Thank you, Jane, for your very kind introduction and for your leadership, here at the Woodrow Wilson Center and in your decades of public service. Few individuals can match the range of Jane Harman’s expertise—from the armed services to intelligence to homeland security. And anyone who ever appeared before her committees knew it. So Jane, I’ll just say that I’m finally glad to be sharing the stage with you instead of testifying before you.

To you and everyone here at the Woodrow Wilson Center, thank you for your invaluable contributions—your research, your scholarship—which help further our national security every day. I very much appreciate this opportunity to discuss President Obama’s counterterrorism strategy, in particular, its ethics and efficacy.

It is fitting that we have this discussion here at the Woodrow Wilson Center. It was here in August 2007 that then-Senator Obama described how he would bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end and refocus our efforts on “the war that has to be won”—the war against al-Qa’ida, particularly in the tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He said that we would carry on this fight while upholding our laws and our values and that he would work with allies and partners whenever possible. But he also made it clear that he would not hesitate to use military force against terrorists who pose a direct threat to America. And he said that if he had actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets, including in Pakistan, he would act to protect the American people.

So it is especially fitting that we have this discussion today. One year ago today, President Obama faced the scenario that he discussed here at the Wilson Center five years ago, and he did not hesitate to act. Soon thereafter, our Special Operations Forces were moving toward that compound in Pakistan where we believed Usama bin Laden might be hiding. By the end of the next day, President Obama could confirm that justice had finally been delivered to the terrorist responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001, and for so many other deaths around the world.

The death of bin Laden was our most strategic blow yet against al-Qa’ida. Credit for that success belongs to the courageous forces who carried out that mission, at extraordinary risk to their lives; to the many intelligence professionals who pieced together the clues that led to bin Laden’s hideout; and to President Obama, who gave the order to go in.

One year later, it’s appropriate to assess where we stand in this fight. We’ve always been clear that the end of bin Laden would neither mark the end of al-Qa’ida, nor our resolve to destroy it. So along with allies and partners, we’ve been unrelenting. And when we assess the al-Qa’ida of
2012, I think it is fair to say that, as a result of our efforts, the United States is more secure and the American people are safer. Here’s why.

In Pakistan, al-Qa’ida’s leadership ranks have continued to suffer heavy losses. This includes Ilyas Kashmiri, one of al-Qa’ida’s top operational planners, killed a month after bin Laden. It includes Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, killed when he succeeded Ayman al-Zawahiri as al-Qa’ida’s deputy leader. It includes Younis al-Mauritani, a planner of attacks against the United States and Europe—until he was captured by Pakistani forces.

With its most skilled and experienced commanders being lost so quickly, al-Qa’ida has had trouble replacing them. This is one of the many conclusions we have been able to draw from documents seized at bin Laden’s compound, some of which will be published online, for the first time, this week by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center. For example, bin Laden worried about—and I quote—“the rise of lower leaders who are not as experienced and this would lead to the repeat of mistakes.”

Al-Qa’ida leaders continue to struggle to communicate with subordinates and affiliates. Under intense pressure in the tribal regions of Pakistan, they have fewer places to train and groom the next generation of operatives. They’re struggling to attract new recruits. Morale is low, with intelligence indicating that some members are giving up and returning home, no doubt aware that this is a fight they will never win. In short, al-Qa’ida is losing, badly. And bin Laden knew it. In documents we seized, he confessed to “disaster after disaster.” He even urged his leaders to flee the tribal regions, and go to places, “away from aircraft photography and bombardment.”

For all these reasons, it is harder than ever for the al-Qa’ida core in Pakistan to plan and execute large-scale, potentially catastrophic attacks against our homeland. Today, it is increasingly clear that—compared to 9/11—the core al-Qa’ida leadership is a shadow of its former self. Al-Qa’ida has been left with just a handful of capable leaders and operatives, and with continued pressure is on the path to its destruction. And for the first time since this fight began, we can look ahead and envision a world in which the al-Qa’ida core is simply no longer relevant.

Nevertheless, the dangerous threat from al-Qa’ida has not disappeared. As the al-Qa’ida core falters, it continues to look to its affiliates and adherents to carry on its murderous cause. Yet these affiliates continue to lose key commanders and capabilities as well. In Somalia, it is indeed worrying to witness al-Qa’ida’s merger with al-Shabaab, whose ranks include foreign fighters, some with U.S. passports. At the same time, al-Shabaab continues to focus primarily on launching regional attacks, and ultimately, this is a merger between two organizations in decline.

