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Counting Bodies, Then and Now

By Tom Engelhardt

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In the twenty-first-century world of drone warfare, one question with two aspects reigns supreme: Who counts?

In Washington, the answers are the same: We don't *count* and *they* don't count.

The Obama administration has adamantly refused to count. Not a body. In fact, for a long time, American officials associated with Washington's drone assassination campaigns and "signature strikes" in the backlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Yemen claimed that there were no bodies to count, that the CIA's drones were so carefully handled and so "precise" that they never produced an unmeant corpse – not a child, not a parent, not a wedding party. Nada.

When it came to "collateral damage," there was no need to count because there was nothing to tote up or, at worst, such civilian casualties were "in the single digits." That this was balderdash, that often when those drones unleashed their Hellfire missiles they were unsure who exactly was being targeted, that civilians were dying in relatively countable numbers – and that others were indeed counting them – mattered little, at least in this country until recently. Drone war was, after all, innovative and, as presented by two administrations, quite miraculous. In 2009, CIA Director Leon Panetta called it "the only game in town" when it came to al-Qaeda. And what a game it was. It needed no math, no metrics. As the Vietnam War had proved, counting was for losers – other than the usual media reports that so many "militants" had died in a strike or that some al-Qaeda "lieutenant" or "leader" had gone down for the count.

That era ended on April 23rd when President Obama entered the White House briefing room and apologized for the deaths of American aid worker Warren Weinstein and Italian aid worker Giovanni Lo Porto, two Western hostages of al-Qaeda. They had, the president confessed, been obliterated in a strike against a terrorist compound in Pakistan, though in his comments he managed not to mention the word “drone,” describing what happened vaguely as a “U.S. counterterrorism operation.” In other words, it turned out that the administration was capable of counting – at least to two.

And that brings us to the other meaning of “Who counts?” If you are an innocent American or Western civilian and a drone takes you out, you count. If you are an innocent Pakistani, Afghan, or Yemeni, you don’t. You didn’t count before the drone killed you and you don’t count as a corpse either. For you, no one apologizes, no one pays your relatives compensation for your unjust death, no one even acknowledges that you existed. This is modern American drone reality and the question of who counts and whom, if anyone, to count is part of the contested legacy of Washington’s never-ending war on terror.

A Brief History of the Body Count

Once upon a time, of course, enemy deaths were a badge of honor in war, but the American “body count,” which would become infamous in the Vietnam era, had always been a product of frustration, not pride. It originated in the early 1950s, in the “meat-grinder” days of the Korean War, after the fighting had bogged down in a grim stalemate and signs of victory were hard to come by. It reappeared relatively early in the Vietnam War years as American officials began searching for “metrics” that would somehow express victory in a country where taking territory in the traditional fashion meant little. As time went on, the brutality of that war increased, and the promised “light at the end of the tunnel” glowed ever more dimly, the metrics of victory only grew, and the pressure to produce that body count, which could be announced daily by U.S. press spokesmen to increasingly dubious journalists in Saigon did, too. Soon enough, those reporters began referring to the daily announcements of those figures as the “Five O’Clock Follies.”

On the ground, the pressure within the military to produce impressive body counts for those “Follies” resulted in what GIs called the “Mere Gook Rule.” (“If it’s dead and it’s Vietnamese, it’s VC [Viet Cong].”) And soon enough anything counted as a body. As William Calley, Jr., of My Lai massacre fame, testified, “At that time, everything went into a body count – VC, buffalo, pigs, cows. Something we did, you put it on your body count, sir... As long as it was high, that was all they wanted.”

When, however, victory proved illusory, that body count came to appear to ever more Americans on the home front like grim slaughter and a metric from hell. As a sign of success, increasingly detached from reality yet producing reality, it became a death-dealing Catch-22. As those bodies piled up and in the terminology of the times a “credibility gap” yawned between the metrics and reality, the body count became a symbol not just of a war of frustration, but of defeat itself. It came, especially after the news of the My Lai massacre finally broke in the U.S., to look both false and barbaric. Whose bodies were those anyway?

In the post-Vietnam era, not surprisingly, Washington would treat anything associated with the disaster that had been Vietnam as if it were radioactive. So when, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration's top officials began planning their twenty-first-century wars in a state of exhilarated anticipation, they had no intention of reliving anything that reeked of Vietnam. There would be no body bags coming home in the glare of media attention, no body counts in the battle zones. They were ready to play an opposites game when it came to Vietnam. General Tommy Franks, who directed the Afghan invasion and then the one in Iraq, caught the mood perfectly in 2003 when he said, "We don't do body counts."

