A Problem of Standards?: Another Perspective on Secret Law

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A PROBLEM OF STANDARDS?: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON SECRET LAW

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ABSTRACT

This Article provides a new perspective on the growth of secret law in the United States. It is widely assumed that the U.S. government's exercise of national security powers suffers from excessive secrecy. Although secrecy presents significant challenges, it does not alone explain the lack of clarity surrounding the government’s legal justifications for using military force, conducting surveillance, or exercising other national security powers. The Article argues that what is often labeled “secret law” may also be understood as a consequence of how legal standards are used in this context.

The Article draws on the larger rules versus standards literature to help unpack the debate over secret law. This literature suggests that standards should become clearer and more predictable over time as a body of law accrues. The Article demonstrates, however, that in the national security context, standards tend to expand, becoming more fluid and indeterminate. Though secrecy may impact the inflationary trajectory of national security standards, it does not alone explain it. The Article urges greater attention to how these standards are formulated and applied to produce a body of law that is more determinate and predictable and less prone to expansion. The Article also cautions against viewing national security as a form of

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legal exceptionalism and instead notes its connections to administrative law more generally.
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INTRODUCTION

It is commonly—and correctly—assumed that U.S. national security policy suffers from excessive secrecy. The focus is typically on how the executive branch conceals the legal authority and legal justifications for its actions, triggering complaints about secret law.1 The phenomenon of secret law has been associated with various high-profile counterterrorism measures, from drone strikes to surveillance programs. Commentators have described the threat that secret law poses to the separation of powers, democratic accountability, and other tenets of the modern liberal state.2 But national security secrecy also helps mask—and is sometimes confused with—a lack of determinacy in the law itself.

In some instances, the debate over secret law has less to do with transparency than with executive branch efforts to treat congressional delegations as invitations to develop broad and malleable standards that provide sufficient elasticity to respond to heterogeneous, often rapidly developing events.3 A similar impulse helps explain attempts by executive branch officials to strip rules of their ordinary meaning, causing their sub rosa transformation into standards.4 In both instances, focusing narrowly on secrecy can obscure underlying tensions over how the law is given—or not given—content.

Although transparency remains important, this Article suggests secrecy's limits as an explanation for what are, in part, concerns about the content of the underlying legal authority itself, including the degree to which it constrains government officials and provides notice to regulated actors. Secrecy may be more acute in matters affecting national security. However, this Article cautions against viewing national security as an isolated outpost of legal exceptionalism. By examining secret law against the larger rules versus

1. See infra Part I.
2. See, e.g., Geoffrey R. Stone, Secrecy and Self-Governance, 56 N.Y.L. SCH. L. REV. 81, 82, 97 (2011/2012) (concluding that the Constitution provides only limited protection against “undue government secrecy” and describing the incompatibility of secrecy, separation of powers, and democratic accountability).
4. See infra Part III.B.
standards literature, the Article builds on an existing, but underdeveloped, body of scholarship that situates national security within the broader framework of administrative law.5

This Article thus seeks to reframe the debate about national security secrecy as a debate, at least partly, about standards. It cautions against focusing exclusively on transparency without regard to how the underlying legal authority is designed and implemented. The Article suggests that increasing avenues by which standards can gain content through their application to specific cases, such as through judicial review, can help counteract the indeterminacy that is often associated with and sometimes mistaken for secret law. Such review, moreover, can also mitigate the inflation of legal authority through standards, although the degree to which courts will impose constraints remains uncertain.6

A principal goal of the rule of law is to ensure obedience to rules and avoid arbitrariness.7 As Lon Fuller explained, secret law undermines the internal morality of law itself, undercutting the obligation to obey the law’s command.8 Secrecy can threaten the rule of law not only by masking the legal authority by which power is exercised but

5. See, e.g., Robert Knowles, National Security Rulemaking, 41 Fla. St. U. L. Rev. 883, 887-88 (2014) (examining the process of national security rule making); Christopher Slobogin, Panvasive Surveillance, Political Process Theory, and the Nondelegation Doctrine, 102 Geo. L.J. 1721, 1723-25, 1758-59 (2014) (applying administrative law principles to “panvasive surveillance” that is not considered a search or seizure, such as NSA bulk metadata collection); Cass R. Sunstein, Administrative Law Goes to War, 118 Harv. L. Rev. 2663, 2663-64 (2005) (arguing for application of administrative law principles to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force and noting, in particular, that “the logic of Chevron applies to the exercise of executive authority in the midst of war”); see also Eugene R. Fidell, Military Commissions & Administrative Law, 6 Green Bag 2d 379, 383-84, 387-88 (2003) (describing the value of applying an administrative law perspective to military commissions established at Guantanamo to try unlawful combatants); David Zaring & Elena Baylis, Sending the Bureaucracy to War, 92 Iowa L. Rev. 1359, 1361 (2007) (examining how the civil administrative state has been mobilized in the war on terrorism).

6. See generally Aziz Z. Huq, Structural Constitutionalism as Counterterrorism, 100 Calif. L. Rev. 887, 889 (2012) (explaining that, as an empirical matter, courts do not necessarily lean to the libertarian left of the executive).

7. See A.V. Dicey, Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution 198 (6th ed. 1902) (explaining that the rule of law “means, in the first place, the absolute supremacy or predominance of regular law as opposed to the influence of arbitrary power, and excludes the existence of arbitrariness, of prerogative ... on the part of government”).

8. Lon L. Fuller, The Morality of Law 39 (1964) (“Certainly there can be no rational ground for asserting that a man can have a moral obligation to obey a legal rule that ... is kept secret from him.”).
also by concealing the fluidity and indeterminacy of that authority itself. Although such indeterminacy can give public officials greater latitude to respond to diverse and unforeseen challenges, it can also enable authoritarian models of governance. Secrecy, moreover, can undermine the principle of equality by enabling authorities to treat the law’s subjects in a discriminate manner.  

Part I describes the growing concerns about secret law in the United States and theories advanced to explain it. Part II surveys the literature on rules and standards. It emphasizes the features of standards that are particularly relevant to understanding their operation in the national security context: their provision of broad ex ante guidelines that enable government authorities to respond to diverse situations; their lower cost to promulgate relative to rules; and the expectation that they will be sharpened over time through their application to individual cases by courts and agencies.

Part III applies these insights to national security secrecy. It focuses on two commonly cited instances of secret law: (1) the use of military detention and lethal force against terrorist groups under the Authorization for Use of Military Force, and (2) new, more expansive government surveillance programs, such as those that rely on bulk data collection. It explains how what is often diagnosed as legal secrecy may also be understood as a function of how legal standards are employed in these areas. Part IV then discusses several implications of reframing the question of legal secrecy as one of standards in the national security context. Although it recognizes that public officials require some degree of both flexibility and secrecy, this Article suggests the need to strengthen the mechanisms by which standards can be developed through their application to individual cases.

I. THE GROWTH OF SECRET LAW

Commentators have highlighted the growth of legal secrecy in recent years. Building on pioneering work by Kim Lane Schepple,  

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9. See Paul Gowder, *The Rule of Law and Equality*, 32 Law & Phil. 565, 565-66 (2013) (explaining how the rule of law, which is required to treat individuals as equals, is achieved only when states practice regularity, publicity, and generality).

10. See *Kim Lane Schepple, Legal Secrets: Equality and Efficiency in the Common*
David Pozen has applied the distinction between deep and shallow secrecy to the control of national security information. Professor Pozen explains that a secret is deep when a small group of similarly situated individuals keeps the secret’s existence from the public. By contrast, “a secret is shallow if ordinary citizens understand they are being denied relevant information and have some ability to estimate its content.” The former includes not only the operational details of a particular counterterrorism initiative but also the legal authority to engage in it. Heidi Kitrosser has drawn a similar distinction between what she terms “macro-transparency” and “micro-secrecy.” Professor Kitrosser argues that a law’s “execution must be traceable to publicly created and publicly known laws [macro-transparency], even if those laws allow their execution to occur in secret [micro-secrecy].” Secret law is a failure of macro-transparency. Bruce Ackerman has similarly emphasized the distinction between secret and acknowledged programs. These scholars all share the view that the greatest threat to democratic accountability and separation of powers comes when a particular program—and the legal rationale for it—remains hidden from the public.

Others have resisted distinctions between deep or macro-secrecy, on the one hand, and shallow or micro-secrecy on the other, instead emphasizing the connection between secrecy and illegality. Jenny-Brooke Condon, for example, has cautioned against focusing too heavily on secrecy per se. She argues that the focus should instead

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12. Id. at 274.
13. Id.
15. Id. at 1165.
17. See, e.g., Kutz, supra note 16, at 200 (explaining that secret law “undermines democratic accountability, raising the possibility that we do not know what our government does in our name, and so cannot demand a change”).
be on illegal secrecy, observing that “shallow secrets’ can ... be no less problematic than deep secrets when they insulate the government’s illegal conduct from judicial and public review.” In a similar vein, Jameel Jaffer has concentrated on the relationship between secrecy and government accountability. He argues that “known unknowns,” or information that is secret only formally and officially, but which the public knows about, can “sever the connection between transparency and accountability” for government misconduct.

U.S. counterterrorism policy after 9/11 provides fruitful ground for the study of legal secrecy. Secrecy has permeated the detention and interrogation of terrorism suspects, the use of lethal force through drone strikes, and the creation of new surveillance programs relying on bulk data collection. Sometimes, the program itself is secret (“deep” secrecy); other times, it is public, but its details remain hidden (“shallow” secrecy). In both instances, the public authority justification for the particular government activity may be obscured or provided at a high level of generality through mere references to a statute or to the President’s constitutional authority as Commander in Chief. Such abstracted descriptions of the government’s legal authority, without further elaboration, have contributed to the perception of secret law.

As information becomes public—whether through leaks, litigation, public pressure, or a combination of factors—it stokes debate over the proper limits on secrecy and the corresponding role of transparency in a democratic society facing threats to its security. Yet the secrecy-transparency discourse may also be understood as a debate about the underlying form and content of the law itself. That debate—which encompasses questions of how specific the law should be and when (and how) its content should be articulated—would benefit from increased attention to the rich literature on

19. Id. at 1105-06.
20. Jameel Jaffer, Known Unknowns, 48 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 457, 459-60 (2013) (describing how government secrecy, though illusory, may keep the government from having to answer questions from the public or the courts).
21. Id. at 471.
22. See supra note 12 and accompanying text.
23. See supra note 13 and accompanying text.
24. See Pozen, supra note 11, at 297.
rules and standards. The next Part surveys that literature and explains how it can shed light on the phenomenon of secret law.

II. RULES, STANDARDS, AND NATIONAL SECURITY

A substantial body of literature addresses the question of rules versus standards as a legal form. This subject has been approached from diverse perspectives, including political choice theory, judicial behavior, and economic analysis, and it has provided insights into various fields, including property, constitutional, and administrative law. This Article explains how the rules versus standards discussion also offers valuable insights into the question of secret law.