In Yemen, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, continues to feel the effects of the death last year of Anwar al-Awlaki, its leader of external operations who was responsible for planning and directing terrorist attacks against the United States. Nevertheless, AQAP continues to be al-Qa’ida’s most active affiliate, and it continues to seek the opportunity to strike our homeland. We therefore continue to support the government of Yemen in its efforts against AQAP, which is being forced to fight for the territory it needs to plan attacks beyond Yemen.
In North and West Africa, another al-Qa’ida affiliate, al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, continues its efforts to destabilize regional governments and engages in kidnapping of Western citizens for ransom activities designed to fund its terrorist agenda. And in Nigeria, we are monitoring closely the emergence of Boko Haram, a group that appears to be aligning itself with al-Qa’ida’s violent agenda and is increasingly looking to attack Western interests in Nigeria in addition to Nigerian government targets.

More broadly, al-Qa’ida’s killing of innocents—mostly Muslim men, women and children—has badly tarnished its image and appeal in the eyes of Muslims around the world. Even bin Laden and his lieutenants knew this. His propagandist, Adam Gadahn, admitted that they were now seen “as a group that does not hesitate to take people’s money by falsehood, detonating mosques, [and] spilling the blood of scores of people.” Bin Laden agreed that “a large portion” of Muslims around the world “have lost their trust” in al-Qa’ida.

So damaged is al-Qa’ida’s image that bin Laden even considered changing its name. And one of the reasons? As bin Laden said himself, U.S. officials “have largely stopped using the phrase ‘the war on terror’ in the context of not wanting to provoke Muslims.” Simply calling them al-Qa’ida, bin Laden said, “reduces the feeling of Muslims that we belong to them.” To which I would add, that is because al-Qa’ida does not belong to Muslims. Al-Qa’ida is the antithesis of the peace, tolerance and humanity that is at the heart of Islam.

Despite the great progress we’ve made against al-Qa’ida, it would be a mistake to believe this threat has passed. Al-Qa’ida and its associated forces still have the intent to attack the United States. And we have seen lone individuals, including American citizens—often inspired by al-Qa’ida’s murderous ideology—kill innocent Americans and seek to do us harm.

Still, the damage that has been inflicted on the leadership core in Pakistan, combined with how al-Qa’ida has alienated itself from so much of the world, allows us to look forward. Indeed, if the decade before 9/11 was the time of al-Qa’ida’s rise, and the decade after 9/11 was the time of its decline, then I believe this decade will be the one that sees its demise.

This progress is no accident. It is a direct result of intense efforts over more than a decade, across two administrations, across the U.S. government and in concert with allies and partners. This includes the comprehensive counterterrorism strategy being directed by President Obama, a strategy guided by the President’s highest responsibility—to protect the safety and security of the American people.

In this fight, we are harnessing every element of American power—intelligence, military, diplomatic, development, economic, financial, law enforcement, homeland security and the power of our values, including our commitment to the rule of law. That’s why, for instance, in his first days in office, President Obama banned the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, which are not needed to keep our country safe.

Staying true to our values as a nation also includes upholding the transparency upon which our democracy depends. A few months after taking office, the President travelled to the National Archives where he discussed how national security requires a delicate balance between secrecy
and transparency. He pledged to share as much information as possible with the American people “so that they can make informed judgments and hold us accountable.” He has consistently encouraged those of us on his national security team to be as open and candid as possible as well.

Earlier this year, Attorney General Holder discussed how our counterterrorism efforts are rooted in, and are strengthened by, adherence to the law, including the legal authorities that allow us to pursue members of al-Qa’ida—including U.S. citizens—and to do so using “technologically advanced weapons.”

In addition, Jeh Johnson, the general counsel at the Department of Defense, has addressed the legal basis for our military efforts against al-Qa’ida. Stephen Preston, the general counsel at the CIA, has discussed how the Agency operates under U.S. law. These speeches build on a lecture two years ago by Harold Koh, the State Department Legal Adviser, who noted that “U.S. targeting practices, including lethal operations conducted with the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, comply with all applicable law, including the laws of war.”