There would be no more "Five O'clock Follies," not in wars in which victory was assured for "the greatest force for freedom in the history of the world" and "the finest fighting force that the world has ever known" (as presidents took to calling the U.S. military). And that remains official military policy today. Only recently, for instance, Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby responded to a journalist's question about how many Islamic State fighters and civilians U.S. air power had recently killed in Washington's latest war in Iraq this way: "First of all, we don't have the ability to – to count every nose that we shwack [sic]. Number two, that's not the goal. That's not the goal... And we're not getting into an issue of body counts. And that's why I don't have that number handy. I wouldn't – I wouldn't have asked my staff to give me that number before I came out here. It's simply not a relevant figure."

From 2003 to 2015, official policy on the body count has not reflected reality. The U.S. military has, in fact, continued to count bodies. For one thing, it kept and reported the numbers on America's war dead, bodies that truly counted, though no one would have called the tallies a body count. For another, from beginning to end, the military has been secretly counting the dead on the other side as well, perhaps to privately convince themselves, Vietnam-style, that they were indeed winning in wars where a twenty-first-century version of the credibility gap appeared all too quickly and never left the scene. As David Axe has written, the military "proudly boasts of the totals in official documents that it never intends for public circulation." He added, "The disconnect over wartime body counts reflects a yawning gap between the military's public face and its private culture."

To Count or Not to Count, That Is the Question

But here was the oddest thing: whatever the military might have been counting, the fact that it stopped counting in public didn't stop the body count from happening. It turned out that there were others on this planet no less capable of counting dead bodies. In the end, the cast of characters producing the public metrics of this era simply changed and with it the purpose of the count. The newcomers had, you might say, different answers to both parts of the question: Who counts?

Over the last century, as "collateral damage" – the deaths of civilians, rather than combatants – has become ever more the essence of war, the importance of who is dying and in what numbers has only increased. When the U.S. military began refusing to make its body count part of a public celebration of its successes, civil society stepped in with a very different impulse: to shame, blame, and hold the military's feet to the fire by revealing the deeper carnage of war itself and what it does to society, not just to the warriors.

While the previous counters had pretended that all bodies belonged to enemies, the new counters tried to make “collateral damage” the central issue of war. No matter what the researchers who have done such counts may say, most of them are, by their nature, critiques of war, American-style, and included in them were no longer just the bodies, civilian and military, found on the battlefield, but every body that could somehow be linked to a conflict or its fallout, its side effects, its aftereffects.

Think of this as a new numerology of defeat or disaster or slaughter or shame. In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, distinctly non-military outfits took up this counting or estimating process. In 2004 and 2006, the *Lancet*, a British medical journal, published studies based on scientific surveys of “excess Iraqi deaths” since the American invasion of 2003 and, in the first case, came up with an estimated 98,000 of them and in the second with 655,000 (a much-criticized figure); such studies by medical and other researchers have never stopped. More recent counts of such deaths have ranged from 500,000 in 2013 to one million or 5% of the Iraqi population this year.

The most famous enumeration of civilian casualties in Iraq, however, comes from the constantly upgraded tally – based on published media reports, hospital and morgue records, and the like – of Iraq Body Count, the independent website that bills itself as “the public record of violent deaths following the 2003 invasion of Iraq.” At this moment, its most up-to-date top estimate for civilian deaths since that invasion is 156,000 (211,000, including the deaths of combatants). And these figures are considered by the site and others as distinctly conservative, no more than what can be known about a subject of which much is, by necessity, unknown.

In Afghanistan, there has been less tallying, but the U.N. Mission there has kept a count of civilian casualties from the ongoing war and estimates the cumulative figure, since 2001, at 21,000 (though again, that is undoubtedly a conservative figure). However, when it comes to the American drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen, in particular, where the Obama administration has adamantly resisted the idea of significant civilian casualties, the civilian counters have been there under the most impressively difficult circumstances, sometimes with representatives on the ground in distant parts of Pakistan and elsewhere. In a world in which drone operators refer to the victims of their strikes as “bug splat” and top administration officials prefer to obliterate those “bugs” a second time by denying that their deaths even occurred, the attempt to give them back their names, ages, and sexes, to remind the world of what was most human about the dead of our new wars, should be considered a heroic task.