Rules and standards elude precise definition because the two denote ends of a continuum rather than fixed and self-contained points. However, the following example conveys the basic distinction. Assume a law prohibits driving too fast. A rule might prohibit any person who travels on a residential street from going thirty miles per hour, which the rule defines as speeding. The test for determining whether a person has committed the offense of speeding is straightforward: did the defendant drive a car on a residential street, and if so, did her speed exceed the limit? By contrast, a


26. See, e.g., Carol M. Rose, Crystals and Mud in Property Law, 40 Stan. L. Rev. 577, 592-93 (1988) (explaining the divergent purposes of rules versus standards and arguing that, rather than adopting one of these positions, property law is governed by both).


29. See Louis Kaplow, Rules Versus Standards: An Economic Analysis, 42 Duke L.J. 557, 561 & n.6 (1992); Morse, supra note 25, at 562; Sullivan, supra note 27, at 57 (explaining that legal directives can be situated as rules or standards "to signify where they fall on the continuum of discretion").

30. This example was originally provided by Russell Korobkin. See Russell B. Korobkin, Behavioral Analysis and Legal Form: Rules vs. Standards Revisited, 79 Or. L. Rev. 23, 23 (2000). A version of the example also appears in Morse, supra note 25, at 562-63.
standard might prohibit driving unreasonably fast on a residential street, taking into account road conditions, traffic patterns, and other factors relevant to the safety of residents. When applying this standard, a judge must resolve factual questions and determine the reasonableness of the driver’s speed under the circumstances.31

This example illustrates some basic attributes of rules and standards. Rules require more mechanical determinations (for example, did the speed exceed thirty miles per hour?). As Kathleen Sullivan has explained, a rule “binds a decisionmaker to respond in a determinate way to the presence of delimited triggering facts.”32 Because they reduce a decision maker’s discretion, rules are relatively predictable.33 Their certainty, moreover, can help produce compliance among the citizenry, which knows in advance the grounds for official intervention.34 Rules, however, tend to be over- or underinclusive35: a thirty mile-per-hour speed limit would exclude a careless driver who was nevertheless traveling under the limit, but include a cautious driver who was traveling modestly above the limit. Rules, therefore, may in some cases appear arbitrary, irrational, and in tension with the background principle or policy they seek to capture.36

Conversely, standards give greater latitude to the decision maker, who is empowered to apply the background principle or policy to a particular set of facts.37 For example, a court would have to resolve multiple issues to determine whether a person was speeding.38 Because standards permit greater case-by-case adjustment and consideration of the totality of the circumstances, they are both

31. Morse, supra note 25, at 563; see also Korobkin, supra note 30, at 23.
32. Sullivan, supra note 27, at 58; see also Duncan Kennedy, Form and Substance in Private Law Adjudication, 89 HARV. L. REV. 1685, 1687-88 (1976) (“The extreme of formal realizability [or ‘ruleness’] is a directive to an official that requires him to respond to the presence together of each of a list of easily distinguishable factual aspects of a situation by intervening in a determinate way.”).
33. Kennedy, supra note 32, at 1688 (describing “restraint of official arbitrariness and certainty” as key features of rules).
34. Id. at 1688-89.
35. Sullivan, supra note 27, at 58.
36. Id. at 58-59; see also Kennedy, supra note 32, at 1689 (explaining how a rule’s rigidity can involve “the sacrifice of precision in the achievement of the objectives lying behind the rule[”]).
37. Sullivan, supra note 27, at 58.
38. See supra notes 30-31 and accompanying text.
less predictable and less prone to over- and underinclusiveness. Standards are also relatively flexible and thus more capable of responding to changing conditions and behavior than rules, whose specificity makes them vulnerable to becoming obsolete.

Louis Kaplow has described the relative advantages of using standards or rules based on the nature of the regulated activity. The choice between rules and standards, he explains, depends principally on the relative desirability of ex ante versus ex post creation of the law. That, in turn, involves a determination of whether information should be gathered and processed before or after individuals act. Professor Kaplow notes that “[r]ules are more costly to promulgate than standards because rules involve advance determinations of the law’s content, whereas standards are more costly for legal advisors to predict or enforcement authorities to apply because they require later determinations of the law’s content.” Rules thus tend to be attractive to address frequently recurring fact scenarios, as with many traffic laws, health and safety regulations, and provisions of the federal income tax code. Standards, by contrast, tend to be preferable when the law governs more heterogeneous behavior in which each type of relevant act may be rare, such as the law of negligence, which applies to diverse and often complex accident scenarios.

The choice between rules and standards implicates the allocation of responsibility among the respective branches of government: legislators typically determine rules ex ante, whereas courts interpret standards through ex post application. As standards are enforced over time, they tend to become more rule-like through the development of precedent. If enough decisions interpret a speeding standard based on particular facts—such as road conditions and traffic patterns—the standard begins to take on the specificity of a

40. Id. at 66.
41. See Kaplow, supra note 29, at 584.
42. See id. at 562.
43. See id. at 585.
44. Id. at 562-63.
45. See id. at 563-64.
46. See id. at 563-64, 600.
47. Id. at 608.
48. Id. at 577.
rule. The standard’s principles, as Judge Richard Posner explains, become “particulariz[ed]” through application. As the standard becomes more rule-like, its predictability increases and its elasticity decreases. Conversely, rules can become more standard-like over time through the creation of exceptions and qualifications.

The choice between rules and standards has normative implications. Scholars have explained how rules promote fairness by protecting individuals against arbitrary and discriminatory government conduct, “requir[ing] decisionmakers to act consistently, treating like cases alike.” Rules have been associated with the protection of individual liberty for similar reasons: they bind the exercise of authority to fixed, ex ante constraints. Yet, these same attributes can make rules seem arbitrary and inequitable, suppressing relevant similarities and differences through their formal rigidity.

Standards, on the other hand, can promote fairness by reducing arbitrariness and irrationality. They give decision makers the latitude to treat alike cases that are formally distinct, but substantively similar. By making determinations based on the specific facts of an individual case, standards can help achieve—or avoid frustrating—the legal directive’s underlying policy or purpose. Standards, however, remain vulnerable to arbitrariness and unpredictability for the same reason: they give greater discretion to decision makers in determining the law’s content through their application.

In the administrative law context, Colin Diver has examined the question of precision in rule making to develop a “standard for standards.” The goal of achieving what he describes as optimal

49. See id.
51. See Sullivan, supra note 27, at 61.
52. Id. at 62.
53. See id. at 63-64.
54. See id. at 63.
55. Id. at 66.
56. Id.
57. See id. at 65-66.
58. Diver, supra note 28, at 66. In framing the question, Professor Diver paraphrases
precision—thus avoiding the twin extremes of underprecision and excessive regulatory rigidity—depends on the interplay of three factors: transparency, accessibility, and congruency.\textsuperscript{59} Transparent rules “use words with well-defined and universally accepted meanings within the relevant community”; accessible rules are “applicable to concrete situations without excessive difficulty or effort”; and congruent rules “produce[] the desired behavior” through the “content of the message communicated.”\textsuperscript{60} Tradeoffs typically occur among the three. For example, a transparent rule, such as no person can drive without a high school diploma, “may assure similar treatment of categorically similar cases, but it may also fail to provide defensible applications.”\textsuperscript{61} Calibration is achieved through a feedback loop when policymakers adjust to information about social costs to reduce error and achieve the desired outcome. Although they may be limited by distorting influences (incomplete knowledge, imperfect vision, and selfish desires), policymakers can achieve a degree of “bounded rationality”\textsuperscript{62} by moving towards an “optimally precise formulation” for the particular regulatory context.\textsuperscript{63} Adjudication by judges and agencies plays an important role by providing a means by which standards and rules are developed through application to concrete situations.

This literature on the relationship of standards and rules provides a useful perspective on legal secrecy in the context of national security.\textsuperscript{64} National security law spans disparate fields, including criminal law enforcement, noncriminal sanctions mechanisms, noncustodial restrictions on liberty, intelligence gathering and other forms of surveillance, and the law of armed conflict. Each, however,

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\textsuperscript{59} Id. at 67.

\textsuperscript{60} Id.

\textsuperscript{61} Id. at 72.

\textsuperscript{62} Id. at 98 (quoting James G. March, \textit{Bounded Rationality, Ambiguity, and the Engineering of Choice}, 9 \textit{Bell J. Econ.} 587, 590-91 (1978)).

\textsuperscript{63} Id.

\textsuperscript{64} Cf. Zaring & Baylis, \textit{supra} note 5, at 1367 (“In the scholarship on the administration of the war on terror ... most observers have been thinking about divided government control of the war-fighting executive rather than about the capabilities of the various independent and executive branch agencies in helping to fight that war.”).
may be said to face a similar regulatory challenge as various areas of administrative law: achieving the optimal degree of precision that gives form to legal directives to achieve the desired goal without unnecessarily or impermissibly infringing upon individual liberty, equality, privacy, and other competing interests. Limits on or barriers to adjudication can hinder an important mechanism by which standards are distilled and rules are calibrated.

In the national security context, secrecy is commonly justified by the need to avoid tipping off regulated actors, protect sources and methods, and manage sensitive diplomatic or intelligence concerns. However, secrecy in the design and application of counterterrorism measures is in tension with the notion of law as public. Secrecy also weakens due process principles, such as the requirement of notice, because individuals remain unaware of the consequences of their actions. Both sides of the secrecy debate tend to treat the law as fixed and instead dispute whether (as well as when and to what degree) it should be revealed to the public.65

Yet there is more at work than an acoustic separation between decision and conduct rules under Meir Dan-Cohen’s classic framing.66 Professor Dan-Cohen posits a distinction between decision rules directed at officials and conduct rules directed at the general public, which shape their perception and behavior.67 On various national security issues, the legal framework itself resists particularization. It is not simply that government officials and the public are hearing different rules because the law is saying different things to different audiences. The law itself remains fluid, often deliberately so.

Viewed from this perspective, the growth of secret law in the United States reflects more than a lack of transparency about decision rules applied by officials to regulated actors. It also points to ambiguities in the law that result partly from the combined effect of two factors: (1) the expression of the law through standards designed to give public officials greater flexibility, and (2) limitations

65. See supra Part I.
67. See id. at 630.
on judicial review, which is the traditional means by which standards are liquidated into rules.

III. SECRECY AND STANDARDS: THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE AND SURVEILLANCE

Both the use of military force against al Qaeda and other terrorist groups as well as government surveillance programs engaging in bulk data collection have served as focal points for accusations about secret law. Yet such accusations also reflect concerns about a lack of particularity in the law itself that results from unliquidated standards. This Part describes how the debate about secrecy in these areas may also be understood as one about the inflationary potential and enabling effect of standards. It also describes how the indeterminacy of the legal standard—and, thus, the perception of secret law—tends to be greater where barriers to judicial review are more pervasive.

A. The Use of Military Force

Enacted days after the 9/11 attacks, the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) authorized the President “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons” responsible for the attacks as well as those who harbored attackers.68 The AUMF has served as the framework statute for much of the war on terrorism, including the detention and interrogation of and the use of lethal force against suspected terrorists.69 Secrecy has surrounded much of the AUMF’s interpretation and application, fueling a perception of secret law.70 This

69. For example, interpretation of the AUMF was central in Hamdi v. Rumsfeld, 542 U.S. 507 (2004) (plurality opinion), in which the Supreme Court concluded that the AUMF permitted the detention of enemy combatants.
perception, however, may be due as much to the expression of the AUMF through standards as to a lack of transparency in the law itself.