Given these efforts, I venture to say that the United States government has never been so open regarding its counterterrorism policies and their legal justification. Still, there continues to be considerable public and legal debate surrounding these technologies and how they are sometimes used in our fight against al-Qa’ida.

Now, I want to be very clear. In the course of the war in Afghanistan and the fight against al-Qa’ida, I think the American people expect us to use advanced technologies, for example, to prevent attacks on U.S. forces and to remove terrorists from the battlefield. We do, and it has saved the lives of our men and women in uniform.

What has clearly captured the attention of many, however, is a different practice, beyond hot battlefields like Afghanistan—identifying specific members of al-Qa’ida and then targeting them with lethal force, often using aircraft remotely operated by pilots who can be hundreds if not thousands of miles away. This is what I want to focus on today.

Jack Goldsmith—a former assistant attorney general in the administration of George W. Bush and now a professor at Harvard Law School—captured the situation well. He wrote:

*The government needs a way to credibly convey to the public that its decisions about who is being targeted -- especially when the target is a U.S. citizen -- are sound.... First, the government can and should tell us more about the process by which it reaches its high-value targeting decisions... The more the government tells us about the eyeballs on the issue and the robustness of the process, the more credible will be its claims about the accuracy of its factual determinations and the soundness of its legal ones. All of this information can be disclosed in some form without endangering critical intelligence.*

Well, President Obama agrees. And that is why I am here today.
I stand here as someone who has been involved with our nation’s security for more than thirty years. I have a profound appreciation for the truly remarkable capabilities of our counterterrorism professionals—and our relationships with other nations—and we must never compromise them. I will not discuss the sensitive details of any specific operation today. I will not, nor will I ever, publicly divulge sensitive intelligence sources and methods. For when that happens, our national security is endangered and lives can be lost.

At the same time, we reject the notion that any discussion of these matters is to step onto a slippery slope that inevitably endangers our national security. Too often, that fear can become an excuse for saying nothing at all—which creates a void that is then filled with myths and falsehoods. That, in turn, can erode our credibility with the American people and with foreign partners, and it can undermine the public’s understanding and support for our efforts. In contrast, President Obama believes that—done carefully, deliberately and responsibly—we can be more transparent and still ensure our nation’s security.

So let me say it as simply as I can. Yes, in full accordance with the law—and in order to prevent terrorist attacks on the United States and to save American lives—the United States Government conducts targeted strikes against specific al-Qa’ida terrorists, sometimes using remotely piloted aircraft, often referred to publicly as drones. And I’m here today because President Obama has instructed us to be more open with the American people about these efforts.

Broadly speaking, the debate over strikes targeted at individual members of al-Qa’ida has centered on their legality, their ethics, the wisdom of using them, and the standards by which they are approved. With the remainder of my time today, I would like to address each of these in turn.

First, these targeted strikes are legal. Attorney General Holder, Harold Koh and Jeh Johnson have all addressed this question at length. To briefly recap, as a matter of domestic law, the Constitution empowers the President to protect the nation from any imminent threat of attack. The Authorization for Use of Military Force—the AUMF—passed by Congress after the September 11th attacks authorizes the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force” against those nations, organizations and individuals responsible for 9/11. There is nothing in the AUMF that restricts the use of military force against al-Qa’ida to Afghanistan.

As a matter of international law, the United States is in an armed conflict with al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, and associated forces, in response to the 9/11 attacks, and we may also use force consistent with our inherent right of national self defense. There is nothing in international law that bans the use of remotely piloted aircraft for this purpose or that prohibits us from using lethal force against our enemies outside of an active battlefield, at least when the country involved consents or is unable or unwilling to take action against the threat.

Second, targeted strikes are ethical. Without question, the ability to target a specific individual—from hundreds or thousands of miles away—raises profound questions. Here, I think it’s useful to consider such strikes against the basic principles of the law of war that govern the use of force.
Targeted strikes conform to the principle of necessity—the requirement that the target have definite military value. In this armed conflict, individuals who are part of al-Qa’ida or its associated forces are legitimate military targets. We have the authority to target them with lethal force just as we targeted enemy leaders in past conflicts, such as German and Japanese commanders during World War II.

