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## America the Serial Killer

By John Feffer

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Everybody loves Dexter. He's handsome. He's helpful. He works at the Miami Metro Police Department, and he's very good at his job as a blood-splatter analyst. Oh, did I mention that he moonlights as a serial killer? Don't worry: he only kills bad guys. That's part of the code that Dexter's adoptive father, himself a police officer, passed down to his son. As a child who had watched his mother die a horrendous death, Dexter couldn't overcome the murderous impulses that surged within him. His father, channeling those impulses in the only constructive way he could think of, created a better monster of his son's nature: a serial killer of serial killers.

The other essential rule of Dexter's code: don't get caught. He is very precise in the way he dispatches his victims, and he will do almost anything to evade detection. Dexter works for the law, but his second job is most definitely above the law.

During its six seasons on Showtime, the [popular TV show \*Dexter\*](#) has asked a vexing moral question: can a person do good by doing bad? Let's throw in one more twist. Sometimes Dexter makes mistakes and kills people who don't fit his definition of Really Bad. He must then wrestle with his (rudimentary) conscience and, more importantly, try to resolve the paradoxes of his father's code. One last painful element of the Dexter story: his efforts to wipe out bad guys occasionally endanger and even lead to the death of his own nearest and dearest. Dexter has a serious problem, in other words, with blowback.

By this point, you've probably figured out my theory. *Dexter* is all about U.S. foreign policy and the moral calculus of a superpower. Our government has likewise been on a killing streak for a

long time, and there's no end in sight. But we are also, as a country, conflicted about this propensity toward murder. We try to tell ourselves that we only kill bad guys like Osama bin Laden and his ilk. We maintain that we intervene in the affairs of other countries for only the best and purest of reasons. But we also suspect that we have deviated from our code — many times and with devastating consequences.

The first season of *Dexter* aired in 2006, and it's tempting to draw the parallels between the serial killer and our serial wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. But let's go post-partisan here and instead look at what the Obama team is doing today. "More recently, there has been hope for a more humane set of policies from the Obama administration," writes Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) senior analyst Adil Shamoo in an [excerpt from his new book](#), *Equal Worth*. "However, such hope has not materialized in the form of a new policy toward the [Middle East]. The Obama administration is bent on proving its 'national security credentials' by following the old policy of vengeance and not of justice." This tension between vengeance and justice, a major preoccupation of *Dexter*, was on display last week when a U.S. drone strike killed Fahd al-Quso, a top al-Qaeda operative in Yemen.

Quso helped plan al-Qaeda's attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000, and he would certainly fit Dexter's definition of Really Bad. He pledged to attack any and all Americans, soldiers and civilians alike. Maybe, you say, we should have apprehended him. Actually, Quso had been apprehended — several times. The FBI interrogated him prior to 9/11. He escaped from prison in 2003 only to be recaptured in 2004 and then released by the Yemeni government in 2007. Maybe Washington should have tried extraordinary rendition. But the Obama administration has largely backed out of the business of extraordinary rendition in favor of extrajudicial killing.

Dexter would have no compunction about taking out Quso. Extrajudicial killing is what he's all about. America's favorite serial killer is judge, jury, and executioner all wrapped up in one.

But how do we feel about the U.S. president occupying that role? To make a final judgment, we must consider the legal issues, the foreign policy implications, and finally the practical matter of blowback.

The Obama administration [only admitted publicly](#) back in January to the existence of its CIA-directed drone attacks in Pakistan. Talk about open secrets. The New American Foundation estimates that the Obama administration has expanded the drone program [sixfold over](#) what the Bush team had initiated in Pakistan. And that doesn't include the expansion of drone warfare to Yemen and Somalia or the drone strikes that the Air Force conducts over Afghanistan.

Two weeks ago, in an effort to increase transparency in one of the most opaque overseas operations the United States conducts, White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan was more expansive about the program. "One could argue that never before has there been a weapon that allows us to distinguish more effectively between al-Qaeda terrorists and civilians," Brennan [said](#). "It's this surgical precision, the ability, with laser-like focus to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an al-Qaeda terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue around it that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential."

Next time I need surgery, I'm certainly not going to employ Brennan. Tasked with removing a tumor in my toe, he'd lop off my entire leg, remove an arm from an attending nurse, and accidentally cut away a couple limbs from patients waiting in pre-op. That's how "surgical" the drone strikes have been. The New America Foundation estimates that they have a [17% error rating](#) (in other words, we've killed 300-450 non-militants). This corresponds to the calculations of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which has compiled a [list of 317 civilians killed](#) by drones in Pakistan.