The exercise of war powers under the AUMF highlights two salient features of standards: their ex post rather than ex ante delineation of legal authority, and their potential flexibility, which allows for their application to discrete—and often diverse—situations. The AUMF suggests how standards governing the exercise of national security powers can resist liquidation into more rule-like form and instead expand over time. The absence of transparency surrounding the AUMF can thus obscure and, in some instances, be mistaken for an underlying indeterminacy in the law itself. The following discussion examines two related exercises of AUMF authority—detention and targeting—from this perspective.

1. Detention

In approving the use of military force against persons and entities responsible for the 9/11 attacks and those who harbored them, the AUMF effectively identified al Qaeda and the Taliban as its targets.71 Beyond that, the AUMF provided little guidance as to its scope. The Bush Administration nevertheless relied on the AUMF in conjunction with the President’s Article II powers as Commander in Chief to detain individuals in a wide variety of circumstances and locations as an incident to the use of military force.72 It did not initially elaborate on the legal basis for the detentions, nor did it delineate the scope of the president’s detention authority with respect to al Qaeda, the Taliban, or other organizations.73 The Bush

71. See Hamdi, 542 U.S. at 518 (plurality opinion) ("There can be no doubt that individuals who fought against the United States in Afghanistan as part of the Taliban, an organization known to have supported the al Qaeda terrorist network responsible for those attacks, are individuals Congress sought to target in passing the AUMF.").

72. Id. at 516-17.

73. The Bush Administration also concealed the existence of executive authorization for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to engage in detention operations. See S. SELECT COMM. ON INTELLIGENCE, 113TH CONG., COMM. STUDY OF THE CIA’S DETENTION AND INTERROGATION PROGRAM, EXEC. SUMMARY 11 (Comm. Print 2014), http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/press/executive-summary_0.pdf [https://perma.cc/PVS7-69X2] (noting that the President signed a covert action memo authorizing the CIA director to “undertake operations
Administration, in short, originally kept hidden the most basic facts surrounding detentions, including the identity of individuals in U.S. custody, the methods of their interrogation, and, in the case of CIA-run black sites, the existence of the detention facilities themselves. The Administration also refused to disclose its interpretation of the President’s detention authority, which was set forth in secret memoranda by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (OLC). This lack of transparency over the AUMF’s meaning triggered perceptions of a secret law being developed within the executive branch. One might, however, also view the Bush Administration’s initial claims of broad AUMF detention authority as evidence of the enabling effect of standards.

This detention authority’s elasticity was perhaps best illustrated by the shifting conceptions of “enemy combatant.” In some instances, the Bush Administration opted for a narrow definition, describing AUMF detention as “classic wartime detention.” In other instances, it advanced a definition that seemed to defy limits, suggesting at one point that the President could detain “[a] little old lady in Switzerland who writes checks to what she thinks is a charity that helps orphans in Afghanistan but [what] really is a front to finance al-Qaeda activities.” The Supreme Court provided only

designed to capture and detain persons who pose a continuing, serious threat of violence or death to U.S. persons and interests or who are planning terrorist activities”). The full text of that authorization—contained in a September 17, 2001, presidential covert action memorandum of notification—still remains classified.


75. See id. at 151.


77. See Hamdi, 542 U.S. at 516 (plurality opinion) (“[T]he Government has never provided any court with the full criteria that it uses in classifying individuals as [enemy combatants, but] for purposes of this case [has defined an enemy combatant as] an individual who, it alleges, was ‘part of or supporting forces hostile to the United States or coalition partners’ in Afghanistan and who ‘engaged in an armed conflict against the United States’ there.” (quoting Brief for Respondents at 3, Hamdi, 542 U.S. 507 (No. 03-6696))).

78. See Brief for Respondents at 20–21, 27, Hamdi, 542 U.S. 507 (No. 03-6696).

limited guidance, ruling in *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld* that the AUMF authorized holding enemy fighters for the duration of the armed conflict as “a fundamental incident of waging war.”\(^{80}\) *Hamdi* did not, however, address the scope of detention authority beyond those captured fighting against U.S. or allied forces in a combat zone.

Over time, the AUMF’s detention standard gained greater clarity through the process of adjudication. In early 2009, the Obama Administration sought to articulate a single standard for presidential detention authority in response to the federal courts’ exercise of habeas corpus jurisdiction in the Guantanamo detainee litigation. The Administration explained that the AUMF authorized the President to detain individuals who were “part of” or who “substantially supported” al Qaeda, the Taliban, or associated enemy forces for the duration of the armed conflict with those groups.\(^{81}\) The Administration did not define these terms with precision but instead sought flexibility. It drew loosely on “[p]rinciples derived from law-of-war rules” and resisted ex ante specificity.\(^{82}\) “It is neither possible nor advisable,” the Justice Department explained, “to attempt to identify, in the abstract, the precise nature and degree of ‘substantial support,’ or the precise characteristics of ‘associated forces,’ that are or would be sufficient to bring persons and organizations within the foregoing framework.”\(^{83}\) Justice further stated:

Evidence relevant to a determination that an individual joined with or became part of al-Qaida or Taliban forces might range from formal membership, such as through an oath of loyalty, to more functional evidence, such as training with al-Qaida (as reflected in some cases by staying at al-Qaida or Taliban safehouses that are regularly used to house militant recruits) or taking positions with enemy forces.\(^{84}\)

\(^{80}\) 542 U.S. at 519.

\(^{81}\) Respondents’ Memorandum Regarding the Government’s Detention Authority Relative to Detainees Held at Guantanamo Bay at 1-2, *In re Guantanamo Bay Detainee Litigation*, 2008 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 109949 (D.D.C. 2005) (Misc. No. 08-442 (TFH)).

\(^{82}\) *Id.* at 1.

\(^{83}\) *Id.* at 2.

\(^{84}\) *Id.* at 6-7.
The assumption was that this standard would be developed and articulated through its application to individual cases.85

Lower courts largely adopted the Obama Administration’s interpretation of the President’s detention authority under the AUMF86 and applied a “totality of the evidence” test to determine whether a particular prisoner fell within its ambit.87 Courts resisted any “settled criteria” for determining who was “part of” a covered enemy force.88 Instead, they relied on a variety of factors, such as a person’s travel patterns or associations.89 They then applied these factors in individual cases, further clarifying the definition. In 2012, Congress adopted the Obama Administration’s interpretation of the President’s detention authority.90

Secrecy remains an issue that limits public knowledge about the facts that underlie the government’s asserted basis for the Guantanamo detentions, as well as the conduct of the litigation itself, including attorneys’ ability to share relevant information with their clients. Yet the Guantanamo habeas cases illustrate how secrecy can obscure related but ultimately distinct concerns triggered by the elasticity of standards and how those standards can become—or fail to become—more particularized through adjudication.

The features of AUMF detention authority that have resisted judicial examination, such as the duration of detention, tend to remain more ambiguous. The international law of armed conflict (LOAC) requires the prompt repatriation of prisoners upon the cessation of hostilities,91 even when no peace treaty has been

85. See id. at 2.
86. See, e.g., Al-Bihani v. Obama, 590 F.3d 866, 872 (D.C. Cir. 2010) (upholding the President’s authority to detain under the AUMF individuals that were “part of” or who “materially supported” al Qaeda, the Taliban, or associated forces (quoting Military Commissions Act of 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-366, § 948a(1)(A)(i), 120 Stat. 2600, 2601)).
89. See Uthman v. Obama, 637 F.3d 400, 403-07 (D.C. Cir. 2011).
signed.92 Relying on this background LOAC norm, the United States maintains that it can hold prisoners for the duration of the armed conflict with al Qaeda and other AUMF-covered forces.93 The 2012 National Defense Authorization Act validated this interpretation, clarifying that the AUMF authorizes continued detention “under the law of war ... until the end of the hostilities.”94 President Obama, to be sure, has described the need to bring the war with al Qaeda to a close and repeal the AUMF,95 and former senior administration officials have similarly cautioned against a “forever war.”96 Yet officials have never specified criteria for determining the end of hostilities against al Qaeda and associated forces.97 For years, courts accepted the LOAC principle that detainees can be held under the AUMF for the duration of the conflict, but declined to provide specific criteria for determining when hostilities have ceased.98 Recently, a district court ruled that detention authority continued as long as fighting is ongoing, thus rejecting one detainee’s claim that he


97. See Jeh Charles Johnson, Gen. Counsel, U.S. Dep’t of Def., The Conflict Against Al Qaeda and its Affiliates: How Will it End?, Remarks at the Oxford Union 8-9 (Nov. 30, 2012), http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/211954.pdf [https://perma.cc/HE7V-Y8C4] (noting that there would come “a tipping point at which so many of the leaders and operatives of al Qaeda and its affiliates have been killed or captured” that the organization with which the United States is at war “has been effectively destroyed,” but declining to provide specifics on when that tipping point might come).

98. See, e.g., Hamdi v. Rumsfeld, 542 U.S. 507, 521 (2004) (plurality opinion) (explaining that the continued detention of an enemy combatant was authorized because “[a]ctive combat operations against Taliban fighters apparently are ongoing in Afghanistan,” but declining to provide more specific criteria for determining the cessation of hostilities).
should be released because of statements by the President that the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan was over. Apart from such limited guidance, the law governing the end of hostilities for purposes of AUMF detentions has not been secret so much as defined at a high level of abstraction.

Such generality is attractive to executive branch officials for several reasons. It not only helps them respond quickly to new threats but also provides flexibility to address enduring and seemingly intractable problems, such as the Guantanamo detentions. For example, defining the temporal bounds of the conflict at a high level of generality helps enable the administration to continue holding detainees whom it is unwilling to transfer to other countries, whether because of restrictions imposed by Congress or security considerations. Loosely defining the conflict itself, meanwhile, leaves open the option to engage in detention operations in emerging military theaters, such as Syria, should that be deemed desirable, without seeking new legal authority from Congress.

Detentions under the AUMF have unquestionably suffered from gaps in transparency. But continued uncertainty surrounding various aspects of the President’s detention authority is less a function of secret law than the product of standards that have resisted particularization. Secrecy, to be sure, helps perpetuate legal

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99. See Al Warafi v. Obama, No. 09-2368, 2015 WL 4600420, at *7 (D.D.C. July 30, 2015) (rejecting the petitioner’s claim that he should be released because the President had declared an end to the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan).


101. The Obama Administration, for example, has reportedly detained Umm Sayyaf, the wife of a senior ISIL leader in Syria. Her husband, Abu Sayyaf, was killed after engaging U.S. forces. However, the United States has avoided specifying how the AUMF authorizes her detention, leaving the legal theory to educated speculation. See Nathalie Weizmann & Rebecca Ingber, Whatever Happened to Umm Sayyaf?, LAWFARE (June 11, 2015, 8:10 AM), https://www.lawfareblog.com/whatever-happened-um-sayyaf (describing the possible legal basis for detention under the AUMF).
indeterminacy by concealing important facts and providing a rationale for denying judicial review, thus foreclosing an avenue by which standards can be particularized. But secrecy alone does not explain the underlying fluidity in the law itself.

