented scores of abuses that appear to be illegal actions, amounting to war crimes, such as double-tap strikes (against first responders) and strikes deliberately targeting funerals and weddings—dozens of them have been documented by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the Stanford and New York University law schools. A hunter doesn’t respect funerals, weddings, or prayers.

THE KILL LIST

There is live video screening of drone attacks, directly transmitted from Creech to US officials in Washington. But that’s not enough. The White House wanted real action. So a kill list was established. Obama was playing the leading role, the Hunter in Chief. The White House staff for national security, exempt from review by Congress, would play a substantial role in the hunting expeditions for killing suspected terrorists. According to a New York Times report detailing how the killings were decided in Washington, every Tuesday more than one hundred members of the national security apparatus, “a grim debating society” headed by the president, would gather by videoconference to discuss targets and recommend to the president who should be next to die—every strike in Yemen, Somalia, and Libya and the riskier ones in Pakistan.

Candidates for the kill list were hotly debated. There were issues that required clarification, such as “What’s a Qaeda facilitator?” “If I open a gate and you drive through it, am I a facilitator?” someone wondered. If men are loading a truck with fertilizers, how do you know if they are making bombs or just farming? Obama’s chief of staff, William Daley, observed: “The president accepts as a fact that a certain amount of screw-ups are going to happen.” People close to Obama were impressed by his “striking self-confidence.” As national security adviser Thomas Donilon put it, “He’s a president who is quite comfortable with the use of force on behalf of the
Cameron P. Munter, ambassador to Pakistan, was even more blunt: Obama “didn’t realize his main job was to kill people.”

That killing was part of the ordinary business of the day at the White House can be glimpsed from the following interaction between Obama and his close national security advisor and speechwriter Ben Rhodes. At the end of the first term, when Obama asked Rhodes what he wanted to be engaged with during the second term, Rhodes complained that the administration lacked political ambition and had not taken on issues like normalizing relations with Cuba but mostly that “I’m tired of just being the guy who defends drones.” Obama understood instantly: “So, more Cuba, less killing. Look, I feel you.” The president offered Rhodes the opportunity to take the lead on some projects of interest to him but insisted, “I’d like you to stay where you are. . . . You’re not just an advisor, you’re a friend.” They were friends and partners at the White House not only while they collaborated on writing Obama’s great speeches for Prague and Cairo and Oslo, but also while they went hunting terrorists in the Middle East and Africa. Not only Creech but also the White House had turned into the “Home of the Hunters.”

Obama “insisted on approving every new name on an expanding ‘kill list,’ poring over terrorist suspects’ biographies on what one official calls the macabre ‘baseball cards’ of an unconventional war.” During the first six months of 2011 there were 145 drone strikes against Gaddafi’s regime alone, even while the Obama administration denied there was a war against Libya. What did Obama know from the baseball card profiles of the potential terrorists? According to one report, of the approximately 3,000 people killed by drones up to June of 2011, the CIA knew the names of only 125, and it considered only 35 of them as “high value targets.” But why should a hunter know the names of the wild prey he is going to kill? Only pets and tamed animals have names.

Did these killings really diminish the terrorism problem posed by al-Qaeda and affiliates? David Kilcullen, a “counterterrorist guru,” close associate of General David Petraeus in the “surge” to end the war in Iraq, and someone who knew the situation well, didn’t think so. He told Congress in April 2009, “Since 2006, we’ve killed 14 senior Al-Qaeda leaders using drone strikes; in the same period, we’ve killed 700 Pakistani civilians in the same area. The drone strikes are highly unpopular. They are deeply aggravating to the population. And they’ve given rise to a
feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists and leads to spikes of extremism... The current path that we are on is leading us to loss of Pakistani government control over its own population.\textsuperscript{23}

The ratio of fifty civilians killed for each militant was, for Kilcullen, “immoral,” and led to a self-generating process of further violence, a view reiterated in other internal CIA documents.\textsuperscript{24}

The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism is the most cited database regarding victims of drone warfare. As of June 2018, the Bureau estimated that between 7,854 and 10,918 people had been killed by American drones in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia; of these, between 751 and 1,555, following the BIJ’s own definitions, were “civilians,”\textsuperscript{25} and among these, 262 to 335 were children.\textsuperscript{26} Some Western estimates put the number of combatants among the dead at 85 percent. A very different calculation was given by the Pakistani daily \textit{Dawn}: it estimated that of the 708 people killed by drones in 2009 alone, only five were known militants. The other major English-speaking daily in Pakistan, the \textit{News}, estimated that of the 701 people killed by drones between January 2006 and April 2007, only 14 were known militants.\textsuperscript{27} Why the wide disparity between these numbers and the accepted Western estimates? A major explanation has to do with the notion of “signature strike”—in which the meaning of “combatant” is decided on the basis of a pattern of life, geographical location, or guilt by association.