There are two major categories of drone strikes. The first, dubbed the personality strike, goes after a known bad guy. The second, the signature strike, targets unidentified individuals and groups according to their pattern of behavior. Neither type qualifies as "surgical." In the first case, U.S. drones [killed Zabet Amanullah](#) on the presumption that he was a top Taliban commander when in fact he was a human rights advocate. Even Dexter would have felt bad about that. In the second case, the United States is expanding its definition of enemy combatants to include groups in Yemen and Somalia, and this makes even the State Department [uncomfortable](#).

We should all be uncomfortable. It's bad enough when the president directs the extrajudicial killings by handpicking a set of discrete targets. But signature strikes give the CIA [even more latitude](#) in drawing up kill lists and racking up "collateral damage." As William Saletan [explains in Slate](#), "in the Pakistani frontier regions, the CIA has license to take out fighters who appear to be involved, or intent on getting involved, in the Afghan insurgency. The drone campaign has spread from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency."

So the United States doesn't do so well with the first rule of Dexter's code — only kill bad guys. It works a great deal harder to abide by the second rule: don't get caught. It has done its utmost to conceal the drone program and create plausible deniability. "To absolve itself in the most sensitive strikes, the CIA has become skilled at using lawyers to cover its tracks. "They use paper when it is going to help them," says the former official. "Or they get on the secure phone. Or they get in an elevator casually with a lawyer and ask for his advice, like, 'There's nothing preventing me from destroying those tapes, is there?'" writes Michael Hastings in an [in-depth article on drones](#) in *Rolling Stone*.

Wait, you might say, what Dexter does is clearly illegal. Murder is illegal. But aren't drone strikes legal? It's a war, they're combatants, we're combatants, we take them out. Why bring in any lawyers?

Back in the 1970s, the United States banned the practice of assassination until Congress passed a law in the wake of 9/11 that empowered the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force" in going after those responsible for the terrorist attacks. But the targeted killing of American citizens, the "collateral damage" inflicted on innocent bystanders who happen to be in the vicinity of targeted drone strikes, and the dispatch of unknown targets based on unreleased evidence of their behavior all raise difficult legal questions. That's a polite way of saying that these are lawsuits waiting to happen.

Moreover, what if other countries made the same claims in assassinating individuals in the United States? Washington might rethink the legality of its actions when China or Russia authorizes a drone attack on a Uighur or Chechen “terrorist” hanging out in Chicago. They too could use the self-defense argument.

So, strictly speaking, targeted killings are legal because the Congress passed a law declaring them legal. But they still fly in the face of international law and establish a dangerous precedent that will one day be used against the United States.

Meanwhile, the blowback continues. In a drone strike last year, the United States killed an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, a leading al-Qaeda militant. A subsequent strike took out two of his close relatives. “The October drone strike that killed Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman, a U.S. citizen, and his teenage cousin shocked and enraged Yemenis of all political stripes,” [writes Jeremy Scahill](#) in *The Nation*. “I firmly believe that the [military] operations implemented by the U.S. performed a great service for al-Qaeda, because those operations gave al-Qaeda unprecedented local sympathy,’ says Jamal, the Yemeni journalist. The strikes ‘have recruited thousands.’ Yemeni tribesmen, he says, share one common goal with al-Qaeda, ‘which is revenge against the Americans, because those who were killed are the sons of the tribesmen, and the tribesmen never, ever give up on revenge.’”

Dexter is an individual driven by his nature to kill. He can’t help himself. The United States is not an individual, but rather a collection of institutions subject to the democratic control of more than 300 million individuals. Like Dexter, the United States was baptized in blood — the slaughter of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans — and has been steeped in blood ever since. But it need not be part of our nature any more than the Holocaust defines Germany today or King Leopold’s monstrous crimes compel modern-day Belgium to behave in like manner. If the U.S. government argues, as Dexter does, that the system is broken and the Really Bad act with impunity, Washington can do something Dexter can’t — use its unprecedented power and influence to strengthen international law rather than undermine it.

If Dexter turns himself in, the show is over. The United States, in its last flush of unipolar glory, fears the same ending should it suddenly adhere to international law. With its expanded drone program, the Obama administration has kept America’s serial killer persona on the air for too long. More and more Americans are just saying no, as Medea Benjamin [chronicles in her new book on drones](#). It’s time for the United States to stop breaking bad and behave like a proper, law-abiding member of the international community.