2. Targeting and the Use of Force

The AUMF has also provided the statutory foundation for lethal drone strikes against al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and, most recently, Syria. Drone strikes have been shrouded by even greater secrecy than detentions, and have generated accusations that the United States is waging a shadow war across the globe. They have also been criticized for misidentifying targets and harming innocent civilians. In one high-profile example, the United States acknowledged that a drone strike in Pakistan mistakenly killed two western hostages held by al Qaeda. Human rights groups have continued to document civilian casualties notwithstanding that the administration introduced reforms designed to minimize such casualties.

Critical gaps remain in the factual record surrounding drone strikes, such as the identity of intended and actual targets; the number, dates, and status of people killed; and the location of each strike. These gaps have been exacerbated by the absence of transparency and accountability, which are essential for ensuring that the use of force is consistent with international law and human rights standards.


drone strike as well as the particular agency involved. The broad legal justification for using lethal force, by contrast, has become clearer over time. The continuing gap between a general targeting standard on the one hand, and the standard’s application to particular situations on the other, yields an indeterminacy in the law governing the use of force. The Obama Administration has been able to apply this standard with greater flexibility than the standard’s purported stringency suggests. Although often cited as an example of legal secrecy, the law governing the use of force may be better described as a case of legal fluidity.

U.S. officials initially refused to provide information about drone strikes, including the legal basis for conducting them. But mounting criticism of their use, particularly outside Afghanistan, increased pressure on officials to respond. In May 2010, Harold H. Koh, then Legal Adviser to the State Department, provided the first public explanation of the legal basis for drone strikes at the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law. Professor Koh defended the use of drone strikes in the armed conflict against al Qaeda and associated forces, explaining that they were authorized domestically under the AUMF and complied with all applicable international law. Although Professor Koh did not engage in detailed legal analysis, he identified the two bases under international law for drone strikes: the LOAC and the law of self-defense. In public speeches over the next two years, other senior U.S. officials

107. See Jameel Jaffer, The Erosion of a Secret, JUST SECURITY (Sept. 12, 2014, 11:56 AM), https://www.justsecurity.org/14908/erosion-secret/ [https://perma.cc/DW5H-TFDF]; see also Koh, supra note 96, at 14-15 (urging the Obama administration to be more transparent regarding the factual record surrounding drone strikes including the Administration’s “method of counting civilian casualties” and the threat posed by particular targets).

108. Former CIA Director Leon Panetta provided an early, if indirect, acknowledgment of remote drone strikes in Pakistan in May 2009, noting that they were “the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership.” U.S. Airstrikes in Pakistan Called ‘Very Effective’, CNN (May 18, 2009, 6:48 PM), http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/05/18/cia.pakistan.airstrikes/ [https://perma.cc/VCS8-XBSJ].


111. Id.

112. Id.
elaborated on the legal grounds for drone strikes.\textsuperscript{113} Although the speeches did not provide a granular discussion of legal authorities, they did offer a road map to the legal architecture of the Obama Administration’s targeted killing program.\textsuperscript{114}

The speeches maintained that: (1) the United States remains engaged in a transnational, noninternational armed conflict (NIAC) with al Qaeda and associated enemy forces; (2) the AUMF authorizes the President to use military force against those enemy forces; (3) the President has additional authority as Commander in Chief under Article II of the Constitution to protect the nation from an imminent threat of attack; (4) the President’s authority to use lethal force is not limited to “hot,” or active, battlefields; (5) the President may use such force against nonstate actors in another country if that country either consents to its use or is unwilling or unable to contain the threat those actors pose; and (6) all uses of force must conform to the LOAC, including the principles of necessity, distinction, and proportionality.\textsuperscript{115}

Administration officials stressed that this legal framework provided the outer limit for the use of force and suggested that the United States often used force in a more restrictive manner as a


\textsuperscript{114} See Rebecca Ingber, \textit{Interpretation Catalysts and Executive Branch Legal Decision-making}, 38 \textit{Yale J. Int’l L.} 359, 398-401 (2013) (describing how speechmaking by Obama administration officials not only provided to the public the preexisting rationale for executive programs but also helped drive the executive “to crystallize and finally bind itself to a position”).

\textsuperscript{115} See Holder, supra note 113 (“Our legal authority is not limited to the battlefields in Afghanistan.”).
matter of policy. Thus, before launching a drone strike, U.S. officials asked whether the target posed “a significant threat to U.S. interests.” Officials, in turn, defined a significant threat as a person who; (1) is an operational leader of al Qaeda or an associated force; (2) is himself an operative in the midst of training for or planning to carry out attacks against the United States or its interests; or (3) possesses unique operational skills that are being leveraged in a planned attack. Officials noted that the United States would use lethal force only if capturing the individual was not feasible.

In response to media reports that the United States had placed on a “kill list” Anwar al-Aulaqi, a U.S. citizen suspected of being a senior operational leader for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, high-level officials described the additional legal justifications for using force against a U.S. citizen. Then Attorney General Eric Holder, for example, identified the following criteria: (1) the U.S. citizen must “pose an imminent threat of violent attack against the United States;” (2) capture must not be feasible; (3) and the operation must be conducted in a manner consistent with the LOAC. Holder further emphasized that no lethal strike against a U.S. citizen could go forward without a “thorough and careful review” by U.S. officials.

Further details were provided in an unsigned and undated Justice Department “White Paper,” obtained by NBC News and made public in February 2013. The White Paper described the U.S. government’s legal position on the use of force against a U.S. citizen who “is an operational leader” of al Qaeda “located outside the United States” and who is “continually planning attacks against U.S.

116. See Brennan, Ethics and Efficacy, supra note 113.
117. Id.
118. Id.
119. Id.
120. Holder, supra note 113.
121. Id.
persons and interests.”123 It summarized a more complete legal analysis contained in a July 16, 2010 OLC Memo,124 which was subsequently made public in June 2014 as a result of FOIA litigation brought by the ACLU and *New York Times*.125 The memo, which was heavily redacted, was written in response to the possible targeting of al-Aulaqi. The United States subsequently killed al-Aulaqi in a drone strike in Yemen in September 2011, along with another U.S. citizen, Samir Khan.126

Both the White Paper and the July 16, 2010, OLC Memo discussed the legality of targeted killing. The White Paper, for example, addressed the concept of “imminence,” explaining that the United States “does not require ... clear evidence that a specific attack on U.S. persons and interests will take place in the immediate future.”127 Such a narrow conception of imminence, the White Paper explained, would force the “United States to refrain from action until preparations for an attack [were] concluded” and, therefore, “would not allow the United States sufficient time to defend itself.”128 Instead, at least with respect to al Qaeda leaders who are continually planning attacks, the United States could strike within any “limited window of opportunity” that presented itself.129 The White Paper and OLC Memo also defended the legality of strikes against American citizens abroad, notwithstanding the U.S. Constitution,130 the War Crimes Act,131 and a federal criminal statute

123. DOJ WHITE PAPER, supra note 122, at 6.


127. DOJ WHITE PAPER, supra note 122, at 7.

128. Id.

129. Id.

130. Id. at 5 (examining the legality of targeted killing under the Fourth and Fifth
prohibiting the U.S. government from killing U.S. nationals abroad. The White Paper and OLC Memo’s explanations of the legal basis for strikes tracked those provided in speeches by senior administration officials and helped flesh out the legal justification for the Administration’s targeted killing program.

In May 2013, President Obama delivered an address regarding drone strikes at the National Defense University. In connection with the speech, Obama issued a Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) outlining standards and procedures for lethal strikes that either were already in place or that would be implemented over time. The PPG described drone strikes as a last resort, stating that lethal force would be used “only to prevent or stop attacks against U.S. persons, and even then, only when capture is not feasible and no other reasonable alternatives exist to address the threat effectively.” The PPG stated that lethal force would be used outside areas of active hostilities under specified criteria. It further noted that targeting decisions were made “at the most senior levels of the U.S. government” and that “an additional legal analysis” is conducted if the target is a U.S. citizen.

The Obama Administration has thus far disclosed only one of the legal memoranda it has relied on to kill suspected terrorists; others reportedly exist. But the Administration has nevertheless provided a reasonably clear outline of its legal authority to engage in

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131. DOJ WHITE PAPER, supra note 122, at 15-16; July 16, 2010 OLC Memo, supra note 124, at 38 (same).
133. See Obama, supra note 95.
135. Id.
136. Id. (listing criteria).
137. Id.
drone strikes. Indeed, the crux of the plaintiffs’ argument in FOIA litigation seeking disclosure of documents discussing the legal basis for the targeted killing of al-Aulaqi—which the Second Circuit adopted in ordering disclosure of the July 16, 2010, OLC Memo—was that the Administration’s legal justifications were not secret but had already been made public through various speeches and statements by administration officials.\textsuperscript{139}

Two factors help explain the continuing perception of secret law despite the disclosure of the government’s asserted authority to conduct drone strikes. First, the Administration continues to conceal critical facts surrounding drone strikes even after they have occurred. Second, and relatedly, this authority still takes the form of a general standard that has resisted liquidation through its application to specific cases, partly because of barriers to judicial review.

Take, for example, the use of “imminence.” The current standard defines imminence only in the negative: it tells us more about what imminence is not—a particular attack in the immediate future—than what imminence is.\textsuperscript{140} The “no other reasonable alternatives” standard evinces a similar level of generality, borne of a desire for flexibility.\textsuperscript{141} The current standard describes capture as the preferred approach but provides no meaningful guidance as to when it would permit targeting as an alternative to capture.

Most significantly, a broadly articulated targeting standard has helped perpetuate ambiguity regarding precisely where, with whom, and on what theory the United States is engaged in armed conflict. This uncertainty has facilitated the use of force under the AUMF against AQAP in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Somalia, and most recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria.\textsuperscript{142} The list of forces covered by the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[139.] See N.Y. Times Co. v. DOJ, 752 F.3d 123, 141 (2d Cir. 2014) (finding that prior disclosures and acknowledgments through various speeches by administration officials and the DOJ White Paper waived any claim the government had to preventing release of the legal analysis contained in the OLC opinion at issue).
\item[140.] See supra text accompanying notes 127-29.
\item[141.] See supra text accompanying note 135.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
AUMF has expanded significantly over time. The United States, moreover, has often resisted specifying whether a particular group, such as AQAP, falls within the AUMF because it is part of al Qaeda or because it is a successor force. The standard governing the use of force has thus demonstrated considerable elasticity, such as when the United States claimed it could use force against ISIL as a successor force to al Qaeda despite the various differences and tensions between the two groups. The United States has also avoided providing a precise definition of associated forces, relying instead on generalized criteria, such as whether the new group is a “cobelligerent” of an AUMF-covered force (al Qaeda or the Taliban). Although the Department of Defense recently provided a list of associated forces against whom the United States is presently using force, that list does not include other groups the United States believes the AUMF covers but against whom the United States has not yet chosen to use force. The list, moreover, may expand to include additional groups in the future.