Targeted strikes conform to the principle of distinction—the idea that only military objectives may be intentionally targeted and that civilians are protected from being intentionally targeted. With the unprecedented ability of remotely piloted aircraft to precisely target a military objective while minimizing collateral damage, one could argue that never before has there been a weapon that allows us to distinguish more effectively between an al-Qa’ida terrorist and innocent civilians.

Targeted strikes conform to the principle of proportionality—the notion that the anticipated collateral damage of an action cannot be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage. By targeting an individual terrorist or small numbers of terrorists with ordnance that can be adapted to avoid harming others in the immediate vicinity, it is hard to imagine a tool that can better minimize the risk to civilians than remotely piloted aircraft.

For the same reason, targeted strikes conform to the principle of humanity which requires us to use weapons that will not inflict unnecessary suffering. For all these reasons, I suggest to you that these targeted strikes against al-Qa’ida terrorists are indeed ethical and just.

Of course, even if a tool is legal and ethical, that doesn’t necessarily make it appropriate or advisable in a given circumstance. This brings me to my next point.

Targeted strikes are wise. Remotely piloted aircraft in particular can be a wise choice because of geography, with their ability to fly hundreds of miles over the most treacherous terrain, strike their targets with astonishing precision, and then return to base. They can be a wise choice because of time, when windows of opportunity can close quickly and there may be just minutes to act.

They can be a wise choice because they dramatically reduce the danger to U.S. personnel, even eliminating the danger altogether. Yet they are also a wise choice because they dramatically reduce the danger to innocent civilians, especially considered against massive ordinance that can cause injury and death far beyond its intended target.

In addition, compared against other options, a pilot operating this aircraft remotely—with the benefit of technology and with the safety of distance—might actually have a clearer picture of the target and its surroundings, including the presence of innocent civilians. It’s this surgical precision—the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an al-Qa’ida terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue around it—that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential.

There’s another reason that targeted strikes can be a wise choice—the strategic consequences that inevitably come with the use of force. As we’ve seen, deploying large armies abroad won’t
always be our best offense. Countries typically don’t want foreign soldiers in their cities and towns. In fact, large, intrusive military deployments risk playing into al-Qa’ida’s strategy of trying to draw us into long, costly wars that drain us financially, inflame anti-American resentment and inspire the next generation of terrorists. In comparison, there is the precision of targeted strikes.

I acknowledge that we—as a government—along with our foreign partners, can and must do a better job of addressing the mistaken belief among some foreign publics that we engage in these strikes casually, as if we are simply unwilling to expose U.S forces to the dangers faced every day by people in those regions. For, as I’ll describe today, there is absolutely nothing casual about the extraordinary care we take in making the decision to pursue an al-Qa’ida terrorist, and the lengths to which we go to ensure precision and avoid the loss of innocent life.

Still, there is no more consequential a decision than deciding whether to use lethal force against another human being—even a terrorist dedicated to killing American citizens. So in order to ensure that our counterterrorism operations involving the use of lethal force are legal, ethical and wise, President Obama has demanded that we hold ourselves to the highest possible standards and processes.

This reflects his approach to broader questions regarding the use of force. In his speech in Oslo accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the President said that “all nations, strong and weak alike, must adhere to standards that govern the use of force.” And he added:

Where force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct. And even as we confront a vicious adversary that abides by no rules, I believe the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is a source of our strength.

The United States is the first nation to regularly conduct strikes using remotely piloted aircraft in an armed conflict. Other nations also possess this technology. Many more nations are seeking it, and more will succeed in acquiring it. President Obama and those of us on his national security team are very mindful that as our nation uses this technology, we are establishing precedents that other nations may follow, and not all of them will be nations that share our interests or the premium we put on protecting human life, including innocent civilians.

If we want other nations to use these technologies responsibly, we must use them responsibly. If we want other nations to adhere to high and rigorous standards for their use, then we must do so as well. We cannot expect of others what we will not do ourselves. President Obama has therefore demanded that we hold ourselves to the highest possible standards—that, at every step, we be as thorough and deliberate as possible.

This leads me to the final point I want to discuss today — the rigorous standards and process of review to which we hold ourselves today when considering and authorizing strikes against a specific member of al-Qa’ida outside the “hot” battlefield of Afghanistan. What I hope to do is to give you a general sense, in broad terms, of the high bar we require ourselves to meet when
making these profound decisions today. That includes not only whether a specific member of al-Qa’ida can legally be pursued with lethal force, but also whether he should be.

