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Learning From America's History of Assassinations

Gary Hart
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It is unfortunate that senior administration officials making life and death decisions today on when, where, and against whom drone strikes should be launched did not live through, as I did, the period of 1975-76 when Congressional investigations, including the famous Church committee, discovered plots by our government to assassinate foreign leaders. In the case of Fidel Castro those plots had an almost demented insistence and caused the CIA to partner with the Mafia to achieve its objectives, ordered by at least two administrations.

Profound Constitutional and moral issues were raised by these plots and their discoveries. For a new and very young senator, it was shocking to discover that a sewer of still unknown dimensions was flowing underneath the city on a hill. Such a discovery causes you to suspect almost everyone and everything (in my case not enough) and to believe that expediency will trump principle on almost every occasion.

The drone assassination policy is the product of the confluence of the notion of preemption, terrorism as war not crime, and a mistaken notion that "national security" can be defined so broadly that any action is justified. At least one prominent Air Force general desperately wanted to initiate large-scale nuclear attacks on the Soviet Union in the 1940s. Presumably, the preemption doctrine would have justified massive bombing

raids on the Imperial palace and Japanese Ministry of War if we had known they were planning Pearl Harbor. These and more actions are possible if you totally put aside what the United States of America claims to stand for.

I am not willing to trust unnamed "informed, high-level officials" with unchecked and unbalanced assassination decisions. Information is often wrong, and who knows how high "high" is. Who puts the hit list together and using what information? Both parties have their Ollie Norths. Ronald Reagan signed a paper authorizing Iran-Contra but couldn't remember doing so. And what are the standards for determining an "imminent threat of violent attacks"? These are vague and subjective standards and there is no Congressional oversight or judicial review.

Where American citizens are targeted, as they have been, their Constitutional rights are unilaterally suspended by the anonymous "high level official." That is not what Madison or Jefferson had in mind. Having drones available would not have altered their principles, as they seem to have done with those in power today. And, politically, Democrats have to be very careful on this issue to avoid adoption of a double standard. All hell would break loose if this were the W Bush administration.

Expediency is never a justification for unconstitutional and immoral actions. This is so even where self-defense and national security are concerned. It has proved incredibly easy to assassinate someone (and his family) half a world away. And that is what makes this new style of warfare so attractive... and so dangerous. The Obama administration is creating precedents it will live to regret and inviting retaliation, using both drones and computers, as they become available to most nations in the world.

We believe ourselves to be exceptional and when we live up to our Constitutional principles we are. But when we abandon those principles, simply because new technology makes it easy to do so, we become just like everyone else, lose our moral authority, and welcome our behavior to be used against us.