There are, however, other well-informed Western sources that concur with Kilcullen’s 50-to-1 estimate. Peter Bergen and Megan Braun report that since 2004 some forty-nine militant leaders have been killed in drone strikes, constituting “2% of all drone-related fatalities.”\textsuperscript{28} The 2012 report \textit{Living under Drones}, produced by the Stanford’s International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic and the NYU School of Law’s Global Justice Clinic, similarly found, for Pakistan specifically, that “the number of ‘high-level’ targets killed as a percentage of total casualties is extremely low—estimated at just 2%.”\textsuperscript{29} Bergen and Jennifer Rowland reviewed the drone campaign in Pakistan between 2004 and December 31, 2013, and affirmed that the fifty-eight militant leaders whose death were confirmed by at least two credible news sources “account for only 2 percent of all drone-related fatalities in Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textit{Signature strikes} are based on patterns of behavior observed on the ground from a drone ten thousand feet in the sky. William Arkin’s “Data
Machine”—the vast system of data collection for national security purposes that is leading to increasingly automated surveillance and warfare—would define a signature as “a distinctive basic characteristic or set of characteristics that consistently re-occurs and uniquely identifies a piece of equipment, activity, individual, or event.” Signature strikes target “groups of men who bear certain signatures, or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activity, but whose identities aren’t known.” What those “defining characteristics” are has never been made explicit to the public. By 2012 the CIA had clearance to treat armed men traveling by truck in Pakistan, a country where gun ownership is common, as individuals whose “pattern of life” warranted a lethal strike, with the dead being counted as “militants.” An extension of such cavalier acceptance of group killing is the frequency with which drone attacks on militants are carried out at night. A study by an academic group and the BIJ found that “houses are twice as likely to be attacked at night compared with the afternoon . . . when families were likely to be at home and gathered together.”

President Obama’s main counterterrorism chief, John Brennan, claimed in August 2011 that not a single noncombatant had been killed in a year of strikes. This derives from accepting a simple premise: “Military-age males in a strike zone [are] combatants . . . unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.” That is, you are a terrorist if you are in a zone where there are terrorists, because “in fact, simply being a male capable of taking up arms in a territory deemed ‘hostile’ sufficed in the minds of the drone program administrators to dispatch the suspect and label the homicide an ‘act of war.’” (This logic still does not take into account the estimated three hundred children killed by drones). As a CIA officer told Jane Mayer of the *New Yorker*, “No tall man with a beard is safe anywhere in Southwest Asia.” Other officials candidly admitted that they “were killing a large number of terrorist suspects, even when the C.I.A. analysts were not certain beforehand of their presence.” In short, signature strikes ordinarily imply that the identity of the people killed is unknown. In 2012 President Obama approved TADS, “terrorist attack disruption strikes,” in Yemen—strikes on unknown people who are deemed to be linked to terrorism. Frequently the NSA approves drone attacks by looking at the activity of a SIM card, not the actual content of the phone call;
this led one former drone operator to “believe that the drone program amounts to little more than death by unreliable metadata.”

Laurie Calhoun writes: “Preemptive war and summary execution of suspects are two sides of the same tyrannical coin.” Such executions are protected by the secrecy of the perpetrators and the procedures used to target, death sentences issued by a president-appointed committee of bureaucrats with no provision for appeal or surrender. Calhoun points out that “military dictators have always executed their suspected enemies without trial,” and she wonders how the Predator drone program’s “institu
tional” homicide differs from the outrageous mass murders perpetrated by the tyrants of the past.