Over time, we’ve worked to refine, clarify, and strengthen this process and our standards, and we continue to do so. If our counterterrorism professionals assess, for example, that a suspected member of al-Qa’ida poses such a threat to the United States as to warrant lethal action, they may raise that individual’s name for consideration. The proposal will go through a careful review and, as appropriate, will be evaluated by the very most senior officials in our government for decision.

First and foremost, the individual must be a legitimate target under the law. Earlier, I described how the use of force against members of al-Qa’ida is authorized under both international and U.S. law, including both the inherent right of national self-defense and the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which courts have held extends to those who are part of al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, and associated forces. If, after a legal review, we determine that the individual is not a lawful target, end of discussion. We are a nation of laws, and we will always act within the bounds of the law.

Of course, the law only establishes the outer limits of the authority in which counterterrorism professionals can operate. Even if we determine that it is lawful to pursue the terrorist in question with lethal force, it doesn’t necessarily mean we should. There are, after all, literally thousands of individuals who are part of al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, or associated forces—thousands. Even if it were possible, going after every single one of these individuals with lethal force would neither be wise nor an effective use of our intelligence and counterterrorism resources.

As a result, we have to be strategic. Even if it is lawful to pursue a specific member of al-Qa’ida, we ask ourselves whether that individual’s activities rise to a certain threshold for action, and whether taking action will, in fact, enhance our security.

For example, when considering lethal force we ask ourselves whether the individual poses a significant threat to U.S. interests. This is absolutely critical, and it goes to the very essence of why we take this kind of exceptional action. We do not engage in lethal action in order to eliminate every single member of al-Qa’ida in the world. Most times, and as we have done for more than a decade, we rely on cooperation with other countries that are also interested in removing these terrorists with their own capabilities and within their own laws. Nor is lethal action about punishing terrorists for past crimes; we are not seeking vengeance. Rather, we conduct targeted strikes because they are necessary to mitigate an actual ongoing threat — to stop plots, prevent future attacks, and save American lives.

And what do we mean by a significant threat? I am not referring to some hypothetical threat—the mere possibility that a member of al-Qa’ida might try to attack us at some point in the future. A significant threat might be posed by an individual who is an operational leader of al-Qa’ida or one of its associated forces. Or perhaps the individual is himself an operative—in the midst of actually training for or planning to carry out attacks against U.S. interests. Or perhaps the individual possesses unique operational skills that are being leveraged in a planned attack. The
purpose of a strike against a particular individual is to stop him before he can carry out his attack and kill innocents. The purpose is to disrupt his plots and plans before they come to fruition.

In addition, our unqualified preference is to only undertake lethal force when we believe that capturing the individual is not feasible. I have heard it suggested that the Obama Administration somehow prefers killing al-Qa’ida members rather than capturing them. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is our preference to capture suspected terrorists whenever feasible.

For one reason, this allows us to gather valuable intelligence that we might not be able to obtain any other way. In fact, the members of al-Qa’ida that we or other nations have captured have been one of our greatest sources of information about al-Qa’ida, its plans, and its intentions. And once in U.S. custody, we often can prosecute them in our federal courts or reformed military commissions—both of which are used for gathering intelligence and preventing terrorist attacks.

You see our preference for capture in the case of Ahmed Warsame, a member of al-Shabaab who had significant ties to al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula. Last year, when we learned that he would be traveling from Yemen to Somalia, U.S. forces captured him in route and we subsequently charged him in federal court.

The reality, however, is that since 2001 such unilateral captures by U.S. forces outside of “hot” battlefields, like Afghanistan, have been exceedingly rare. This is due in part to the fact that in many parts of the world our counterterrorism partners have been able to capture or kill dangerous individuals themselves.

Moreover, after being subjected to more than a decade of relentless pressure, al-Qa’ida’s ranks have dwindled and scattered. These terrorists are skilled at seeking remote, inhospitable terrain—places where the United States and our partners simply do not have the ability to arrest or capture them. At other times, our forces might have the ability to attempt capture, but only by putting the lives of our personnel at too great a risk. Often times, attempting capture could subject civilians to unacceptable risks. There are many reasons why capture might not be feasible, in which case lethal force might be the only remaining option to address the threat and prevent an attack.

