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New Evidence That Team Obama Misled Us about the Drone War

By Conor Friedersdorf

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The Obama Administration is deliberately misleading Americans about the drone war it is waging in Pakistan.

Can anyone read the McClatchy Newspapers summary of top-secret intelligence reports and continue to deny it? Set aside the morality and effectiveness of the CIA's targeted-killing program. Isn't it important for Congress and the people to know the truth about the War on

Terrorism? Many Americans remain furious that the Bush Administration gave Iraq War speeches that elided inconvenient truths and implied facts that turned out to be fictions. Is the objection merely that the Iraq War turned out badly? Or is misleading Congress and the public itself problematic, especially when the subject is as serious as killing people in foreign countries?

To justify frequent drone strikes that regularly kill innocent people, risk serving as a terrorist recruiting tool, and terrorize whole communities understandably averse to drones buzzing above their homes, Obama Administration officials give the impression that al-Qaeda terrorists are the main targets. As it turns out, they haven't just helped hide the fact that the Bush Administration kicked off America's drone campaign in Pakistan by killing someone at the request of Pakistan's government -- as Jonathan S. Landay explains, Obama officials have misled us about their own behavior. "Contrary to assurances it has deployed U.S. drones only against known senior leaders of al Qaida and allied groups, the Obama administration has targeted and killed hundreds of suspected lower-level Afghan, Pakistani and unidentified 'other' militants in scores of strikes in Pakistan's rugged tribal area, classified U.S. intelligence reports show," he reports.

The misleading rhetoric includes words spoken by President Obama himself:

The administration has said that strikes by the CIA's missile-firing Predator and Reaper drones are authorized only against "specific senior operational leaders of al Qaida and associated forces" involved in the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks who are plotting "imminent" violent attacks on Americans. "It has to be a threat that is serious and not speculative," President Barack Obama said in a Sept. 6, 2012, interview with CNN. "It has to be a situation in which we can't capture the individual before they move forward on some sort of operational plot against the United States." Copies of the top-secret U.S. intelligence reports reviewed by McClatchy, however, show that drone strikes in Pakistan over a four-year period didn't adhere to those standards.

Read more here: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/04/09/188062/obamas-drone-war-kills-others.html#storylink=cpy>

In fact, the documents "show that drone operators weren't always certain who they were killing." Under what legal theory does the Obama Administration justify that behavior? It won't tell us.

Instead John Brennan is trotted out to mislead us while acting as if he is being admirably forthcoming. "On April 30, 2012, Brennan gave the most detailed explanation of Obama's drone program. He referred to al Qaida 73 times, the Afghan Taliban three times and mentioned no other group by name," Landay writes. But the classified documents McClatchy reviewed demonstrate that, during the months about which they have information, al-Qaeda members were a minority of people killed by drones, and killing senior al-Qaeda leaders was rare.

I've written before about how the Obama Administration misleadingly invokes and twists the word "imminent." I've also complained about the effort to portray Hellfire missiles as "surgical" instruments. Proponents of drone strikes talk about how unmanned aerial vehicles can hover for hours to verify that the person in their sites is an appropriate target and avoid killing anyone else. That's a misleading account of how things sometimes work in the field, as retired Brig. Gen. Craig Nixon explained to an audience I was in last year at the Aspen Ideas Festival.

The McClatchy report concludes with another example of a drone strike gone wrong:

Consider one attack on Feb. 18, 2010.

Information, according to one U.S. intelligence account, indicated that Badruddin Haqqani, the then-No. 2 leader of the Haqqani network, would be at a relative's funeral that day in North Waziristan. Watching the video feed from a drone high above the mourners, CIA operators in the United States identified a man they believed could be Badruddin Haqqani from the deference and numerous greetings he received. The man also supervised a private family viewing of the body.

Yet despite a targeting process that the administration says meets "the highest possible standards," it wasn't Badruddin Haqqani who died when one of the drone's missiles ripped apart the target's car after he'd left the funeral.

It was his younger brother, Mohammad.

Friends later told reporters that Mohammad Haqqani was a religious student in his 20s uninvolved in terrorism; the U.S. intelligence report called him an active member -- but not a leader -- of the Haqqani network. At least one other unidentified occupant of his vehicle perished, according to the report.

In its drone-strike database, the New America Foundation scores that drone strike as having killed three to four "militants," zero unknown persons, and zero civilians. I've argued that the New America data very likely undercounts the number of civilians that are killed in drone strikes.

There has long been evidence indicating the Obama Administration was misleading the country about the nature of its drone war in Pakistan. This latest report only confirms the suspicions that critics of the program have articulated. And there is reason to believe that even it understates the magnitude of executive branch deception. Says Marcy Wheeler, "This report is perhaps most interesting for the fact that CIA, in its own documents, claims that none of the 40-some people killed at Datta Khel on May 17, 2011 were civilians. In other words, the CIA is lying -- even internally -- about drone strikes as blatantly as it did about torture." *The New York Times* report on that strike stated that "missiles fired from American drone aircraft struck a meeting of local people in northwest Pakistan who had gathered with Taliban mediators to settle a dispute over a chromite mine. The attack, a Pakistani intelligence official said, killed 26 of 32 people present, some of them Taliban fighters, but the majority elders and local people not attached to the militants. The civilian death toll appeared to be among the worst in the scores of strikes carried out recently in Pakistan's tribal areas by the C.I.A., which runs the drones."

The appropriate response when a president is caught misleading the country about a war he's waging is more scrutiny. There's no telling what else the Obama Administration is hiding. It is the job of Congress to find out, and the prerogative of Americans to know the nature of killing done on their behalf.