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The Art of Infinite War

By Ta-Nehisi Coates

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I am sitting in Baltimore Washington Airport. I am waiting on my flight to back to Boston. While going through security I refused to go through the full body scanner, and asked for the pat-down. I generally do that as a rule these days. The wait was longer than usual, about 20 minutes or so. This did not worry me. My flight was delayed an hour anyway. But standing there watching people go through, and thinking back on our conversations around drones, and our current war against Al Qaeda and its affiliates, something came to me -- I can't see how this war ends.

We have set as our goal the destruction of Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and the safeguarding of every single American life against murder at their hands. That strikes me as a reasonable undertaking, and one that any state acting in its interests might undertake. One problem with this is that America prides itself on a kind of moral exceptionalism. We do not, in fact, view ourselves as merely acting in our own interests, but as a force for good in the world. But the more vexing problem is that it means a kind of perpetual war.

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Do we really have it in our power to guarantee that no group of young men ever again organize themselves under the banner of Islamism and set the destruction of America as their goal? And why should we restrict our concerns to Islamism? Surely there will be

(and are) other protean fighters who claim no country and who will swear themselves to our destruction. Why should we not also war against them?

Consider what this means. The president is anti-torture -- which is to say he thinks the water-boarding of actual confirmed terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was wrong. He thinks it was wrong, no matter the goal -- which is to say the president would not countenance the torture of an actual terrorist to foil a plot against the country he's sworn to protect. But the president would countenance the collateral killing of innocent men, women and children by drone in pursuit of an actual terrorist. What is the morality that holds the body of a captured enemy inviolable, but not the body of those who happen to be in the way?

I thought about this when MSNBC's progressive pundit Krystal Ball made the following critique recently:

There is something about this drone debate, though, that is driving me nuts. And that is the charge, mostly by Republicans, that if you feel any different about the drone program under President Obama than you would have under President George W. Bush, you are an utter, hopeless hypocrite. Let me ask you a question. How would you feel about a Madeleine Albright panel on women and body image? Okay, now how do you feel about a Larry Flynt panel on women and body image? How do you feel about your kid in Dr. Ruth's sex-ed class versus Todd Akin's? Do you feel different about Warren Buffett setting standards for financial ethics versus Bernie Madoff? Of course you do, because you're normal. But according to the Republican logic used during this drone debate, if you feel any different about the Madeleine Albright and Larry Flynt panels, you are a hypocrite.

My label-mate Conor Friedersdorf sees progressive hypocrisy in this comment. I see it as a statement from someone who was likely less bothered by the fact of war than the fact of George Bush. If this is the case, if we -- liberals and conservatives -- are not so much bothered by war, as we are by incompetent war, what is the motive for war to ever end? The motive for not seeing American soldier shot is clear. But war no longer requires this.

Here is what I would like to know: Can any of us imagine a time when we are not firing weapons into foreign countries; when we are not stripping down to our socks for travel; when we are not sending agents into mosques to foment plots; when we are not spying on Muslim students? What reason is there to view this moment when we do not torture as anything more than a brief interlude? Is this just who we are, now? Or is it, in fact, who we have always been? Can any of us actually imagine the end?