Finally, when considering lethal force we are of course mindful that there are important checks on our ability to act unilaterally in foreign territories. We do not use force whenever we want, wherever we want. International legal principles, including respect for a state’s sovereignty and the laws of war, impose constraints. The United States of America respects national sovereignty and international law.

Those are some of the questions we consider; the high standards we strive to meet. And in the end, we make a decision—we decide whether a particular member of al-Qa’ida warrants being pursued in this manner. Given the stakes involved and the consequence of our decision, we consider all the information available to us, carefully, responsibly.

We review the most up-to-date intelligence, drawing on the full range of our intelligence capabilities. And we do what sound intelligence demands—we challenge it, we question it,
including any assumptions on which it might be based. If we want to know more, we may ask the Intelligence Community to go back and collect additional intelligence or refine its analysis so that a more informed decision can be made.

We listen to departments and agencies across our national security team. We don’t just hear out differing views, we ask for them and encourage them. We discuss. We debate. We disagree. We consider the advantages and disadvantages of taking action. We also carefully consider the costs of inaction and whether a decision not to carry out a strike could allow a terrorist attack to proceed and potentially kill scores of innocents.

Nor do we limit ourselves narrowly to counterterrorism considerations. We consider the broader strategic implications of any action, including what effect, if any, an action might have on our relationships with other countries. And we don’t simply make a decision and never revisit it again. Quite the opposite. Over time, we refresh the intelligence and continue to consider whether lethal force is still warranted.

In some cases—such as senior al-Qa’ida leaders who are directing and planning attacks against the United States—the individual clearly meets our standards for taking action. In other cases, individuals have not met our standards. Indeed, there have been numerous occasions where, after careful review, we have, working on a consensus basis, concluded that lethal force was not justified in a given case.

Finally, as the President’s counterterrorism advisor, I feel that it is important for the American people to know that these efforts are overseen with extraordinary care and thoughtfulness. The President expects us to address all of the tough questions I have discussed today. Is capture really not feasible? Is this individual a significant threat to U.S. interests? Is this really the best option? Have we thought through the consequences, especially any unintended ones? Is this really going to help protect our country from further attacks? Is it going to save lives?

Our commitment to upholding the ethics and efficacy of this counterterrorism tool continues even after we decide to pursue a specific terrorist in this way. For example, we only authorize a particular operation against a specific individual if we have a high degree of confidence that the individual being targeted is indeed the terrorist we are pursuing. This is a very high bar. Of course, how we identify an individual naturally involves intelligence sources and methods, which I will not discuss. Suffice it to say, our Intelligence Community has multiple ways to determine, with a high degree of confidence, that the individual being targeted is indeed the al-Qa’ida terrorist we are seeking.

In addition, we only authorize a strike if we have a high degree of confidence that innocent civilians will not be injured or killed, except in the rarest of circumstances. The unprecedented advances we have made in technology provide us greater proximity to targets for a longer period of time, and as a result allow us to better understand what is happening in real time on the ground in ways that were previously impossible. We can be much more discriminating and we can make more informed judgments about factors that might contribute to collateral damage.
I can tell you today that there have indeed been occasions when we have decided against conducting a strike in order to avoid the injury or death of innocent civilians. This reflects our commitment to doing everything in our power to avoid civilian casualties—even if it means having to come back another day to take out that terrorist, as we have done. And I would note that these standards—for identifying a target and avoiding the loss of innocent civilians—exceed what is required as a matter of international law on a typical battlefield. That’s another example of the high standards to which we hold ourselves.

Our commitment to ensuring accuracy and effectiveness continues even after a strike. In the wake of a strike, we harness the full range of our intelligence capabilities to assess whether the mission in fact achieved its objective. We try to determine whether there was any collateral damage, including civilian deaths. There is, of course, no such thing as a perfect weapon, and remotely piloted aircraft are no exception.

As the President and others have acknowledged, there have indeed been instances when—despite the extraordinary precautions we take—civilians have been accidently injured, or worse, killed in these strikes. It is exceedingly rare, but it has happened. When it does, it pains us and we regret it deeply, as we do any time innocents are killed in war. And when this happens we take it seriously. We go back and review our actions. We examine our practices. And we constantly work to improve and refine our efforts so that we are doing everything in our power to prevent the loss of innocent life. This too is a reflection of our values as Americans.

