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## Droning as Foreign Policy

By Saul Landau

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American Presidents seem willfully ignorant of historical precedents – especially when violence and lies become primary instruments of policy. In the Spring of 1914, European powers jockeyed for advantages amidst hints of war. In June, Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The bullet didn't help Serbian nationalism, but it provoked the onset of World War I. Tens of millions died. President Wilson dragged the United States into that war in 1917.

In late 2002, another zany incident mushroomed into a pretext for war and on-going assassinations. An Iraqi “scientist” defected to Germany and told its intelligence officials a hair-raising tale about Saddam Hussein’s secret possession of weapons of mass destruction. The Germans delivered this account to the CIA, but dubbed the Iraqi “Curve Ball to show their skepticism.” The eager-for-war Bushies, however, ignored German doubts. This story – true or false -- answered their bellicose prayers: they could sell this crap to media hacks – like Judith Miller of the NY Times -- to help convince the incredulous public.

Rafid Ahmed Alwan now admits proudly he invented the tales of Saddam’s supposed WMD. He laughed triumphantly when Colin Powell dramatically recounted his fabrications in his February 2003 UN Security Council speech before the world’s TV audience. “Curveball” became the hawks’ key source to justify the US invasion of Iraq.

Tyler Drumheller was a CIA official who observed how the Bushies used Curve Ball as an ideal pretext.

“If they had not had Curveball they would have probably found something else,” he told Bob Simon on “60 Minutes.” “Because there was a great determination to do it. But going to war in Iraq, under the circumstances we did, Curveball was the absolutely essential case.” (Nov. 4, 2007)

Bush’s costly invasion and ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq taught lessons. Although Obama has not withdrawn from those countries and increased the number of US troops in Afghanistan he has not invaded Iran as some hawks demand.

It’s unlikely that a Serbian assassin or Iraqi liar will catalyze the next horror show, however, since the Obama Administration has transferred previously human catalytic powers to technology: selective assassination has become the alternative to invading nations teeming with extremist enemies of the United States and Israel.

This tactic relies on the very US intelligence agencies that goofed so badly on assessing WMD in Iraq and failed to predict the recent uprisings throughout the Arab world. The national security mavens now swear to Congress and carefully chosen “reporters” that US spooks collect absolutely accurate information on our most virulent enemies.

The foreign sources paid by the CIA – do the insiders name them “Screwballs?”—supply US agents with names and locations of bad guys abroad. Since we’re a government of law and not men, the agencies “check” the accuracy of the data. God forbid we should make the same mistake we did with Curveball!

Unknown “checkers” then “verify” the information and send it to the executioners: young techies programming remote control, missile-laden drones to hit the “target’s” house, car, motor bike or tent. A real-life video game!

Hey, it’s better than sending US troops to invade yet another country and killing tens of thousands in the process! Washington now murders much smaller groups. No cumbersome processes -- indictment, trial, hearing. After all, “solid, secret reports” affirm the targets were terrorists.

The Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) last year offered a “glimpse of the drone strikes based on actual interviews with civilian victims of the strikes.”

One North Waziristan civilian victim “recounted how his home had been visited by Taliban fighters asking for lunch. He said he had agreed out of fear of refusing them. The very next day, he recalled, the house was destroyed by a missile from a drone, killing his only son.” (Gareth Porter Al Jazeera Nov 3, 2010)

Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann of the New America Foundation estimated between 1,109 and 1,734 people had died from drone hits in Pakistan from early 2008 to November 2010.

The dead supposedly included “66 leading officials in al-Qaeda or other anti-US groups.” The US military identified other bodies as those of "militants." (Porter)

UN rules forbid one state using force against another state or non-state group without consent of the other state; or without Security Council authorization; or in self-defense, but Harold Koh, the State Department’s legal maven, claimed drone attacks are self-defense, and killings as part of armed conflict. So what that Pakistan has not agreed! Or war rules ban attacks on civilians or civilian objects!

Under Koh’s legal logic, however, Taliban commanders at war with the United States could order Pakistanis in the US with aeronautical engineering degrees to design drones against US targets. Assume these engineers had drone victims in their family and could improve on battery-operated planes kids fly at playgrounds.

Remember: In 1993 Aimal Kasi, a Pakistani, killed two and wounded three people outside of CIA headquarters. Does no one in the vast secret world of Homeland Anxiety suggest a blowback scenario – not from a Serb nationalist or Iraqi liar – but from drones?

The lawyers invent elastic “legal rules.” Death drones on.