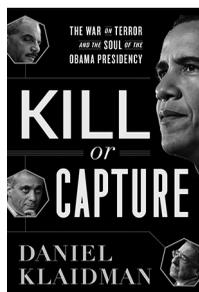


## POLICY, TERROR, &amp; ESPIONAGE

**Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency**

By Daniel Klaidman

Reviewed by Dr. W. Andrew Terrill, Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College

New York: Houghton  
Mifflin Harcourt, 2013

304 pages

\$14.95

Daniel Klaidman's *Kill or Capture* provides an in-depth examination of the Obama administration's policies on terrorism-related issues including Guantanamo Bay prisoners, harsh interrogations, military commissions, and the use of armed drones to strike against terrorists. According to Klaidman, President Obama had emerged as a foreign policy realist by the time he was elected and repeatedly proved himself to be "ruthlessly pragmatic" on terrorism issues despite his liberal instincts. An ongoing focus of this book is the legal and policy disagreements within the administration and the ways in which these struggles influenced the internal debate on a range of contentious issues. The two most important factions within the administration were sometimes slyly referred to as "Tammany Hall" and "the Aspen Institute." The bare knuckles realists of Tammany (such as White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel) often won the most important debates, and the Aspen idealists often spent more time than they would have wished nursing their political wounds.

The author goes into extensive and sometimes painful detail about the debates among administration national security officials, attorneys, and other senior bureaucrats. According to Klaidman, "By the midway point of Obama's first year in office the White House's thermostat had swung toward Tammany." Rahm Emanuel is portrayed as tough and "transactional," focusing heavily on how any action could help the president's agenda without worrying about liberal ideals that were politically costly. Attorney General Eric Holder was often his chief foil and at least on one occasion was pushed to the brink of resignation. While Holder is one of Obama's closest friends, the president still tended to side with Emanuel on most important arguments in the belief that pragmatism was necessary to move the country forward. After over a year in office, Holder ultimately chose not to resign because it would have been widely assumed that he had been driven out by Tammany or become disillusioned with the administration to the point that he could no longer serve it. Holder understood the situation and remained a loyalist.

If the president needed any additional push to implement tough-minded policies, he clearly received it when on 25 December 2009 a member of the terrorist group al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) barely failed in his mission to destroy a commercial US aircraft with 289 passengers. The consequences of such an action would have been catastrophic for both the country and the administration. In addition, due to an appalling death toll, the attack could have produced serious political pressure to do something dramatic in retaliation and perhaps even undertake some sort of intervention in Yemen, which could have gone very badly. In meetings with his senior national security officials,

President Obama stated, “We dodged a bullet, but just barely. It [the attack] was averted by brave individuals [passengers], not because the system worked.” Five months later, the Obama administration was lucky again when the “Times Square bomber,” Faisal Shahzad, selected the wrong type of fertilizer for use in a car bomb and was arrested after his car smoked but did not explode. This incident was a second “dodged bullet” that influenced the security versus privacy/civil liberties debate in the administration. Under these circumstances, improving intelligence and security operations appeared increasingly vital if the United States was going to avoid a catastrophe. After the Christmas bombing attempt, Holder told his staff the increased danger of large-scale terrorist strikes had fundamentally changed the administration debate and they were now in a “new world.” The Times Square bombing attempt only confirmed this assessment. Aspen increasingly started to look like Tammany.

A central part of the administration’s response to terrorist near misses involved what the author calls “Barack Obama’s ferocious campaign of targeted killings” through the use of armed drones. While some administration officials were uncomfortable with the legality of drone strikes, Obama was prepared to escalate their use to end the terrorist career of Anwar al Awlaki and other individuals like him. Awlaki was the Yemen-based planner of the Christmas Day plot, whom Obama designated as the leading terrorist target for elimination, having priority even over al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri. Unsurprisingly, Awlaki was subsequently killed in a US drone strike, despite his status as a US citizen. Also, as is well known, the Obama administration continued to make extensive use of armed drones, which Klaidman describes as a “seductive tool.” In this political environment, some administration officials worried that capturing terrorists (who could possess valuable intelligence) was no longer a priority when they could be killed so easily. Yet, if President Obama remained a committed supporter of drone strikes, one hard-line policy he did not support was the continued use of the Guantanamo Bay prison to hold terrorism suspects. Rather, he had hoped to transfer these detainees to Supermax prisons such as the ones in Marion, Illinois, and Florence, Colorado, but was repeatedly and effectively thwarted by bipartisan Congressional objections.

In sum, this book is a particularly valuable resource since many of the issues it discusses provide important historical context for contemporary policy debates. These controversies include the arguments about privacy versus security involving the National Security Agency’s activities. Civil libertarians who maintain the scales have been tipped too far in the direction of security can usefully consider the very close calls with terrorism mentioned in this study, and what kind of political environment would exist if they had succeeded. Likewise, individuals on all sides of the Guantanamo debate will have the opportunity to consider how indescribably difficult politically it will be to close that prison in any near-term time frame despite potentially viable alternatives. The issue of drones has also continued to be with us and is likely to remain the seductive tool for not only Obama but also many future presidents.