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Do Obama's Drone Strikes Imperil America?

By Robert Wright
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This week opponents of President Obama's prolific use of drone strikes hit the elite-media trifecta. High profile reportage in the New York Times and the Washington Post and on PBS together amplified a question that has been asked more and more by national security experts: Is Obama sacrificing America's long-term security for short-term political gain?

The long-term security risk was captured in the lead paragraph of a Washington Post story : "Across the vast, rugged terrain of southern Yemen, an escalating campaign of U.S. drone strikes is stirring increasing sympathy for al-Qaeda-linked militants and driving tribesmen to join a network linked to terrorist plots against the United States."

More than 20 interviews conducted in Yemen by the Post--with government officials, tribal leaders, and others--revealed "a strong shift in sentiment toward militants affiliated with the transnational network's most active wing, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or AQAP." Since 2009, when Obama is first known to have authorized drone strikes in Yemen, the number of core AQAP members has more than doubled, growing from around 300 to at least 700. That's not the direction in which the drone strikes were supposed to move the numbers.

A Yemeni human rights worker described the dynamic at play: "The drones are killing al-Qaeda leaders, but they are also turning them into heroes."

The New York Times piece--a long, deeply reported, and somewhat unsettling article about how the Obama administration decides who to kill via drone--concurred with the Post on the value al

Qaeda recruiters are getting out of drone strikes, and also answered the riddle this poses: If the strikes have such a big downside, why has President Obama accelerated their use, first in Pakistan, then in Yemen?

The answer: These strikes do, in the short run, impede the operational capabilities of al Qaeda, and Obama is scared to death of the fallout from a single successful al Qaeda strike.

The foiled airliner bombing on Christmas of 2009, which originated in Yemen, apparently freaked him out big time. At a meeting in its aftermath, Obama was "simmering about how a 23-year-old bomber had penetrated billions of dollars worth of American security measures."

When a few officials tentatively offered a defense, noting that the attack had failed because the terrorists were forced to rely on a novice bomber and an untested formula because of stepped-up airport security, Mr. Obama cut them short.

"Well, he could have gotten it right and we'd all be sitting here with an airplane that blew up and killed over a hundred people," he said, according to a participant. He asked them to use the close call to imagine in detail the consequences if the bomb had detonated.

Shortly thereafter,

David Axelrod, the president's closest political adviser, began showing up at the "Terror Tuesday" meetings, his unspeaking presence a visible reminder of what everyone understood: a successful attack would overwhelm the president's other aspirations and achievements.

Dennis Blair, director of national intelligence until May of 2010, gave the Times a simple analysis of Obama's penchant for drone strikes: "It is the politically advantageous thing to do-- low cost, no U.S. casualties, gives the appearance of toughness. It plays well domestically and it is unpopular only in other countries. Any damage it does to the national interest only shows up over the long term."

Tuesday night's Frontline episode on Al Qaeda in Yemen didn't add much substance to the Times-Post analysis, but it lent a visual dimension, showing us the craters left by lethal drones and the al Qaeda forces who are energized and expanded by the strikes. "We're at war with America and it's allies," says an al Qaeda footsoldier.

Or, as the Post put it, "Militants who had focused on their fight against the Yemeni government now portray the war in the south as a jihad against the United States, which could attract more recruits and finances from across the Muslim World."

But, hey, so long as things don't get out of control before election day, why worry?