Terrorists are people stripped of names, citizenship, national identity. They have no rights, no personal defense, no due process. They represent nothing, allegedly belong to no group, family, or country. We make of them the embodiment of bare life in the manner described by authors such as Michel Foucault or Giorgio Agamben. In the Greek distinction between zoe (living beings in their natural state that include people and animals) and bios (human individuals in society), terrorists belong to zoe, to bare life, the equivalent of what, in Roman law, was the figure of homo sacer; someone “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.” The reduction of people into animal-like bare life is not marginal to the politics of the war of terror; it constitutes it. Hence the centrality of the hunter’s ethos. “Double taps” are an extreme instance of the reduction of terrorists to bare life to be killed with no due process and with no ordinary rites of burial. Homo sacer or “sacred man,” in its double aspect of abjection and sacrality, is a figure close to the anthropological notion of taboo: someone who produces at once awe and horror.

The politics of the drone provides a startling example of how politics is turned into biopolitics, a transformation produced by modernity, according to Foucault—that is, central to the mechanisms of state power are the calculations about natural or bare life itself, “a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques.” For Agamben, such a biopolitics of bare life “signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought.” Achille Mbembé has added the notion of necropolitics, that is, a politics in which “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides . . . in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” In the current world,
terrorism provides evidence for such views. A political axiom in the current War on Terror is that it is the sovereign state’s right to place the attribute “terrorist” on someone, who then becomes an individual outside human law (so that he can be killed without homicide being committed) or divine law (so that his death is not a valid sacrifice to any community and disrespect toward his religious burial is not a sacrilege). A major criticism by Dick Cheney and other Republicans against the new Obama administration was that, for a while, it appeared as if they were going to treat the terrorists as “criminals”—that is, allowing them a right to due judicial process and punishment, an intolerable concession in the post-9/11 mind-set that defines the terrorists as bare life just to be hunted and exterminated.

A HUNTER’S WORLD

I once spent several autumns running after wild boars with a group of twenty to thirty Basque hunters before I wrote an ethnographic essay on their mind-set and emotional life. What impressed me were the ways this type of hunting reduces the universe into an elementary semiotics of tracks, barks, and smells, as well as its specific use of the senses, its symbolism, and what I called its “erotics.” A hunter is a man possessed by desire who needs a kill. If, for Chamayou and for Hugh Gusterson, hunting is the true paradigm of the drone pilot, a theory of hunting is perhaps the best cultural and subjective analogue to a theory of the drone.

The hunter’s initial premise is that the human senses—hearing, sight, smell, touch—must be reduced to the level of animal communication. The wild beast in flight is concrete only in the tracks and scent it leaves behind—traces that are transmitted through invisible air, that the dog perceives and translates into barking. The hunter, upon hearing the barking, has to interpret the authenticity, intensity, modality, and direction of the signals and guess the location of the animal before approaching the spot where it might be hiding. The sensorial and cognitive gaps between human and wild animal are such that one wonders how the hunter can trust his own guesses. Yet a successful catch shows that the hunter comes to know a lot about his object of desire. But what kind of “knowledge” is this, based on tracks, blind smell, wordless barking?
To understand the hunter’s reduced sensorial field, one should differentiate between the primary-level senses of smell and touch (which lack a definite semantic space) and the secondary-level senses of hearing and sight (whose words, images, and colors form semantic hierarchies, relationships, and incompatibilities). Smell and touch dominate the hunt, and hearing is also vital but not at the level of speech. As for sight, the hunter uses it in a sort of process of elimination—normally the hunter imagines the image of the fugitive prey but doesn’t see it except as a momentary “apparition” preceding an immediate kill. You can watch a domestic animal endlessly, but a wild animal is elusive, travels under cover of night. As in the children’s game Hide and Seek, “seeing” is “killing” and wins the game. The visual paradox of the hunter consists in transforming the erratic image of the fantasized wild animal into the still life of an inert animal. Only then can he touch it.

One could say that the hunter’s claims to “knowledge” rely on olfactory information, based primarily on the dog’s sniffing and the guesswork that guides the hunter. Instinctual, intuitive knowledge is related to the sense of smell, as when you “smell” danger. The hunter never “knows” for certain the moves of his prey; he can only guess what it will do. In the absence of fixed knowledge, a shaman-like “divination” of the prey’s behavior is the only type of knowledge left to him. The ordinary notion of “truth” doesn’t apply to guesswork or fantasy—we are already in the domain of symbolism. No hypothesis can falsify the result when we are guessing or divining. The only certitude is the kill.

