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http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/obamas-unaccountable-drone-war/

Obama's Unaccountable Drone War

The United States's targeted killing program has neither the controls nor the justifications the president promises.

By PHILIP GIRALDI

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Ironically, for a president who once ran for office promising "transparency" in government, the dreaded associated "a" word, "accountability," has been somewhat difficult to discern. Even if

government actions were transparent, which they are not, the ability of senior bureaucrats and politicians to make multiple bad decisions goes unchallenged when there is no accountability .

The recent killing of two foreign captives in an errant drone strike in Pakistan has raised some serious questions about the government's employment of what has become its principal offensive weapon in its global war on terror (which the White House now prefers to call its overseas contingency operations). While President Obama, who has claimed that drones strikes only take place when there is "near certainty" about the target, took personal responsibility for the mishap, it does not require much understanding of Washington's ways to realize that the gesture is in reality quite empty since the Chief Executive is unlikely to bear any actual consequences.

As the government acts *in loco populi* in its increasing use of drones as the end game in a policy that includes kill lists, assassinations of American citizens and military action in countries with which the United States is not at war, there should be at least a modicum of both transparency and accountability to the process. In reality, there is neither and many Americans have no idea what is being done in their name. Most would be shocked to learn about the U.S. using drones for so-called double-taps in which a group on the ground is hit and the drone hovers while rescuers rush to the scene. The rescuers are then killed by a second wave of missiles. Apart from anything else, targeting those assisting the wounded is a war crime.

The serious questions that should be raised about the use of drones have most often been successfully deflected by both government and an accommodating media which have diverted the narrative into an all too frequent technical discussion of the weapon's capabilities. Drones are cheap as weapons systems go, they are versatile, they can hover for hours or even days. They have unparalleled technical intelligence sensors and they can spot, assess, and kill targets with some precision. They are a Hollywood-plus-video game vision of warfare, American-style, with an operator sitting in air-conditioned comfort while he or she searches for a target, acquires it, and zap, a hellfire missile makes the bad guy wish he had not messed with Uncle Sam. Best of all, as in a video game, no American servicemen are actually placed in harm's way in the process.

When not discussing how capable drones are at doing what they do and dissecting how they do it, the media interest is frequently focused on the administrative question of who should be operating them, whether that ought to be the intelligence community or the armed forces. The Pentagon runs the drones in places like Afghanistan and Iraq-Syria that are considered war zones, where it has a broad mandate to use the unmanned vehicles for "protection of forces" as well as offensive operations. The CIA initially became the prime operator in most other theaters because it could plausibly deny what it was doing and could also target countries like Pakistan and Yemen where the governments were ostensibly friendly and supportive but did not want the public to know that they were cooperating with the Americans. And the CIA also had the advantage of operating with less of a bureaucratic "tail" than the military, enabling it to move

more quickly and respond spontaneously to evolving situations. But essentially the question of who should run the counter-terrorist drones is a bit of a red herring as the technology, procedures and results are basically the same and there is no longer any fig leaf of denial regarding who is doing what to whom.

The government's justification for using drones at all, reportedly spelled out in some detail in classified Justice Department memos, has long been based on the constabulary concept. That means that the U.S., by virtue of the authority provided by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to pursue al-Qaeda and more recently "associated groups" wherever they might be, has taken upon itself the task of ridding the world of terrorists. The drone has become the mechanism of choice in those countries where the local authorities do not have the ability to confront and detain their own radicals and whatever other non-indigenous terrorists have chosen to shelter within their borders. In other words, if Pakistan can't do it, Washington will send in a sheriff and take care of the problem.

But how drones work, who operates them, and what the legal justification for their use might be avoids rather more serious discussion of their fundamental immorality. The 800-pound gorilla question regarding the drones is, "Who exactly is being killed and what do we in Washington actually know about those who are dead?" Anecdotally, the people who live in the places that are on the receiving end of the attacks believe that large numbers of civilians are killed, far more than the number of actual militants. The destruction of a wedding party in Yemen in December 2013 was widely reported and led to compensation payments by the United States government.

The federal government undoubtedly compiles meticulous reviews of drone strikes, but the official public announcements, when they are actually made, seem to vary considerably from what those on the ground are experiencing. They routinely indicate that only militants or terrorists have been killed and are often accompanied by the word "confirmed." But how do we know that to be true as the details of such operations are generally considered classified and how does that square with independent estimates suggesting that only two percent of the thousands killed fit the high-level terrorist profile? *The Guardian* has reviewed drone strikes in Pakistan and has concluded that 28 civilians are killed as collateral damage for the death of each certifiable "bad guy" target.

As many of the strikes and victims are located in Pakistan or Yemen where the U.S. has no one on the ground, are American authorities getting some kind of confirmation from the respective governments or intelligence services, and if so, how do Islamabad and Sana'a themselves identify militants? It might well just be someone who lives in the wrong village or who is out at the wrong time at night. Or could it be the supporter of a political party opposed to the government?

A second question, which is related to the first, must be "what is the benefit versus damage assessment relating to drone strikes?" Washington is hated in Pakistan, with opinion polls revealing that only 11 percent of the population views the United States favorably. Other polls indicate that the level of animosity is directly linked to the attacks by drones. If that is so, what is the offset? How many identified leaders of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who are the alleged targets of the drone operations, have been killed and, more to the point, to what extent has that degraded their ability to conduct their own operations? If the threat represented by the two groups is not being dramatically eroded, the damage to Washington's relationship with Pakistan, nuclear armed and frequently borderline unstable, might well be considered a price that is too high to pay.

A third question relates to how the drones are actually directed, because the targeting relies on intelligence and one has to suspect that the information being developed might not be very reliable. A drone capable of hitting a target with pinpoint accuracy is only as good as the intelligence it relies on to make the strike. Lack of precise information on what is actually happening on the ground is likely the reason the program developed so-called signature strikes. Signature strikes are basically profiles, i.e. someone behaving in a certain way or appearing in a certain area, which means that the attackers have no idea whatsoever of whom they are killing. If there is heavy reliance on signature strikes, which appears to be the case, the collateral damage caused by the attacks will be considerably higher as there will undoubtedly be a substantial margin for error.

Finally, drones should be considered in their macro context, which is the extent to which they have done irreparable damage to the reputation of the United States and led many to label it a rogue nation. The callous attitude towards casualties inflicted collaterally suggests that the U.S. is at war with civilian populations as much as with terrorists, eliminating any possible moral high ground for justifying the unending war on terror.

But one should go back to the initial observation about transparency and accountability, which is where the rot sets in. The government has a right to protect secrets on sources and methods relating to its counter-terrorism activity, but such operations should be conducted within a context where it is being honest with the public about what is being done and what the costs are. There is considerable evidence that the White House has sought to conceal the scale of ongoing military action worldwide and the fact that it has avoided transparency about the drone program suggests that it has much to answer for.