DEATH BY GEOLOCATION: "WE'RE GOING AFTER THEIR PHONES"

In December, I talked about the role I thought SIGINT played in drone targeting (here, noting that the same analysis that picks key pirates out of a database might choose to kill them).

> [I]t is very easy to see what kind of role metadata analysis would play in the early stages of targeting a signature strike, because that's precisely how the intelligence community identify the nodes that, McNeal tells us, they're often targeting when they conduct signature strikes. Wiretap the person at that node and you may learn a lot (that's also probably the same kind of targeting they do to select potential informants, as we know they do with metadata), kill that person and you may damage the operational capabilities of a terrorist (or pirate) organization.
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> When the WaPo reported on NSA's role in drone killing, it focused on how NSA collected content associated with a known target — Hassan Ghul — to pinpoint his location for drone targeting.
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> But NSA probably plays a role in the far more controversial targeting of people we don't know for death, with precisely the kind of contact chaining it uses on US persons.

It turns out I overestimated the role of HUMINT in the targeting process.

In their first story at the Intercept, Glenn Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill describe drone killing being done almost entirely on SIGINT.

> What's more, he adds, the NSA often locates drone targets by analyzing the activity of a SIM card, rather than the actual content of the calls. Based on his experience, he has come to believe that the drone program amounts to little more than death by unreliable metadata.
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> "People get hung up that there's a targeted list of people," he says. "It's really like we're targeting a cell phone. We're not going after people — we're going after their phones, in the hopes that the person on the other end of that missile is the bad guy."
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> [snip]
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> The former JSOC drone operator estimates that the overwhelming majority of high-value target operations he worked on in Afghanistan relied on signals intelligence, known as SIGINT, based on the NSA's phone-tracking technology.
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> "Everything they turned into a kinetic strike or a night raid was almost 90 percent that," he says. "You could tell, because you'd go back to the mission reports and it will say 'this mission was triggered by SIGINT,' which means it was triggered by a geolocation cell."

Their source argues the reliance exclusively on SIGINT is particularly bad for JSOC in Yemen.

> As the former drone operator explains, the process of tracking and ultimately killing a targeted person is known within the military as F3: Find, Fix, Finish. "Since there's almost zero HUMINT operations in Yemen — at least involving JSOC — every one of their strikes relies on signals and imagery for confirmation: signals being the cell phone lock, which is the 'find' and imagery being the 'unblinking eye' which is the 'fix.'" The "finish" is the

> strike itself.
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> "JSOC acknowledges that it would be completely helpless without the NSA conducting mass surveillance on an industrial level," the former drone operator says. "That is what creates those baseball cards you hear about," featuring potential targets for drone strikes or raids.

I've been pointing out JSOC's inaccuracy for some time.

In fact, this may explain Dianne Feinstein's efforts to ensure CIA retains control of drone targeting.

Of course, the HUMINT CIA gets — in both Pakistan and Yemen — has proven highly susceptible to manipulation by our partners on the ground. So it's not clear that's any better either.

All this Intelligence and so little actual intelligence.