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No One Is Immune

The CIA's fake vaccination program in Pakistan reveals the moral bankruptcy of American spooks.

By Tom Scocca
Posted July 25, 2011

This was one story from our open-ended war: Last year, in a remote area of Afghanistan, 10 medical aid workers were [ambushed and killed by militants](#). The *New York Times Magazine* and *Slate* published moving remembrances of some of the victims: Karen Woo, a British doctor who wanted to make a documentary about the lives of people in remote areas of Afghanistan; Tom Little and Dan Terry, who had spent decades bringing health care and other aid to the country. President Obama awarded Little the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a posthumous ceremony earlier this year. After the killings, the Taliban reportedly added a final insult. The victims, [they claimed](#), were not really medical personnel. They were spies "on a clandestine mission against mujahideen in the area."

Only: How do we know this was a vicious insult? The question should be obscene and unthinkable. Yet this month, the Obama administration admitted that the Central Intelligence Agency [had staged a fake vaccination campaign in Pakistan](#) as American intelligence closed in on Osama Bin Laden. Health care workers were used on a clandestine mission—not in the paranoid imagination of America-hating fanatics but as part of the deliberate policy of the United States government.

As atrocities go, delivering inadequate vaccines under false pretenses isn't obviously worse than, say, systematically kidnapping people and torturing them. But like the decision by Rupert Murdoch's reporters, in the course of [illegally eavesdropping on everyone](#), to hack into [one particular vanished child's voice mail](#), the single act is a metonym for the total moral collapse of the people and the system responsible for it. The CIA has now signed off on the murder of Tom Little and Dan Terry and on any future killings of doctors in overt or covert war zones. Now, there is no such thing as a noncombatant.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan theater of war is one of the last places in the world where polio is still endemic. The *Washington Post* reported that the Pakistani government [considered canceling a polio immunization drive last week](#) because of the CIA campaign, before deciding to proceed. "One health official in the border belt said the main concern is that militants in that region might harm members of vaccination teams, suspecting them of being CIA agents," the *Post* wrote.

Even if health workers go unharmed, they risk being turned away by people who were already mistrustful of foreign interventions and especially of vaccination efforts. The CIA's logic—that health care teams could penetrate places other outsiders could not—is precisely the reason not to use the tactic.

Why were we willing to risk destroying the global campaign against polio? After the CIA vaccination story broke, [the *Post* carried a response](#) from a "senior U.S. official":

"People need to put this into some perspective," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. "The vaccination campaign was part of the hunt for the world's top terrorist, and nothing else. If the United States hadn't shown this kind of creativity, people would be scratching their heads asking why it hadn't used all tools at its disposal to find bin Laden."

Perspective, the official said. Well, in that case, why should the creativity have stopped with the fake vaccinations? We could have gone door-to-door in Abbottabad and shot everyone. Eventually, if we kept it up, we would have shot Bin Laden.

But the senior U.S. official was not, in fact, describing the ethical reasoning behind the effort to "find bin Laden." Bin Laden had already been found. The vaccination campaign was a matter of bureaucratic self-protection—to [get DNA samples](#) from people inside the compound, to confirm that the target that the CIA had identified in Abbottabad was correct, so that the agency wouldn't embarrass itself. The most that the vaccinations could have done, if the DNA tests had come back negative, would have been to allow the CIA to quietly add this particular house to the list of places in which, over the course of a decade, it had failed to find Bin Laden.

And that assumes the vaccination trick even worked. According to the *Guardian*, it was "not known whether the CIA managed to obtain any bin Laden DNA, although one source suggested

the operation did not succeed." Yet we got Bin Laden anyway. The necessity that the senior official was pleading was fake necessity.

Here, for once, we have the chance to make a distinction about the secret use of American power. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the country was offered a failure-proof moral test: Is it worth doing an awful thing to catch Osama Bin Laden? Would we give our covert forces the power to do what was necessary, to be ruthless and effective against our enemies?

But with the vaccination campaign, we get a look behind the curtain—and there's the old "creative" spook world, the one of poisoned cigars and potted insurrections. The power we've given our covert forces includes the power to be evil and feckless, and to be unaccountable for either.

The anonymous official was not merely describing the thought processes behind one immoral, ineffective, and destructive stunt. The same people, thinking the same way, have been making decisions about life and death—mostly death—all over the world.

A decade ago, the American intelligence machinery failed to correctly assess the risk that a terrorist group that had already bombed multiple American targets and killed hundreds of people might attack America. In response, we turned that machinery loose to make countless more assessments of risk, pretending the resulting judgments would be clear, correct, and defensible.

That clarity is a sham. Maybe some of the people American intelligence forces have captured and tortured did give up some sort of information. Maybe some of the information was true. Maybe some of the true information was useful in the campaign against al-Qaida. Maybe some of that true, useful information could not have been obtained by any other method. The anonymous U.S. official might tell you so, if you could figure out who he or she was and ask.

Torture is old news. We don't do it anymore. Fine. Nor have we prosecuted anyone for it. The people who did it are free to make and defend other decisions. How sure do we have to be about a target before we tell a drone to fire a missile at it? How many villagers is it worth incinerating to blow up someone who might be someone who has some position in some group potentially affiliated with al-Qaida? How many of your phone calls and e-mails should the NSA intercept and read? The people who supported the vaccination campaign are the people who are making these judgments, and other judgments we know nothing about, every day.

So now, we know what they believed was worth doing in one instance, in Abbottabad. In part. Perhaps there were great, secret feats of competence and heroism by our covert forces, too—difficult decisions, bravely made, that made the victorious raid on Osama's compound possible. We trust that there were.

But here is what was acceptable: According to the *Guardian*, we sent a Pakistani doctor and a medical team into the region, where they announced they were giving out hepatitis B

vaccinations. After giving one round of doses—of what should have been a three-dose course—to children in a poor neighborhood, for cover, they skipped the remaining vaccinations and moved on to where Bin Laden was living.

(The anonymous official told the *Washington Post* that this single-dose fake public-health effort "should not be construed as a 'fake public health effort.' ")

When they got to the Bin Laden compound, according to the *Guardian*, the team sent a nurse inside to administer the hepatitis shots. The nurse, the newspaper wrote, "was unaware of the real purpose of the vaccination campaign." So if the mission had gone wrong—the nurse was reportedly equipped with a "handbag that was fitted with an electronic device"—the first person in harm's way would have been not a covert-ops cowboy but an actual health-care worker.

Nothing did happen to the nurse, however. Apparently she got in and out without raising suspicions. As the *Guardian* wrote, "Health visitors in the area were among the few people who had gained access to the Bin Laden compound in the past, administering polio drops to some of the children."

Osama bin Laden, in other words, had trusted that people who administered polio vaccine were actually there to administer polio vaccine. So when the hepatitis nurse came around, even in his deepest defensive isolation, he did not suspect that public health workers would be agents of war. On this point, Bin Laden—the man who conceived of crashing airplanes full of passengers into occupied buildings—showed less imagination than the United States did.