The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, in particular, has done careful as well as dogged work tabulating drone casualties in Pakistan and Yemen, including counts and estimates of all those killed by drones, of civilians killed by drones, and of children killed by drones. It even has a project, “Naming the Dead,” that attempts to reattach names and other basic personal information – sometimes even photos – to the previously nameless dead (721 of them so far). The *Long War Journal* (a militarized exception to the rule when it comes to the counters of this era) has also kept a record of what it could dig up about drone deaths in Pakistan and Yemen, as has the New America Foundation on Pakistan. In 2012 the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic studied the three sources of such counts and issued a report of its own.

Among the more fascinating reports, the human-rights group Reprieve recently considered claims to drone “precision” and surgical accuracy by doing its own analysis of the available data. It concluded that, in trying to target and assassinate 41 enemy figures in Pakistan and Yemen over the years, Washington’s drones had managed to kill 1,147 people without even killing all the figures actually targeted. (As Spencer Ackerman of the *Guardian* wrote, “The drones came for Ayman Zawahiri on 13 January 2006, hovering over a village in Pakistan called Damadola. Ten months later, they came again for the man who would become al-Qaida’s leader, this time in Bajaur. Eight years later, Zawahiri is still alive. Seventy-six children and 29 adults, according to reports after the two strikes, are not.”)

In other words, when it came to counting, civil society rode to the rescue, though the impact of the figures produced has remained limited indeed in this country. In some ways, the only body count of any sort that has made an impression here in recent years has been sniper Chris Kyle’s 160 confirmed Iraqi “kills” that played such a part in the publicity for the blockbuster movie *American Sniper*.

Exceptional Killers

In his public apology for deaths that were clearly embarrassing to him, President Obama managed to fall back on a trope that has become ever more politically commonplace in these years. Even in the context of a situation in which two innocent hostages had been killed, he congratulated himself and all Americans for the exceptional nature of this country. “It is a cruel and bitter truth,” he said, “that in the fog of war generally and our fight against terrorists specifically, mistakes – sometimes deadly mistakes – can occur. But one of the things that sets America apart from many other nations, one of the things that makes us exceptional is our willingness to confront squarely our imperfections and to learn from our mistakes.”

Whatever our missteps, in other words, we Americans are exceptional killers in a world of ordinary ones. This attitude has infused Obama’s global assassination program and the White House “kill list” that goes with it and that the president has personally overseen. Pride in his killing agenda was evident in the decision to leak news of that list to the *New York Times* back in May 2012. And this version of American exceptionalism fits well with the exceptionalism of the drone itself – even if it is a weapon guaranteed to become less exceptional as it spreads to more countries (in part through recently green-lighted U.S. drone sales to allies).

On the rarest of occasions, Obama admitted in that White House briefing room, drone strikes even kill exceptional people (like us) who need to be attended to presidentially, whose deaths deserve apologies, whose lives are to be highlighted in special media accounts, and whose value is such that recompense is due to their families. In most of the places the drone goes, however, those it kills by mistake are, by definition, unexceptional. They deserve neither notice nor apology nor recompense. They count for nothing.

One thing makes the drone a unique weapon in the world of the uncounted dead on a planet where killing otherwise seems like a dime-a-dozen activity: its pilot, its “crew,” those who trigger the launch of its missiles are hundreds, even thousands of miles away from danger. Though we speak loosely about drone “warfare,” the way that machine functions bears little

relation to war as it was once defined. Conceptually, the drone represents a one-way street of destruction. Because in its version of “warfare” only one side can be hurt, its “signature” is slaughter, not war, no matter how carefully it may be used. It is an executioner’s weapon.

In part because of that, it’s also a blowback weapon. Though it may surprise Americans, those to be slaughtered, the hunted, don’t take to the constant buzz of drones in their skies in a kindly fashion. They reportedly exhibit the symptoms of PTSD; they are resentful; they grasp the unfairness and injustice that lies behind the machine and its form of “warfare” and are unimpressed with the exceptionalism of the Americans using it. As a result, drones across the Greater Middle East have been the equivalent of recruitment posters for those who want revenge and so for extremist outfits everywhere.

Drones should be weapons of shame and yet, despite the recent round of criticism here in the wake of the hostage killings, their use is still widely supported in Washington and among the public. The justification for their use, whatever “legal” white papers the Obama administration has produced as cover, is simple enough: power. We send them across sovereign boundaries as we wish in search of those we want to kill because we can, because we are us.

So all praise to the few in our world who think it worth the bother to count those who count for nothing to us. They do matter.