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Predator Nation

By Tom Engelhardt

May 13, 2012

Here's the essence of it: you can trust America's *crème de la crème*, the most elevated, responsible people, no matter what weapons, what powers, you put in their hands. No need to constantly look over *their* shoulders.

Placed in the hands of evildoers, those weapons and powers could create a living nightmare; controlled by the best of people, they lead to measured, thoughtful, precise decisions in which bad things are (with rare and understandable exceptions) done only to truly terrible types. In the process, you simply couldn't be better protected.

And in case you were wondering, there is no question who among us are the best, most lawful, moral, ethical, considerate, and judicious people: the officials of our national-security state. Trust them implicitly. They will never give you a bum steer.

You may be paying a fortune to maintain their world — the 30,000 people hired to listen in on conversations and other communications in this country, the 230,000 employees of the Department of Homeland Security, the 854,000 people with top-secret clearances, the 4.2 million with security clearances of one sort or another, the \$2 billion, one-million-square-foot data center that the National Security Agency is constructing in Utah, the gigantic \$1.8 billion headquarters the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency recently built for its 16,000 employees in the Washington area — but there's a good reason. That's what's needed to make truly elevated,

surgically precise decisions about life and death in the service of protecting American interests on this dangerous globe of ours.

And in case you wondered just how we know all this, we have it on the best authority: the people who are doing it — the only ones, given the obvious need for secrecy, capable of judging just how moral, elevated, and remarkable their own work is. They deserve our congratulations, but if we're too distracted to give it to them, they are quite capable of high-fiving themselves.

We're talking, in particular, about the use by the Obama administration (and the Bush administration before it) of a [growing armada](#) of remotely piloted planes, aka drones, grimly labeled Predators and Reapers, to fight a nameless, almost planet-wide war (formerly known as the Global War on Terror). Its purpose: to destroy al-Qaeda-in-whatever and all its wannabes and look-alikes, the Taliban, and anyone affiliated or associated with any of the above, or just about anyone else we believe might [imminently](#) endanger our "interests."

In the service of this war, in the midst of a [perpetual](#) state of war and of wartime, every act committed by these leaders is, it turns out, absolutely, totally, and completely legal. We have their say-so for that, and they have the documents to prove it, largely because the best and most elevated legal minds among them have [produced that documentation](#) in secret. (Of course, they dare not show it to the rest of us, lest lives be endangered.)

By their own account, they have, in fact, been covertly exceptional, moral, and legal for more than a decade ([minus](#), of course, the odd [black site](#) and [torture chamber](#)) — so covertly exceptional, in fact, that they haven't quite gotten the credit they deserve. Now, they would like to make the latest version of their exceptional mission to the world known to the rest of us. It is finally in our interest, it seems, to be a good deal better informed about America's covert wars in a year in which the widely announced "covert" killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan is a major selling point in the president's reelection campaign.

No one should be surprised. There was always an "overt" lurking in the "covert" of what now passes for "covert war." The CIA's global drone assassination campaign has long been a [bragging point](#) in Washington, even if it [couldn't officially be discussed](#) directly before, say, Congress. The covertness of our drone wars in the Pakistani tribal borderlands, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere really turns out to have less to do with secrecy — [just about every](#) covert drone strike is reported, sooner or later, in the media — than assuring two administrations that they could pursue their drone wars without accountability to anyone.

A Classic of Self-Congratulation

Recently, top administration officials seem to be [fanning out](#) to offer rare peeks into what's truly on-target and exceptional about America's drone wars. In many ways, these days, American exceptionalism is [about as unexceptional](#) as apple pie. It has, for one thing, become the everyday language of the presidential [campaign trail](#). And that shouldn't surprise us either. After all, great powers and their leaders tend to think well of themselves. The French had their *mission civilisatrice*, the Chinese had the "mandate of heaven," and like all imperial powers they

inevitably thought they were doing the best for themselves and others, sadly benighted, in this best of all possible worlds.

Sometimes, though, the American version of this does seem ... I hate to use the word, but exceptional. If you want to get a taste of just what this means, consider as Exhibit One a [recent speech](#) by the president's counterterrorism "czar," John Brennan, at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. According to his own account, he was dispatched to the center by President Obama to provide greater openness when it comes to the administration's secret drone wars, to respond to critics of the drones and their legality, and undoubtedly to put a smiley face on drone operations generally.

Ever since the Puritan minister John Winthrop first used the phrase in a sermon on shipboard on the way to North America, "a city upon a hill" has caught something of at least one American-style dream — a sense that this country's fate was to be a blessed paragon for the rest of the world, an exception to every norm. In the last century, it became "a shining city upon a hill" and was regularly cited in presidential addresses.

Whatever that "city," that dream, was once imagined to be, it has undergone a largely unnoticed metamorphosis in the 21st century. It has become — even in our dreams — an up-armored garrison encampment, just as Washington itself has become the heavily fortified bureaucratic heartland of a war state. So when Brennan spoke, what he offered was a new version of American exceptionalism: the first "shining drone upon a hill" speech, which also qualifies as an instant classic of self-congratulation.