In these respects, the AUMF more closely resembles an expansive delegation of authority to confront emerging threats by extremist groups than an authorization to use force against a specific enemy. As one commentator put it, an authorization malleable enough to engage in future combat against an amorphous collection of al...


143. See John Reed, Rethinking How We Wage the Forever War, JUST SECURITY (Apr. 20, 2015, 1:03 PM), https://www.justsecurity.org/22220/rethinking-wage-war/ [https://perma.cc/JN22-QWYS].


Qaeda-affiliated persons risks opening the door to an “endless game of global whack-a-mole.” This malleability helps illuminate the phenomenon of secret law. Rather than waging war across the globe based on a body of secret law, the United States may thus better be understood as selectively using force under standards that provide a basic template of legal authority but that resist the type of concretization and specification that ordinarily occurs when standards are liquidated through their application to particular cases.

This approach has given the United States greater latitude to address evolving security threats and helped it navigate changes in the nature of armed conflict that have altered traditional understandings of terms such as “battlefield” and “combatant.” But it has also loosened constraints on the use of force.

The U.N. Charter prohibits the use of force by one state against another, except when authorized by the Security Council to maintain or restore peace or security, or in self-defense in response to an armed attack. Maintaining that the armed conflict against al Qaeda and associated groups is not territorially restricted has alleviated the need for the United States to engage in a self-defense analysis under the U.N. Charter each time it uses force by placing the use of force within the framework of armed conflict. An elastic concept of imminence offers additional latitude to respond with force to perceived threats before those threats have ripened. The use of force in anticipation of an armed attack remains unsettled. See Jane E. Stromseth, New Paradigms for the Jus Ad Bellum?, 38 GEO. WASH. INT’L L. REV. 561, 564-65 (2006). The use of force in self-defense, including against an anticipated armed attack, is also recognized under customary international law. See James A. Green, Docking the Caroline: Understanding the Relevance of the Formula in Contemporary Customary International Law Concerning Self-Defense, 14 CARDOZO J. INT’L & COMP. L. 429, 431, 466-69 (2006).

148. Reed, supra note 143.
150. Id. at 12.
151. U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶ 4 (prohibiting the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state).
152. Id. arts. 39, 41-42.
155. See supra text accompanying notes 127-29.
of signature strikes provides further flexibility, allowing the United States to launch drone strikes based on suspicious patterns of activity even if it does not know the identities of those who would be killed.\textsuperscript{156}

To help alleviate concerns that the current framework has weakened restraints on the use of force, Obama’s PPG offers more rule-like formulations. The PPG, for example, states that there must be “[n]ear certainty that the terrorist target is present” and “[n]ear certainty that non-combatants will not be injured or killed” when lethal force is used “outside areas of active hostilities.”\textsuperscript{157} In fact, neither “certainty” is required under the LOAC. The PPG’s insistence on “near certainty” instead reflects a concern about the implications—political, strategic, and ethical—of waging a boundaryless conflict against nonstate actors.\textsuperscript{158} When applied, the PPG could provide constraints on the executive and limit operational flexibility. But it is not binding and can be dispensed with, as it reportedly has been in the recent campaign against ISIL.\textsuperscript{159} Additionally, although the PPG offers a more rigorous interpretation of *jus in bello* principles that regulate the use of force within armed conflict, such as distinction and proportionality, it does not affect the *jus ad bellum* determination of whether force may be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{156} See Peter Margulies, Constraining Targeting in Noninternational Armed Conflicts: Safe Conduct for Combatants Conducting Informal Dispute Resolution, 46 Vand. J. Transnat’l L. 1041, 1074-75 (2013).
\item \textsuperscript{157} PPG, supra note 134 (footnote omitted).
\item \textsuperscript{159} See Michael Isikoff, White House Exempts Syria Airstrikes from Tight Standards on Civilian Deaths, YAHOO! NEWS (Sept. 30, 2014, 3:30 PM), http://news.yahoo.com/white-house-exempts-syria-airstrikes-from-tight-standards-on-civilian-deaths-183724795.html [https://perma.cc/9N8S-B5AD] (noting the Administration’s explanation that the “near certainty” standard was meant to apply only when the United States takes direct action “outside areas of active hostilities,” which “simply does not fit what we are seeing on the ground in Iraq and Syria right now”).
\end{itemize}
used in the first instance. President Obama has instead described limiting the use of force in aspirational terms, explaining his wish to decrease reliance on drone strikes, avoid a perpetual war against al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and increase reliance on soft power mechanisms to address terrorist threats.

Criticisms about secret law made by human rights groups and other nongovernment organizations in the context of drone strikes reflect as much a concern with the current framework’s fluidity as with its lack of transparency. Law is not simply hidden; it is indeterminate. The main transparency problem remains factual, with gaps in information surrounding details such as the number of strikes, the circumstances under which they occur, and a description of those killed, including the collateral damage. A recent report, for example, provides evidence that U.S. drone strikes have continued to kill numerous civilians in Yemen despite President Obama’s imposition of the “near certainty” requirement—evidence that has been hidden from the public by the secrecy that surrounds such strikes. This informational gap does not merely make it more difficult to determine whether the law is being followed. It also raises questions about what the law actually is, because when a legal directive takes the form of a standard, it typically depends on its application to specific situations for elaboration.

That process of elaboration often occurs through adjudication. But in the case of targeting, justiciability doctrines have thus far barred review of targeted killings, whether ex ante through the

160. See supra text accompanying notes 150-53.
161. See Obama, supra note 95 (“We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root; and in the absence of a strategy that reduces the wellspring of extremism, a perpetual war—through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments—will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways.”).
162. See id. (“The Afghan war is coming to an end. Core al Qaeda is a shell of its former self. Groups like AQAP must be dealt with, but in the years to come, not every collection of thugs that labels themselves al Qaeda will pose a credible threat to the United States.”).
163. See id.
165. SINGH, supra note 106, at 40.
166. See supra notes 49-50 and accompanying text.
provision of injunctive or declaratory relief or ex post through a damages action. When, for example, Anwar al-Aulaqi’s father brought suit to challenge his son’s placement on a kill list, the court dismissed the suit because it raised a nonjusticiable political question. The district court thus declined to address the legality of the standard under which the United States can select individuals for targeted killing or its application to al-Aulaqi. By dismissing the suit, the court avoided clarifying whether a particular group (in this case, AQAP) fell within the AUMF, the required nexus of a targeted individual to that force, what particular activities make an individual an imminent threat such that they may be lawfully killed, and what alternatives to lethal force the United States would first need to employ. Another suit was brought after the United States killed not only Anwar al-Aulaqi but also his son, Abdulrahman al-Aulaqi, whose death was the unintended result of a separate drone strike. That ex post damages suit was also dismissed on justiciability grounds. The court concluded that judicial review “would impermissibly draw [it] ... into the heart of executive and military planning and deliberation” and require it to address “fundamental questions regarding the conduct of armed conflict,” which, it said, should be left to the political branches.

The absence of an adjudicatory process to address targeted killings helps prevent any means by which legal norms, defined at a high level of generality, gain content through their application to individual cases. To borrow from Raymond Carver, what we talk about when we talk about secret law is, at least partly, standards that resist particularization.

B. Surveillance and Bulk Data Collection

Secrecy has pervaded the design and implementation of bulk data collection and other surveillance programs. Those programs have together led to the collection and storage of the content and

169. See id.
171. See id. at 80.
172. Id. at 79.
metadata of e-mails and telephone calls of millions of individuals.\footnote{174}{See James Bamford, 

After 9/11, President Bush authorized the NSA to collect telephony and Internet metadata and telephone and Internet content without review by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) pursuant to the President’s Surveillance Program (PSP), also known by its code name, STELLARWIND.\footnote{175}{See Ryan Lizza, _State of Deception_, NEW YORKER (Dec. 16, 2013), http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/16/state-of-deception [https://perma.cc/KT6H-AD8A].}

Both the contours and legal justifications for activities conducted under the PSP have shifted over time.\footnote{176}{See Laura K. Donohue, _FISA Reform_, 10 I/S: J. L. & POL’Y FOR INFO. SOC’Y 599, 600 (2014).}

After the New York Times revealed in December 2005 that the National Security Agency (NSA) was collecting telephone content between the United States and overseas—one component of the PSP—the Bush Administration provided its first legal explanation of the program to the public.\footnote{177}{James Risen & Eric Lichtblau, _Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts_, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 16, 2005), http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/bush-lets-us-spy-on-callers-without-courts.html?_r=0 [https://perma.cc/45F8-5273].}

Initially, the Administration grounded the PSP on the President’s Article II Commander in Chief authority, the War Powers Resolution, and the AUMF, which the Administration said overrode FISA’s prohibition on warrantless electronic surveillance.\footnote{178}{DOJ, _LEGAL AUTHORITIES SUPPORTING THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY DESCRIBED BY THE PRESIDENT_ (2006), http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB178/surv39.pdf [https://perma.cc/VAY3-EV5B].}

Continuing concerns about the PSP’s legal foundations prompted the Administration to bring it within the FISA umbrella. In July 2004, the FISC approved the Administration’s request to bring the Internet metadata program under FISA’s pen register and trap and trace provisions,\footnote{179}{Opinion and Order, No. PR/TT [Redacted], at 2-3 (FISA Ct. July 14, 2004), http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/1118/CLEANEDPRTT%201.pdf [https://perma.cc/6VDN-JSYH]. Although those provisions refer to “a pen register or trap and trace device,” Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, the then-presiding judge of the FISC, nevertheless sanctioned the bulk} and in May 2006, it
approved the Administration’s request to bring the bulk collection of telephony metadata within FISA’s business records provision. The other PSP collection programs—those aimed at international telephone and Internet content—were subsequently shifted to FISA through the passage of the Protect America Act (PAA) in 2007 and the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 (FAA), which made the temporary changes of PAA permanent.

Even when the executive publicly invoked statutory authority for the PSP—whether under the AUMF, section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act, section 702 of the FAA, or other provisions of FISA—it resisted providing the underlying legal rationale contained in still-secret OLC memoranda and FISC opinions. In addition to approving and reauthorizing bulk data collection programs, the FISC opinions found in several instances that the programs exceeded existing authority, violated prior court orders, and impermissibly captured the domestic communications of tens of thousands of Americans. The public were not the only ones kept in the dark. Congress was informed selectively and incompletely about these surveillance programs and the legal basis for them. While its opinions had almost always remained secret before, the FISC had

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181. See id.


183. See id.

typically engaged in the routine application of law to facts—determining whether a warrant should issue in a particular case—rather than engaging in judicial lawmaking by interpreting the scope and legality of new surveillance programs.  

The U.S. government’s bulk data collection programs have served as a focal point for concerns about secret law. Prior to the revelations by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, some lawmakers had correctly predicted that Americans would be “stunned” when they learned about secret government interpretations of statutes, such as section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act. Since the revelations, advocacy groups have attacked “a hidden body of law that defines the government’s power to collect information about millions of Americans” and pressed for increased disclosure and transparency.