In hunting you establish imaginary boundaries, fences, strategic barriers to control and trap the beast—close a passage, surround an area, point to the center of a field. The hunter’s success requires a strategy of enclosures, and “freedom” consists in not being subjected to them. The erratic animal will pass through these imaginary circles imposed by the hunter’s “rites of passage.” One theory of symbolism argues that when conceptual or encyclopedic knowledge fails, symbolic knowledge kicks in.47 This same theory applies to the hunter, whose substantive lacunae in sensory and conceptual knowledge must be replaced with conjectures and intuitions.

In his memoir, Predator, in which he continuously says he thought of his victims as wild animals and of himself as a hunter, drone pilot Martin engaged with the enemy opponent not as a human to interact with at the level of the human senses—face to face, speaking, listening—but as a target.
For hours a drone operator pursues a hidden, invisible enemy; suddenly the enemy appears and sets in motion a hot chase, the goal being the elimination of the target with the joystick—it’s called a “targeted killing.” Since the pilot is far removed from any personal interaction, the face of the fugitive is invisible, and in the absence of any witness the pilot kills the target as the hunter who sees only an object of a lower species. The pilot does not see an individualized target down below but a group for a “signature strike.” Collateral damage is assumed as intrinsic to war—the killing of up to thirty bystanders for each combatant is taken as a rule in drone warfare, according to a former analyst. Victims of drones are mostly generic individuals, deprived of their individuality and banded into a biopolitical group identity, as wild animals are seen on the basis of habitat and species. Categorical shifting from individual to group, from member to species, is decisive for the diffusion of responsibility regarding the actual killing.

Consistent with the paradigm of the hunt, the only knowledge the drone pilot is allowed about the terrorist is at the animal level—tracks that require policing, momentary sightings, guesswork and information on his whereabouts, fictions of his beastly nature. The hunter cannot engage with the prey at the human sensory level except as a moving target for elimination, cannot know about the motives, ideas, or values of the terrorist except in terms of guesses and fantasy. Ignorance of the terrorist’s subjectivity is a condition for hunting him. You would be contaminated by being in the presence of such an untouchable, by talking to or shaking his hand. By definition you can never touch a wild beast, nor should you touch a tabooed terrorist—except by killing him.

A hunter who begins to perceive the subjectivity of his prey in privacy is already committing a category mistake. The pilot/hunter's primary axiom must be simple: I am the hunter, my enemy is an animal target—not an individual citizen. There is no rule for privacy in animal life; neither there should be for those under drone surveillance, for their privacy has been turned into a public domain, into Predator porn, observed from above potentially by countless people. The peeping drone with its “eye in the sky” should recognize no privacy, say, for a lovemaking couple below—which makes their sexual behavior akin to the nonprivate sex of animals. The risk for pilots comes from feeling that they actually are intruding into the private lives of the people they hunt, when instead of the terrorist wild
beast they begin to see a fully domesticated house animal. The two types of killings, of wild or tame animals, are categorically different for a hunter. The drone pilot, watching the prey for days and weeks, can end up feeling he is using a hunter’s strategy against a domestic pet.

**DON’T CAPTURE, KILL**

US senator Saxby Chambliss succinctly summed up the basic change in terrorism policy under the Obama administration: “to take out high-value targets, versus capturing high-value targets.”\(^50\) The Bush administration’s policy had been, for the most part, to keep suspected terrorists at Guantánamo and torture them. The Obama administration chose to assassinate them instead. The Trump administration followed Obama’s lead. Capture is messy and could lead to domestication. Hunters prefer to kill.

There are countless cases to document the Obama administration policy of “Don’t capture, kill.” Bilal el-Berjawi, stripped of his British citizenship before he was killed by a US drone, had been “under surveillance for several years as he traveled back and forth between the UK and East Africa yet [British and American intelligence] did not capture him. Instead the United States hunted him down and killed him in Somalia.”\(^51\) The authors of the Pentagon’s Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force study “admit frankly that capturing terrorists is a rare occurrence.”\(^52\) It is true that a capture could become a source of information. But the Guantánamo prisoners showed that their prosecution presents messy problems; the Obama and Trump administrations preferred to avoid these.