Never, according to him, has a country with such an advanced weapon system as the drone used it quite so judiciously, quite so — if not peacefully — at least with the sagacity and skill usually reserved for the gods. American drone strikes, he assured his listeners, are "ethical and just," "wise," and "surgically precise" — exactly what you'd expect from a country he refers to, quoting the president, as *the* preeminent "standard bearer in the conduct of war."

Those drone strikes, he assured his listeners, are based on staggeringly "rigorous standards" involving the individual identification of human targets. Even when visited [on American citizens](#) outside declared war zones, they are invariably "within the bounds of the law," as you would expect of the preeminent "nation of laws."

The strikes are never motivated by vengeance, always target someone known to us as the worst of the worst, and almost invariably avoid anyone who is even the most mediocre of the mediocre. (Forget the fact that, as Greg Miller of *The Washington Post* [reported](#), the CIA has recently received permission from the president to launch drone strikes in Yemen based only on the observed "patterns of suspicious behavior" of groups of unidentified individuals, as was already true in the Pakistani tribal borderlands.)

Yes, in such circumstances innocents do unfortunately die, even if unbelievably rarely — and for that we couldn't be more regretful. Such deaths, however, are in some sense salutary, since they lead to the most rigorous reviews and reassessments of, and so improvements in, our actions. "This too," Brennan assured his audience, "is a reflection of our values as Americans."

“I would note,” he added, “that these standards, for identifying a target and avoiding ... the loss of lives 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.”

And that’s just a taste of the tone and substance of the speech given by the president’s leading counterterrorism expert, and in it he’s no outlier. It catches something about an American sense of self at this moment. Yes, Americans may be [ever more down](#) on the Afghan war, but like their leaders, they are high on drones. In a February *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, [83%](#) of respondents supported the administration’s use of drones. Perhaps that’s not surprising either, since the drones are generally presented here as the [coolest of machines](#), as well as cheap alternatives (in money and lives) to sending more armies onto the Eurasian mainland.

Predator Nation

In these last years, this country has pioneered the development of the most advanced killing machines on the planet for which the national-security state has [plans](#) decades into the future. Conceptually speaking, our leaders have also established their “right” to send these robot assassins into any airspace, no matter the [local claims](#) of national sovereignty, to take out those we define as evil or simply to protect American interests. On this, Brennan couldn’t be clearer. In the process, we have turned much of the rest of the planet into what can only be considered an American [free-fire zone](#).

We have, in short, established a remarkably expansive set of drone-war rules for the global future. Naturally, we trust ourselves with such rules, but there *is* a fly in the ointment, even as the droniacs see it. Others far less sagacious, kindly, lawful, and good than we are do exist on this planet, and they may soon have their own fleets of drones. About [50 countries](#) are [today](#) buying or [developing](#) such robotic aircraft, including Russia, China, and Iran, not to speak of Hezbollah in Lebanon. And who knows what terror groups are looking into suicide drones?

As *The Washington Post*’s David Ignatius [put it](#) in a column about Brennan’s speech: “What if the Chinese deployed drones to protect their workers in southern Sudan against rebels who have killed them in past attacks? What if Iran used them against Kurdish separatists they regard as terrorists? What if Russia used them over Chechnya? What position would the United States take, and wouldn’t it be hypocritical if it opposed drone attacks by other nations that face ‘imminent’ or ‘significant’ threats?”

This is Washington’s global drone conundrum as seen from inside the Beltway. These are the nightmarish scenarios even our leaders can imagine *others* producing with their own drones and our rules. A deeply embedded sense of American exceptionalism, a powerful belief in their own special, self-evident goodness, however, conveniently blinds them to what they are doing right now. Looking in the mirror, they are incapable of seeing a mask of death. And yet our proudest export at present, other than Hollywood [superhero films](#), may be a stone-cold robotic killer with a name straight out of a [horror movie](#).

Consider this as well: those “shining drones” launched on campaigns of assassination and slaughter are increasingly the “face” that we choose to present to the world. And yet it’s beyond us why it might not shine for others.

In reality, it’s not so hard to imagine what we increasingly look like to those others: a Predator nation. And not just to the parents and relatives of the more than [160 children](#) the Bureau of Investigative Journalism has documented as having died in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. After all, war is now the only game in town. Peace? For the managers of our national-security state, it’s neither a word worth mentioning, nor an imaginable condition.

In truth, our leaders should be in mourning for whatever peaceful dreams we ever had. But mention drones and they light up. They’re having a love affair with those machines. They just can’t get enough of them or imagine their world or ours without them.

What they can’t see in the haze of exceptional self-congratulation is this: they are transforming the promise of America into a promise of death. And death, visited from the skies, isn’t precise. It isn’t glorious. It isn’t judicious. It certainly isn’t a shining vision. It’s hell. And it’s a global future for which, someday, no one will thank us.