Surveillance depends on a degree of secrecy. The government cannot conduct effective surveillance of a target that knows it is being watched. Secrecy is thus necessarily more pervasive in surveillance than in kinetic activities, such as detention and targeting, that have a visible impact and, in turn, increase pressure on public officials to justify their actions. Yet as with detention and targeting, secrecy alone does not capture the controversy over hidden interpretations of the government’s legal authority. That controversy also stems from the use of elastic standards and a resistance to rules that might more sharply constrain government conduct.

Prior to FISA, foreign intelligence collection was largely unregulated by statute and unsupervised by courts. Congress enacted FISA in 1978 following the Church Committee’s report documenting

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185. See id. at 505-06.


187. Plaintiff’s Memorandum of Law in Support of Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment and in Opposition to Defendants’ Motion for Summary Judgment at 4, ACLU v. FBI, 59 F. Supp. 3d 584 (S.D.N.Y. 2014) (No. 11 Civ. 7562 (WHP)); see also id. at 13 (describing how “pivotal interpretations of our public laws” are hidden from the public view).

188. See Samuel J. Rascoff, Domesticating Intelligence, 83 S. Cal. L. Rev. 575, 632 (2010) (noting that “[a]t first blush, transparency seems like an odd fit with an intelligence community that inevitably carries out much of its work in secret,” but also suggesting areas in which greater transparency is warranted).
decades of warrantless surveillance of U.S. citizens, including for political purposes, and the Supreme Court’s decision in Keith suggesting that a special, less restrictive framework for foreign intelligence surveillance might be constitutionally permissible. FISA, as Laura Donohue has observed, “became the instrument designed to limit the NSA’s collection of information on U.S. citizens.” It subjected all domestic foreign intelligence surveillance, and some surveillance abroad, to a specific warrant procedure modeled on, but ultimately distinct from, the warrant procedure for criminal cases. Warrants were issued by the newly created FISC, which meets in secret and imposes a less onerous showing than for ordinary criminal wiretaps. FISA also required minimization procedures that are “reasonably designed in light of the purpose and technique of the particular surveillance, to minimize the acquisition and retention, and prohibit the dissemination, of nonpublicly available information concerning unconsenting United States persons consistent with the need of the United States to obtain, produce, and disseminate foreign intelligence information.” Congress subsequently amended FISA to authorize other forms of intelligence gathering. In general, however, FISA retained its basic structure, demanding a particularized showing in relation to the target prior to the collection of information, an individualized court order, and heightened protections for U.S. persons.

The bulk collection of domestic telephony metadata, which circumvented this basic framework, is a commonly cited example of secret lawmaking. After 9/11, the Bush Administration began

193. 50 U.S.C. § 1801(h)(1); see also In re Sealed Case, 310 F.3d 717, 731 (FISA Ct. Rev. 2002).
195. Donohue, supra note 191, at 797.
collecting domestic telephone call and Internet records without judicial authority.196 In May 2006, the FISC approved the bulk collection of records under section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act; over the next seven years, fifteen different FISC judges issued thirty-five orders reauthorizing the collection.197 The FISC orders did not become public until June 2013, when The Guardian first published documents obtained by Snowden.198

The bulk telephony metadata program, however, demonstrates more than legal secrecy; it also highlights the inflationary potential of standards in the national security context. The precursor of the section 215 program was added to FISA in 1988.199 It originally allowed the government to obtain an order compelling the production of business records in foreign intelligence or international terrorism investigations from common carriers, public accommodation facilities, storage facilities, and vehicle rental facilities.200 To obtain an order authorizing the production of records under this provision, the government had to provide the FISC with “specific and articulable facts giving reason to believe that the person to whom the records pertain[ed was] a foreign power or an agent of a foreign power.”201 After 9/11, Congress modified this provision through section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act and subsequent legislation. Section 215 provided for the production of “any tangible things (including books, records, papers, documents, and other items).”202 It further required the government to provide the FISC with “a statement of facts showing that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the tangible things sought are relevant to an authorized investigation (other than a threat assessment) ... to obtain foreign intelligence information not concerning a United States person or to protect

196. Risen & Lichtblau, supra note 177.
200. Id. § 1862.
201. Id.
202. The only limitation on the types of records that may be obtained with a section 215 order is that the types must be obtainable with a grand jury subpoena. Id. § 1861(c)(2)(D).
Section 215 thus broadened the type of records that may be obtained, replaced the requirement of “specific articulable facts” with a more generalized concept of “relevance,” and eliminated the requirement that the target be a “foreign power or an agent of a foreign power” and instead required only that the items be obtained in the course of an investigation to obtain “foreign intelligence information” to “protect against international terrorism or clandestine intelligence activities.”203 Although Congress still insisted on a connection between the records sought and the target of the investigation,204 these changes reduced the degree of specificity required of the government to obtain information. The USA PATRIOT Act made changes to other FISA provisions that similarly enhanced the government’s ability to obtain and search electronic files.205

Section 215’s treatment of “relevance” illustrates how standards can reduce constraints on the government’s ability to conduct surveillance. Under the section 215 program, bulk telephony metadata collection is considered relevant to counterterrorism investigations because it provides the necessary “historical repository of metadata” that may later be accessed through a more particularized query.206 Without that historical repository, government officials have explained, it might not be feasible to identify and examine chains of communications between a terrorist suspect and his own contacts.

203. Id. § 1861(b)(2)(A).
204. Id. § 1861(b)(2)(A)(i)-(iii). The USA PATRIOT Act eliminated the “specific and articulable facts” requirement, but in 2005, Congress reintroduced a requirement that the government provide a statement of facts establishing “reasonable ground to believe that the tangible things” to be obtained were “relevant to an authorized investigation (other than a threat assessment).” USA PATRIOT Improvement and Reauthorization Act of 2005, Pub. L. No. 109-177, § 106(b), 120 Stat. 192, 196 (2006).
205. Donohue, supra note 191, at 799; see also id. at 804 (discussing that Congress designed FISA to be used in “specific cases of foreign intelligence gathering” as a means of protecting U.S. citizens’ privacy).
206. See USA PATRIOT Act § 216 (codified at 18 U.S.C. § 3127(3)) (increasing the availability of pen register devices to include the interception of Internet metadata); id. § 214 (codified at 50 U.S.C. § 1842(c)) (reducing the standard for obtaining Internet metadata so that the FBI need only certify to the FISC that the information likely to be obtained is “relevant to an ongoing investigation to protect against international terrorism or clandestine intelligence activities”).
across different time periods and communications networks.\textsuperscript{208} As one district judge found in upholding the program, bulk telephony metadata collection is relevant to counterterrorism investigations because “it allows the querying technique to be comprehensive” and enables the government to “draw connections it might otherwise never be able to find.”\textsuperscript{209} But as the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (PCLOB) cautioned: “[i]f the government develops an effective means of searching through everything in order to find something, then everything becomes relevant to its investigations,” and relevance “becomes limited only by the government’s technological capacity to ingest information.”\textsuperscript{210}

In response to the controversy over Snowden’s revelations about the section 215 program, President Obama announced several reforms, including submitting requests to query the database to the FISC, which would have to find reasonable articulable suspicion that the number to be queried was connected to a suspected terrorist (rather than allowing the executive to decide that question on its own), and limiting queries to within two “hops” of the original contact number queried (as opposed to the three hops previously permitted).\textsuperscript{211} In May 2015, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit declared in \textit{ACLU v. Clapper} that the bulk metadata collection program exceeded the authority granted by Congress.\textsuperscript{212} The court thus rejected the government’s expansive interpretation of section 215’s relevance standard, upon which it relied to create a historical repository of information unconnected to any specific

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{208} See id.
\item \textsuperscript{212} See 785 F.3d 787, 812 (2d Cir. 2015).
\end{itemize}
investigation. On June 2, 2015, just one day after section 215 had expired under a sunset provision in the statute, Congress enacted the USA FREEDOM Act, ending the bulk domestic metadata collection program.213 Among other changes, the Act prohibits the government from collecting telephony metadata, which must instead remain with private companies, and requires the government to obtain a warrant from the FISC to access such metadata.214 Both the Second Circuit’s ruling in Clapper and the enactment of the USA FREEDOM Act thus pushed back against one component of expanded surveillance powers that had developed in secret through the articulation of broad standards.

FISA section 702 has also relaxed constraints on government surveillance. After 9/11, President Bush authorized the NSA to conduct warrantless wiretapping of telephone and e-mail communications in which “one party to a communication was located outside the United States and a participant in the call was reasonably believed to be a member or agent of al Qaeda or an affiliated terrorist organization.”215 Passage of the FAA in 2008 brought this surveillance activity under FISA.216 The FAA dispensed with several traditional FISA requirements. Under the FAA, the government no longer has to show probable cause that the target of the electronic surveillance is a foreign power or an agent of a foreign power; it also no longer has to specify the nature and location of each of the particular facilities or places where that surveillance occurs. Instead, the FAA permits the targeting of persons “reasonably believed to be outside the United States” when a “significant purpose” of the surveillance is to acquire “foreign intelligence information.”217 Additionally, the statute diminishes the FISC’s authority to demand, and eliminates its authority to supervise, privacy-intrusion minimization procedures that are instance-specific.218 These changes


214. See id.

215. Clapper v. Amnesty Int’l USA, 133 S. Ct. 1138, 1143-44 (2013) (quoting Appendix to Petition for Certiorari at 403a, Clapper, 133 S. Ct. 1138 (No. 11-1025)).

216. Id. at 1144.


218. Id. § 1881a(e).
deprive targeting of its ordinary meaning: in place of a rule requiring specific information about an individual “target,” the FAA permits programmatic surveillance by substituting a broad standard of “foreign intelligence information” and severing any nexus to particular individuals.219 While the FAA nominally limits the targets of surveillance to foreign nationals, it enables the surveillance of U.S. citizens whose communications are collected “incidentally” in the process,220 a result FISA was originally intended to prevent.221

Word play has facilitated the sub rosa transformation of intelligence rules into permissive standards. As Jennifer Granick has explained, the NSA has repeatedly “warp[ed] language in order to make rules mean something very different from what ordinary people would take them to mean.”222 For example, when Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) asked Director of National Intelligence James Clapper whether the NSA collects any information on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans,223 Clapper responded “[n]ot wittingly.”224 In fact, the NSA was collecting such information,

219. Id. § 1881a(g)(2)(A)(v).
221. Donohue, supra note 191, at 771-73 (describing the incidental collection of information about U.S. persons prior to FISA).
224. Id. (testimony of James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence).
as Clapper knew at the time. However, Clapper later defended his answer, which he called the “most truthful, or least most untruthful” statement he could make, by distinguishing between “collect” and “gather.”

Surveillance standards, moreover, have resisted narrowing despite evidence of noncompliance. In 2009, FISC Judge Reggie Walton expressed concern about the government’s use of identifiers to query the database of telephony metadata collected under section 215 that did not meet the “reasonable, articulable suspicion” standard prescribed by the FISC. Such misuse of these identifiers, Judge Walton explained, would amount to a “flagrant violation” of FISC orders. He later stated that the NSA’s explanation for its noncompliance with FISC courts “strains credulity.” Judge Walton nevertheless allowed the telephony metadata collection program to continue with reforms, which were subsequently lifted.