As a *New York Times* journalist put it, “The bottom line is clear: killing is more convenient than capture for both the United States and the foreign countries where the strikes occur.”\(^53\) Killing is also cheaper than keeping the target in jail indefinitely. As a result, there were “virtually no captures by American agencies.”\(^54\) Senator Lindsey Graham admitted in 2013: “We lack, as a nation, a place to put terrorists if we catch them. I can tell you that the operators are in a bad spot out there. They know that if they capture a guy, it creates a nightmare. And it’s just easier to kill ’em.”\(^55\) Vice President Cheney had a point when he criticized the Obama administration “for being so weak that it has given up on trying to capture
and interrogate the bad guys and instead just kills them.” Targeted killing from a distance was “clean” and easy, “the antithesis of the dirty, intimate work of interrogation.” As John Rizzo, a career CIA lawyer who had approved the CIA’s infamous detention-and-interrogation program, put it, “Once the interrogation was gone, all that was left was the killing.” The Guardian reported that US special forces routinely killed suspects, even civilians, without attempting capture. In some cases there was not enough evidence to hold an Afghan suspected in custody, but there was enough of a narrative to assassinate him. This was the reality of the counterterrorist policy under Obama, which continues under Trump: don’t bother with capture, just kill the suspected terrorists. It’s hunting.

During the first year of Obama’s presidency, the CIA was after Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a member of al-Qaeda’s East African branch. Killing him would be a major victory, but capturing him would provide an intelligence windfall. In a meeting chaired by Admiral Michael Mullen, Obama was given the options of killing Nabhan with missiles, with a helicopter-borne assault, or doing a “snatch and grab” operation, the last tactically the most attractive but also the riskiest option. And there was a problem: “Where would Nabhan be taken if the military succeeded in capturing him? Nine months into its own war on al-Qaeda, the Obama administration had no detention policy for terrorists captured outside established war zones like Afghanistan or Iraq.” As one of the people involved in the mission explained it, “We didn’t capture him because it would have been hard to find a place to put him.” Guantánamo and Bagram prisons were out of the question. So was bringing him to the US or turning to an anarchic Somalia. As General James Cartwright, vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs, summed it up, the military is required to take surrendering enemies into custody, but “We do not have a plausible strategy.”

Klaidman sums it up in Kill or Capture: “The inability to detain terror suspects was creating perverse incentives that favored killing or releasing suspected terrorists over capturing them.” While testifying to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Admiral William McRaven recognized that a capture outside Afghanistan “is always a difficult issue for us.” The Obama administration’s often-repeated mantra to reassure the public was the lie that killing was the last option when capture was not possible. The actual policy was just the opposite: don’t capture, kill. Yes, we can.
The acceptance of the rationale for assassination and not capture hinges on the insistence that the enemy is not only a combatant but something else—a terrorist. A year into his presidency, in a tense meeting with top counterterrorism and political advisers gathered in the Situation Room, Obama read aloud US district judge William Young’s sentencing of Richard Reid, the so-called Shoe Bomber:

“This is the sentence that is provided for by our statutes, it is a fair and just sentence. . . . You are not an enemy combatant. You are a terrorist. You are not a soldier in any war. You are a terrorist. To give you that reference, to call you a soldier gives you far too much stature. . . .

. . . You are a terrorist. And we do not negotiate with terrorists. We do not treat with terrorists. We do not sign documents with terrorists. We hunt them down one by one.”

This mantra of “you are a terrorist” is the cornerstone of a mind-set that categorically separates them from us—the premise that justifies “hunting” them.

The license to kill terrorists and the new normal for Predator drone assassinations was not accepted as a matter of course initially by everyone in counterterrorism. To understand how a “new normal” for drone assassinations was established as counterterrorist policy, one change sums it up with precision: replace the rule of law—the work of police, judges, jailers—with the law of hunting. Interviewed by the 9/11 Commission soon after the attacks, then head of the CIA, George Tenet, was asked “whether he, as Director of the Central Intelligence, should operate an armed Predator.” He replied to the members of the commission, “This is new ground,” and he raised key issues, asking: “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?” The assistant director, Charles Allen, said that he or the Agency’s number-three man, A.B. “Buzzy” Krongard, “would be happy to pull the trigger.” But “Tenet was appalled.” He added that no CIA personnel had such authority to use drones to summarily assassinate people, even terrorists. Considering the repercussions of getting into the business of assassinations, then CIA’s deputy director John McLaughlin commented: “You can’t underestimate the cultural change that comes with gaining lethal authority. When people say to me, ‘It’s not a big deal,’ I say to them, ‘Have you ever killed anyone?’