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Barack Obama's First Drone Strike



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

For the past quarter century, ever since 2001, presidents of the United States inaugurate their terms not with bottles of champagne but with drone and missile strikes. Donald Trump followed the rhythm. Not long after he ascended to the chair in the Oval Office, he sent off missiles against ISIS fighters “hiding in caves” – as he put it on social media – in the Golis mountains in northeast Somalia. No civilians were killed, said Trump. They always say that. Trump’s first missile strike of this presidency reminded me of Barack Obama’s first missile strike, only three days after the Nobel Peace Prize winner was sworn in as the president of the United States in 2009. In the morning of January 23, CIA director Michael Hayden told Obama that they were ready to strike high-level al-Qaeda and Taliban commanders in northern Pakistan. Obama did not object. At 830pm, local time, a drone flew over Karez Kot in Ziraki village, Waziristan. The people on the ground heard it. They called the

drones *bhungana*, that which sounds like a buzzing bee. Three Hellfire missiles were fired remotely, and they smashed into some homes. Fifteen people died in that attack.

One of the missiles went through the wall of a home and exploded in the drawing room of the house. Inside that room sat a group of family members who were celebrating before one of the young men – Aizazur Rehman Qureshi (age 21) – was to leave for the United Arab Emirates. The drone strike killed him. It also killed two men, Mohammed Khalil and Mansoor Rehman, leaving their fourteen children without a father. Their nephew, Faheem Qureshi (age 7), felt his face on fire, and ran out of the room (he lost an eye). Not one of the men and boys in the room had a connection to either al-Qaeda or to the Taliban. They were hard working people, one of the men had been a worker in the UAE and on his return, his nephew was preparing to go and help the family by working in the Gulf. Now, a hasty decision by the CIA left the family distraught. The US government never apologised for the attack and did not compensate the family.

In 2012, *Newsweek's* Daniel Klaidman published *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency*. If I were Obama, I would like this book. It is sympathetic to him. After that drone strike, Klaidman points out, “Obama was understandably disturbed.” The next day, a person who was there in the Situation Room told Klaidman, Obama walked in but “you could tell from his body language that he was not a happy man.” Apparently, this was the spur for Obama to learn about the CIA’s “signature strikes” (when the US government felt it could kill anyone who looked like a terrorist) and “crowd killing” (when it was acceptable to kill civilians in a crowd if a “high value target” was also there). Obama said that he did not like this that he was unhappy that there might be women and children in the crowd. But, as Klaidman writes, “Obama relented – for the time being.” In fact, the “time being” seems to have extended through the two terms of his presidency. What differentiated Obama from Bush before him and Trump afterwards was merely his hesitancy. His actions were the same.

In 2010, Obama’s team developed the Disposition Matrix or the “kill list” and the procedures to activate the use of strikes to kill or capture “high value targets.” The chain of decision making for this kill list did not include any sense that the men on the list could have been accidentally placed there or that they would get a chance to defend themselves from the CIA’s accusations in a court of law. In other words, there was no judicial review. In 2011, this should have raised eyebrows when these procedures led to the assassination of several US citizens in Yemen (first Anwar al-Awlaki, born in New Mexico, and then – in a separate drone strike – his sixteen-year-old son Abdulrahman al-Awlaki); in 2017, the US government

killed al-Awlaki's eight-year-old daughter, Nawar al-Awlaki. All three were US citizens, who should have been afforded some US constitutional protections even if the US disregards international law. None was available to them.

In 2012, the film *Ghaddar* (Traitor) has a popular song sung by Rahim Shah called *Shaba Tabhi Oka* (Come on Destroy Everything). The film is in Pashto, the language of northern Pakistan and large parts of Afghanistan. It is also the language of those who died in Obama's 2009 drone strike. In the song sequence, two lovers, played by the popular actors Arbaaz Khan and Sobia Khan, dance and sing with the culture of drones and bombs now associated with love. "Look at me, bomb my heart," says Sobia Khan, while the refrain runs, "come on, destroy everything."

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Vijay Prashad's most recent book (with Noam Chomsky) is *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and the Fragility of US Power* (New Press, August 2022).