Former FISC Chief Judge John Bates identified significant compliance problems with bulk data collection under section 702 of the

225. See Granick, supra note 222.


228. Id. at 4.

229. Id. at 5, 11, In re Prod. of Tangible Things from [Redacted], No. BR 08-13 (FISA Ct. Mar. 2, 2009), http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/section/pub_March%202009%20Order%20from%20FISC.pdf [https://perma.cc/PH6M-A6G5] (complaining that the minimization procedures had been “so frequently and systemically violated that it can fairly be said that this critical element of the overall [section 215 program] has never functioned effectively”).


231. Specifically, the FISC lifted its requirements that the NSA query the database with prior FISC approval (or, in an emergency, to query the database on its own but then notify the FISC by close of the next business day) and that the NSA file a weekly report listing each time over the preceding seven-day period it had shared any information derived from bulk metadata collections with anyone outside the NSA. See Donohue, supra note 191, at 819-20.
The NSA relied on that provision to collect data not only directly from Internet companies under the PRISM program, but also from upstream communications (containing both metadata and content) passing through undersea fiber optic cables and sweeping up the protected domestic communications of U.S. persons in the process. Judge Bates nevertheless found that the procedures met the required standard for collection because they were “reasonably designed” to: 1) “ensure that any acquisition authorized under [the certifications] is limited to targeting persons reasonably believed to be located outside the United States”; and 2) “prevent the intentional acquisition of any communication as to which the sender and all intended recipients are known at the time of the acquisition to be located in the United States.”

He reached this conclusion by interpreting the “reasonableness” standard to accommodate technological limitations: because the NSA lacked the means to filter out wholly domestic communications, its failure to do so was not unreasonable. Judge Bates did conclude, however, that the minimization standards were not “reasonably designed” to minimize the retention of that information.

As Orin Kerr has observed, the FISC’s interpretation of surveillance laws suffers from the lack of an effective feedback mechanism. Although ordinary criminal warrants are also issued ex parte, they can provide for ex post review after a warrant is issued. Once evidence has been seized and criminal charges filed, a defendant can seek to suppress the evidence. This ex post review has produced an extensive body of jurisprudence under the Fourth Amendment

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233. Id. at 5.
234. Id. at 41-42 (alteration in original) (quoting 50 U.S.C. § 1881a(d)(1), 188a(d)(1)(2)(B) (2006)).
235. Id. at 30 (“[D]ue to the technological challenges associated with acquiring Internet transactions, NSA is unable to exclude certain Internet transactions from its upstream collection.”), see also id. at 44-45.
236. Id. at 48, 58.
237. Id. at 62-63. Instead, those standards maximized the retention of that information. Id. at 78.
239. Id.
exclusionary rule, liquidating constitutional standards—such as whether a warrant issued on probable cause and, therefore, was reasonable—by means of their application to particular facts. The result has been the creation of a thicket of rules regulating law enforcement conduct through case-by-case adjudication.

Surveillance laws, as drafted, seek to balance privacy and security. But unlike in the case of ordinary criminal warrants, there is typically no review of the judge’s ex parte decision to grant a FISA order. One consequence is that surveillance standards, by remaining indeterminate, tend to augment executive authority, rather than being distilled into rules that help constrain it. Secrecy exacerbates this effect by preventing public debate and hindering legal challenges by preventing those subject to surveillance from establishing standing to bring suit.

Other factors are at work as well, including the desire to preserve flexibility in the face of rapid technological change. New surveillance programs are partly a response to developments that have made it more difficult to apply a legal framework premised on a strict division between domestic and international communications.

240. See, e.g., Samson v. California, 547 U.S. 843, 848 (2006) (explaining that “reasonableness” is to be determined by examining the “totality of circumstances” in a particular case to “assess[] the degree to which [government conduct] intrudes upon an individual’s privacy and, on the other, the degree to which it is needed for the promotion of legitimate governmental interests” (quoting United States v. Knights, 534 U.S. 112, 118-19 (2001))); Brigham City v. Stuart, 547 U.S. 398, 403 (2006) (describing reasonableness as “the ultimate touchstone of the Fourth Amendment”).

241. See New York v. Belton, 453 U.S. 454, 458 (1981) (“Fourth Amendment doctrine ... is primarily intended to regulate the police in their day-to-day activities and thus ought to be expressed in terms that are readily applicable by the police in the context of the law enforcement activities in which they are necessarily engaged.” (quoting Wayne R. LaFave, “Case-by-Case Adjudication” versus “Standardized Procedures”: The Robinson Dilemma, 1974 SUP. CT. REV. 127, 141)); Orin S. Kerr, Searches and Seizures in a Digital World, 119 HARV. L. REV. 531, 536 (2005) (“The modern Supreme Court has used the text of the Fourth Amendment to craft a comprehensive set of rules regulating law enforcement.”).

242. See California v. Carey, 471 U.S. 386, 400-01 (1985) (Stevens, J., dissenting) (“The only true rules governing search and seizure have been formulated and refined in the painstaking scrutiny of case-by-case adjudication.”).

243. Kerr, supra note 209, at 1517.

244. Clapper v. Amnesty Int’l USA, 133 S. Ct. 1138, 1143 (2013) (dismissing suit challenging the FAA on the ground that plaintiffs could not establish with sufficient certainty that they had been the target of surveillance).

245. See Kerr, supra note 209, at 1522-23 (explaining that “the Internet and technological surveillance tools are constantly morphing and relentlessly dynamic”).
Today, for example, many foreign-to-foreign communications, which would otherwise remain outside FISA, now touch a U.S. wire, thus triggering the requirement of a court order under the FISA framework. In a world in which it is increasingly difficult to know which communications to intercept, government officials are prone to favor standards over rules. Secret law, as it is commonly described, thus encompasses more than a lack of transparency in the underlying legal authority; it also suggests concerns about the fluidity of a legal standard that gives government officials greater latitude to act in a changing technological environment at the expense of more rule-like constraints.

IV. SECRET LAW AS A PROBLEM OF STANDARDS: SOME IMPLICATIONS

Perceptions of legal secrecy derive not only from an absence of transparency but also from indeterminacy in the law itself due to the expression of legal directives through standards. Standards are particularly attractive in the national security context because of the flexibility they give officials to adapt existing legal authorities to new and rapidly changing situations. Viewing secret law as a problem of standards has several implications. Most obviously, it suggests that the common framing—as a conflict between legal secrecy and transparency—is too simple. Secrecy exacerbates the tendency of standards towards expansion and contributes to their ambiguity. But increased transparency alone will not halt reliance on national security standards, cabin their inflationary trajectory, or cure the problem misdiagnosed as secret law.

Reframing the problem of secret law as one of standards thus raises the threshold question of whether greater determinacy is possible in this area. Adrian Vermeule has argued that U.S. administrative law is essentially Schmittian. He divides administrative law into a series of legal “black holes” and “grey holes.”

247. See Adrian Vermeule, Our Schmittian Administrative Law, 122 Harv. L. Rev. 1095, 1103-04 (2009).
holes,” a term coined by Law Lord Johan Steyn,249 “either explicitly exempt[ ] the executive from the requirements of the rule of law or explicitly exclude judicial review of executive action.”250 Grey holes,” as described by David Dyzenhaus,251 exist when “there are some legal constraints on executive action ... but the constraints are so insubstantial that they pretty well permit government to do as it pleases.”252 Standards operate within the latter space, serving as what Professor Vermeule describes as “adjustable parameters” to provide a rule-of-law facade to executive action.253

Professor Vermeule thus finds in standards evidence of the need to afford the executive sufficient latitude to respond to the exigencies of national security. He explains that “[e]mergencies cannot realistically be governed by ex ante, highly specified rules, but at most by vague ex post standards; it is beyond the institutional capacity of lawmakers to specify and allocate emergency powers in all future contingencies.”254 Instead, Professor Vermeule argues that the absence of constraints in the legal regime regulating emergency power, whether or not normatively desirable, is inevitable.255 Standards intended to govern national security powers will remain adjustable parameters, whether or not they are secret, and the legal directives they implement will resist liquidation into rules. If such indeterminacy is inevitable, then trying to give content to the grey holes of standards is hopeless.

However, others have challenged Professor Vermeule’s assessment of the inevitability of black and grey holes. Evan Criddle has explained not only how Congress might cabin national security exceptions in the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) that provide for legal black holes,256 but also why federal courts are not “institutionally

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250. Vermeule, supra note 247, at 1096 (quoting Dyzenhaus, supra note 248, at 3).
251. Dyzenhaus, supra note 246, at 3.
252. Id. at 42.
253. Vermeule, supra note 247, at 1097.
254. Id. at 1101.
255. Id. at 1133.
256. See Evan J. Criddle, Mending Holes in the Rule of (Administrative) Law, 104 NW. U. L. REV. COLLOQUIY 309, 311-12 (2010), http://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1197&context=nulr_online [https://perma.cc/ZXA9-G9SN] (describing steps Congress could take, including designing malleable procedural requirements to accommodate agencies’ legitimate concerns for speed and efficiency without abandoning procedural
predestined to convert the APA's flexible standards into grey holes.”\textsuperscript{257} Professor Criddle distinguishes between reasoned deference and de facto abstention, arguing that even after 9/11, federal courts engaged in the latter not the former.\textsuperscript{258} While flexible legal standards may increase the opportunities for judicial abstention, he maintains that judicial review can still give content to national security standards.\textsuperscript{259}

Others have focused on the traditional separation of national security rule making from ordinary domestic rule making.\textsuperscript{260} The APA has a “foreign or military affairs function” exception to its usual notice-and-comment requirements,\textsuperscript{261} which Robert Knowles has proposed cabining through comprehensive rule-making reform.\textsuperscript{262} Professor Knowles argues that greater use of notice-and-comment rulemaking would not only increase public participation but would also promote a regulatory approach that is more effective and protective of individual rights,\textsuperscript{263} at least if coupled with judicial review

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\textsuperscript{257} Criddle, supra note 256, at 312.

\textsuperscript{258} Id. (“[L]ower courts in the post-9/11 cases Vermeule identifies undertook a robust review of agency actions, identifying substantial evidence supporting the agency’s position and articulating a detailed explanation for upholding the agency’s decision.”).

\textsuperscript{259} Id. at 313 (“[T]he public need not necessarily resign itself to the inevitability of executive and judicial lawlessness during national crises.”).

\textsuperscript{260} Knowles, supra note 5, at 889-90.

\textsuperscript{261} See 5 U.S.C. § 553(a)(1) (2012) (stating that notice-and-comment requirements apply “except to the extent that there is involved ... a military or foreign affairs function of the United States”). Professor Knowles describes the exception as “an expression of, if not the foundation of, the national security administrative state.” Knowles, supra note 5, at 904. The APA also contains an exception from notice-and-comment requirements for when there is “good cause” because such requirements would be “impracticable, unnecessary, or contrary to the public interest.” See 5 U.S.C. § 553(b)(3)(B).

\textsuperscript{262} Knowles, supra note 5, at 933-34 (proposing, for example, issuance of an executive order requiring additional procedural requirements for rule making by nonindependent federal agencies).