Ensuring the ethics and efficacy of these strikes also includes regularly informing appropriate members of Congress and the committees who have oversight of our counterterrorism programs. Indeed, our counterterrorism programs—including the use of lethal force—have grown more effective over time because of congressional oversight and our ongoing dialogue with Members and staff.

This is the seriousness, the extraordinary care, that President Obama and those of us on his national security team bring to this weightiest of questions—whether to pursue lethal force against a terrorist who is plotting to attack our country.

When that person is a U.S. citizen, we ask ourselves additional questions. Attorney General Holder has already described the legal authorities that clearly allow us to use lethal force against an American citizen who is a senior operational leader of al-Qa’ida. He has discussed the thorough and careful review, including all relevant constitutional considerations, that is to be undertaken by the U.S. government when determining whether the individual poses an imminent threat of violent attack against the United States.

To recap, the standards and processes I’ve described today—which we have refined and strengthened over time—reflect our commitment to: ensuring the individual is a legitimate target under the law; determining whether the individual poses a significant threat to U.S. interests; determining that capture is not feasible; being mindful of the important checks on our ability to act unilaterally in foreign territories; having that high degree of confidence, both in the identity of the target and that innocent civilians will not be harmed; and, of course, engaging in additional review if the al-Qa’ida terrorist is a U.S. citizen.
Going forward, we’ll continue to strengthen and refine these standards and processes. As we do, we’ll look to institutionalize our approach more formally so that the high standards we set for ourselves endure over time, including as an example for other nations that pursue these capabilities. As the President said at Oslo, in the conduct of war, America must be the standard bearer.

This includes our continuing commitment to greater transparency. With that in mind, I have made a sincere effort today to address some of the main questions that citizens and scholars have raised regarding the use of targeted lethal force against al-Qa’ida. I suspect there are those, perhaps some in this audience, who feel we have not been transparent enough. I suspect there are those—both inside and outside our government—who feel I have been perhaps too open. If both groups feel a little unsatisfied, then I’ve probably struck the right balance.

Again, there are some lines we simply will not and cannot cross because, at times, our national security demands secrecy. But we are a democracy. The people are sovereign. And our counterterrorism tools do not exist in a vacuum. They are stronger and more sustainable when the American people understand and support them. They are weaker and less sustainable when the American people do not. As a result of my remarks today, I hope the American people have a better understanding of this critical tool—why we use it, what we do, how carefully we use it, and why it is absolutely essential to protecting our country and our citizens.

I would just like to close on a personal note. I know that for many people—in our government and across the country—the issue of targeted strikes raised profound moral questions. It forces us to confront deeply held personal beliefs and our values as a nation. If anyone in government who works in this area tells you they haven’t struggled with this, then they haven’t spent much time thinking about it. I know I have, and I will continue to struggle with it as long as I remain involved in counterterrorism.

But I am certain about one thing. We are at war. We are at war against a terrorist organization called al-Qa’ida that has brutally murdered thousands of Americans—men, women and children—as well as thousands of other innocent people around the world. In recent years, with the help of targeted strikes we have turned al-Qa’ida into a shadow of what it once was. They are on the road to destruction.

Until that finally happens, however, there are still terrorists in hard-to-reach places who are actively planning attacks against us. If given the chance, they will gladly strike again and kill more of our citizens. And the President has a Constitutional and solemn obligation to do everything in his power to protect the safety and security of the American people.

Yes, war is hell. It is awful. It involves human beings killing other human beings, sometimes innocent civilians. That is why we despise war. That is why we want this war against al-Qa’ida to be over as soon as possible, and not a moment longer. And over time, as al-Qa’ida fades into history and as our partners grow stronger, I’d hope that the United States would have to rely less on lethal force to keep our country safe.
Until that happens, as President Obama said here five years ago, if another nation cannot or will not take action, we will. And it is an unfortunate fact that to save many innocent lives we are sometimes obliged to take lives—the lives of terrorists who seek to murder our fellow citizens. On behalf of President Obama and his administration, I am here to say to the American people that we will continue to work to safeguard this Nation and its citizens responsibly, adhering to the laws of this land and staying true to the values that define us as Americans.

Thank you very much.