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America's drone wars are not creating a safer world

By Mark Shea

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Since 2004, the United States has launched hundreds of attacks via unmanned drones within northwest Pakistan, despite Pakistan's protests. The drones, which are piloted by radio operators in America, are touted as a means of saving the lives of US troops and making warfare more efficient. Without boots on the ground, we can safely target and kill terrorists half a world away. The question is: "Safely for whom?"

A favourite narrative among Americans is that such warfare is surgical and precise and does little "collateral damage". Collateral damage is the standard euphemism for "killing and maiming innocent men, women and children". But according to a recent study this "surgical" narrative is false. Researchers at the Stanford Law School and New York University's School of Law estimated that from June 2004 to mid-September 2012 drone attacks in Pakistan killed 2,593 to 3,365 people; 474 to 884 were civilians, including at least 176 children, and 1,249 to 1,389 people were injured. The remote control murder of innocent husbands, fathers, wives and children has angered Pakistanis and others in that region of the world and helped to radicalise them against the US, helping to create a fertile field for terrorists to recruit new converts.

Many people respond to this by saying: "Oh, but all that sort of thing changed after 2009, when that dangerous cowboy Bush was voted out and Barack Obama rang in a new era of hope and change." Not so much as you might think. In fact, most Americans – like most Britons and, indeed, most people outside Pakistan – are unaware of the realities of how the Obama administration conducts this war. Here are some salient things to remember.

Describing the CIA's drone strikes, the American investigative journalist Jane Mayer notes: "The programme is classified as covert, and the intelligence agency declines to provide any information to the public about where it operates, how it selects targets, who is in charge, or how many people have been killed."

The programme is founded on a claim by the Obama administration that the drone programme is subject to no judicial review, and that those targeted for killing may legally be secretly targeted on the president's unilateral will alone – even if they are American citizens. In other words, we live, right now and not in some dystopian future, in a world where the president of the United States has seized the power to secretly order the immediate death of anyone he chooses, foreign or citizen, without evidence, arrest, trial, judge, jury, or verdict.

Mayer adds: "Because of the CIA programme's secrecy, there is no visible system of accountability in place, despite the fact that the agency has killed many civilians inside a politically fragile, nuclear-armed country with which the US is not at war. Should something go wrong in the CIA's programme – last month, the Air Force lost control of a drone and had to shoot it down over Afghanistan – it's unclear what the consequences would be."

So what happens when the president's drone war ends up killing and maiming civilians? According to the New York Times: "Mr Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in. It in effect counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent." In short, the administration deals with the killing of civilians by calling them terrorists after it has killed them.

Such a method positively invites abuse. And abuse it has created. For the reality is that, as Conor Friedersdorf reports for The Atlantic: "The Obama administration permits the CIA to carry out 'signature strikes' even though they don't know the identity of the people they're trying to kill!"

You read that right. According to the American political journalist Glenn Greenwald: "In February, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism documented that after the US kills people with drones in Pakistan, it then targets for death those who show up at the scene to rescue the survivors and retrieve the bodies, as well as those who gather to mourn the dead at funerals." In other words, the drone war has led, not to accidental collateral damage, but to the wilful and indiscriminate murder of civilians – exactly the opposite of the "surgical approach" it is touted as.

A common (and perfectly sound) argument on the pro-life front for those who are unsure of whether an unborn baby is a person is that you would not fire a gun into a bush without checking to see whether it was a deer or another hunter. If in doubt, don't shoot. The US policy of drone warfare is the opposite: we are in many cases shooting at people we know nothing about in the hope that some may be terrorists. And, as citizens, we Americans are handing over to an absolutely unaccountable executive the power to secretly order the death of anyone he chooses. Imagine, say, the Chinese using drones on American soil to target and kill suspected criminals or members of the Chinese mafia. Would Americans be satisfied with the explanation of the Chinese government if they said that somewhere between 500 to 1,000 innocent Americans

killed were “acceptable losses” and “collateral damage”? Could there be a more efficient way for China to provoke war? A Briton may likewise wonder: “If the day came when America decided to blow up suspected terrorists in London by this method, would we tolerate it for five seconds?”

The Obama administration is aware of the incredible danger of the executive seizing such power for himself. In the days preceding the election, the administration began drafting “guidelines” for its policy of lawless, secret, unilateral killings because it was afraid that such power might fall into the hands of a Republican. That effort has relaxed now that those who regard themselves as truly enlightened are reassured they are calling the shots. They know they can get away with it because the drones are only falling on Pakistan – for now.

But with America dominated by a mindset that declares “the whole world is a battlefield” and which increasingly treats even its own citizens with suspicion, no American or Briton should rule out the possibility that what is being done to Pakistanis today will be done to “suspected terrorists” on their soil tomorrow as the American security state continues its relentless pursuit of safety, no matter who it has to murder to get it.