\textsuperscript{263} Id. at 938-43 (advocating more frequent use of notice-and-comment rule making, enforced by courts through greater scrutiny of an agency’s decision to forego such rule making). For example, Professor Knowles explains how use of notice-and-comment rule making could have avoided, or at least minimized, the problems associated with a program implemented after 9/11—and widely regarded as a failure—that required noncitizens of specifically designated countries—almost exclusively Muslim nations—to specially register with the Justice Department. Id. at 892-94.
that scrutinizes the rationales employed during the agency’s decision-making process. Under a *Chenery*-based model of judicial review, for example, a court would uphold an agency rule only on the grounds specified by the particular agency when the rule was developed, thus limiting agency power to create policy outside independent scrutiny.

The evolution of detention authority under the AUMF suggests that grey holes are not inevitable. As described above, the Guantanamo habeas litigation provided an important catalyst in the gradual liquidation of a detention standard under the AUMF. To be sure, that standard retains considerable flexibility and remains vulnerable to deferential review in individual cases. But judicial scrutiny did force the executive to articulate legal positions and prompted decisions on the AUMF’s content. It not only had an information-forcing effect but also helped define the AUMF’s outer reach. Notably, the law has become more particularized on issues with which courts have engaged, such as the category of individuals covered by the AUMF, while remaining more uncertain on questions courts have tended to avoid, such as the scope and duration of the armed conflict itself.

In short, courts have the potential to mitigate the inflationary potential of standards. Conversely, barriers to justiciability eliminate an important mechanism for liquidating national security standards, as has been the case in challenges to targeted killing, which have thus far been dismissed on justiciability grounds.

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264. Id. at 903.
265. SEC v. Chenery Corp., 318 U.S. 80, 87-88 (1943) (holding that discretionary administrative action will be upheld only on grounds specified by the agency in the record).
266. See supra text accompanying notes 81-89.
267. Rebecca Ingber has observed that an unintended consequence of federal habeas litigation was to force the Obama Administration Justice Department into a reactive posture and cause it to adopt a more expansive view of presidential detention power than it might otherwise have taken if it had been relieved of litigation pressures and given greater space to deliberate. See Ingber, supra note 114, at 375-76. Whether the absence of such pressures would have led the new administration to adopt a more moderate position is uncertain. Litigation did, however, provide the primary means by which the AUMF’s broadly worded directive on the use of military force became more defined. See id.
these areas in particular, perceptions about secret law persist. These perceptions point not only to continuing gaps in transparency but also to how the relevant legal authority continues to take the form of a generalized standard that resists liquidation.

Proposals designed to address barriers to judicial review can increase the opportunity for standards to gain content through their application to particular cases. One way would be through reform of the state secrets privilege, which has barred adjudication of unlawful detention and treatment of detainees. Another way would be legislation that expressly authorizes damages actions, thus eliminating an obstacle to suits challenging targeted killing and other contested government conduct. The suits might still result in dismissal, but litigation would provide a means for a fuller and more refined articulation of the standard at issue.

Surveillance poses particularly difficult challenges because the need for secrecy—which necessarily excludes notifying the target or allowing for his participation—is in tension with the central features of the adversarial process, which are notice and an opportunity to be heard. As the pre-Snowden FISC opinions show, the absence of this process limited the potential of court review to impose limits on the growth of standards. One reform that could

challenging the President’s authority under the AUMF to engage in the targeted killing of a U.S. citizen in Yemen for lack of standing and on political question grounds. Efforts to define the scope of the President’s authority to engage in lethal force have thus drawn by analogy on decisions in habeas cases interpreting the scope of the President’s detention authority under the AUMF. See Robert M. Chesney, Who May Be Held? Military Detention Through the Habeas Lens, 52 B.C. L. Rev. 769, 773-74 (2011).


273. See supra text accompanying notes 182-98. While recipients themselves may challenge orders issued under section 215 or section 702 before the FISC, no recipient has utilized the adversarial process provided under the statute. See Letter from the Hon. Reggie B. Walton, Presiding Judge, U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, to the Hon. Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman, Comm. on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate 8-9 (July 29, 2013), http://www.leahy.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Honorable%20Patrick%20J%20Leahy.pdf [https://perma.cc/3Y9P-SSAZ]. As a result, the mass suspicionless surveillance programs implemented pursuant to these provisions were approved “almost entirely through ex parte, in camera judicial
lead to a greater elaboration of legal standards under FISA without compromising the need for secrecy in surveillance is the appointment of a special advocate before the FISC. Several former FISC judges and scholars have supported the appointment of a special advocate, which could reduce the risk that the FISC would uphold expansive interpretations of surveillance authority based on *ex parte* submissions. Unlike other *ex parte* proceedings, FISC review of applications requires extensive analysis and creates precedent for future cases. But the adjudicatory process tends to suffer when judges do not hear both sides of an argument or do not receive the type of in-depth briefing warranted by complex, fact-based Fourth Amendment issues and the technical details of surveillance programs. As the President’s Review Group explained in proposing the creation of a Public Interest Advocate, “judges are in a better position to find the right answer on questions of law and fact when they hear competing views.”

In response to these proposals, Congress included a provision in the USA FREEDOM Act that authorizes the FISC to appoint an individual to serve as amicus curiae to participate in cases that present “a novel or significant interpretation of the law.” Whether

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274. See Ensuring Adversarial Process in the FISA Court Act, H.R. 3159, 113th Cong. § 2(a)(1) (1st Sess. 2013) (proposing the creation of a standing pool of private “public interest advocates” appointed by the PCLOB, but not residing within any branch of the government).


276. See, e.g., Vladeck, supra note 273 (manuscript at 23).

277. Id. at 88-89.


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this measure, which leaves the appointment in the FISC’s discretion, will succeed in providing more balanced presentations on important issues remains to be seen. But it offers a potential check against the inflationary potential of standards.

Another way to facilitate the liquidation of surveillance standards would be to provide greater disclosure to criminal defendants where the government has obtained evidence through FISA, thus creating an opportunity for a defendant to contest the warrant. While individuals whose communications are monitored under FISA normally do not receive notice of the government’s surveillance, the government is statutorily required to notify them if it intends to rely on evidence “obtained or derived” from FISA or the FAA in a criminal prosecution.\(^{281}\) If, in response to a defendant’s motion for disclosure, the Attorney General files an affidavit asserting the national security risks of disclosure, the court must conduct an \textit{ex parte}, in camera review to determine if the surveillance was lawful.\(^ {282}\) The statute further contemplates that the court may order disclosure if in camera and \textit{ex parte} review will not suffice to determine the lawfulness of the surveillance.\(^ {283}\) This mechanism for disclosure and adversarial process not only provides a layer of protection to defendants, but also affords a means by which surveillance standards can be concretized through application to individual cases. But this mechanism has been underutilized. The government has often failed to disclose when evidence has been obtained or derived from FISA or the FAA\(^ {284}\) or to disclose the specific authorities it used to obtain the evidence cited in its FISA applications.\(^ {285}\) Courts have also typically declined to provide an adversarial process, despite their authority to do so.\(^ {286}\) In the one instance in which a court did order

\(^{281}\) 50 U.S.C. §§ 1806(c), 1825(d), 1881(e) (2012).

\(^{282}\) Id. § 1806(f).

\(^{283}\) See id. (stating that a court may disclose FISA materials to the defendant under appropriate security procedures and protective orders “where such disclosure is necessary to make an accurate determination of the legality of the surveillance”).


an evidentiary hearing to determine if FISA-derived evidence was lawfully obtained, an appeals court reversed the ruling.

While review by courts or agencies is the most common means for liquidating standards, other mechanisms might be considered. For example, Allen Buchanan and Robert O. Keohane have proposed adoption of an international Drone Accountability Regime to address continuing gaps in transparency and accountability surrounding the use of this technology. Although the proposed regime would be based on an informal agreement among states, it would require public justifications for specific strikes after they occur, which would be evaluated by an independent Ombudsperson. This review process could help concretize norms of use by states through a nonjudicial process that examines the application of ex ante standards to specific drone strikes.

Pressure from civil society can serve as a catalyst for liquidating national security standards. For example, increased public attention on drone strikes against suspected terrorists helped force the Obama administration to articulate limitations on drone use. These limitations were outlined initially in a series of speeches and eventually in the PPG, which provided further nonbinding constraints on drone strikes conducted outside “hot” battlefields.

Yet uncertainty and controversy continue to surround the use of drone strikes. The main obstacle to increased clarity is not a lack of transparency about the legal standards for targeting, but rather an absence of information about how those standards are applied in individual cases. LOAC principles such as necessity, proportionality, and distinction—all of which are incorporated into official U.S. targeting standards—gain content through their application to

(2014) (describing the failure to provide defendants notice of the use of FISA-derived evidence and the implications for the development of Fourth Amendment jurisprudence).

288. See United States v. Daoud, 755 F.3d 479, 485 (7th Cir.), supplemented by 761 F.3d 678 (7th Cir. 2014).
290. Id. at 16-17.
291. See supra text accompanying notes 108-32.
292. See supra text accompanying notes 133-37.
293. See, e.g., Buchanan & Keohane, supra note 289, at 18-20 (describing the attractions and risks of drone use).
concrete situations. Increased precision and certainty in the law will come with increased knowledge of how those standards are employed in individual cases. Creating more opportunities for courts to review the application of standards to specific facts could help achieve this result.

CONCLUSION

The current legal landscape surrounding the exercise of national security powers, from the use of military force to bulk data collection, exhibits a deficient, if sometimes deeply flawed, combination of rules and standards. The former may be resisted—or violated outright, as in the case of some surveillance programs—because of concerns about imposing ex ante restrictions on the executive’s ability to respond to new threats and adapt to rapid technological change. Lawmakers ordinarily seek clarity to induce compliance and avoid socially harmful conduct, but much national security law making—particularly surrounding surveillance—is not primarily concerned with inducing compliance. Rather, national security law making is often concerned with gathering information about possible future noncompliance without notifying potentially noncompliant actors. Standards provide enhanced flexibility but can expand over time and evade liquidation into more rule-like constraints. The different forms and distribution of judicial review impede the tailoring that ordinarily results from applying standards to the facts of individual cases.

In some instances, no review occurs because of threshold justiciability doctrines, such as the state secrets privilege or political question doctrine. In other instances, review is ex parte and not subject to correction. And in other instances, the political economy of litigation—which favors risk-adverse decision making and judicial deference to the executive—limits oversight and stunts clarification of the law. Meanwhile, institutional incentives and political pressures encourage the executive to pursue a legal framework that maximizes its flexibility to respond to emerging security threats.

294. See Koh, supra note 96.
295. Diver, supra note 28, at 73.
The problem of inflationary standards is often misidentified as secret law. To be sure, secrecy remains an important issue, as it can obscure the indeterminacy in the underlying legal authority on which executive officials are relying, shield critical facts from public view, and justify barriers to litigation for fear of disclosing sensitive security information. Yet the conception of secret law as a fixed body of legal authority hidden from the public that needs only to be uncovered fails to capture how the law itself continues to take the form of generalized and elastic standards. Increased precision in the law requires not only more transparency, which facilitates public discussion and debate, but also more opportunities for national security standards to be liquidated through their application to particular cases.