

# We are sleepwalking into the Drone Age, unaware of the consequences

Obama's policy of killing 'militants' in Pakistan may go down well in the US, but it is provoking an extremist backlash abroad



**Clive Stafford Smith**  
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Innocent civilians are being killed by US Predator drones in Waziristan despite claims by the CIA that this is not the case. Photograph: US Air Force/Getty Images

Last October I was at a jirga in Islamabad where 80 people from Waziristan had assembled to talk about the US Predator drones that buzz around overhead, periodically delivering death by Hellfire missile. A jirga is the traditional forum for discussing and resolving disputes, part parliament, part court of law. The turbaned tribal elders were joined by their young sons on a rare foray out of their region to meet outsiders and discuss the killing. The isolation of the Waziris is almost total – no western journalist has been to Miranshah for several years.

At our meeting I spoke as the representative westerner. I reported the CIA claim that not one single innocent civilian had been killed in over a year. I did not need to understand Pashtu to translate the snorts of derision when this claim was translated.

During the day I shook the hand of a 16-year-old kid from Waziristan named Tariq Aziz. One of his cousins had died in a missile strike, and he wanted to know what he could do to bring the truth to the west. At [the Reprieve charity](#), we have a transparency project: importing cameras to the region to try to export the truth back out. Tariq wanted to take part, but I thought him too young.

Then, three days later, the CIA announced that it had eliminated "four militants". In truth there were only two victims: Tariq had been driving his 12-year-old cousin to their aunt's house when the Hellfire missile killed them both. This came just 24 hours after the CIA boasted of eliminating six other "militants" – actually, four chromite workers driving home from work. In both cases a local informant apparently tagged the car with a GPS monitor and lied to earn his fee.

Last week officials in the [Obama administration](#) talked to the *New York Times* about the "Secret Kill List" drawn up for drone assassinations. Democratic strategists in an election year calculate that the article will prove a vote-winner, dispelling any notion that [Barack Obama](#) is soft on terror. The administration voices wanted to leave the impression of an involved and committed president who reads Thomas Aquinas's theory of the "just war" in between personally vetting the kill list.

Mitt Romney dubbed Obama "Dr Strangelove" back in 2007. It may have been a rare, perceptive insight. A decision by the smartest man in the room is only as good as the information that he receives, and no matter how accurate the shiny new missile, if it's aimed at the wrong person it will hit the wrong target.

It is easy to understand how the CIA slaughtered Tariq and many other innocent victims. Those who press the Hellfire buttons are 8,000 miles away in Nevada and are dependent on local "intelligence". Just as with Guantánamo Bay, the CIA is paying bounties to those who will identify "terrorists". Five thousand dollars is an enormous sum for a Waziri informant, translating to perhaps £250,000 in London terms. The informant has a calculation to make: is it safer to place a GPS tag on the car of a truly dangerous terrorist, or to call down death on a Nobody (with the beginnings of a beard), reporting that he is a militant? Too many "militants" are just young men with stubble. At least 174 have been children.

The *New York Times* reports that Obama first embraced a policy of taking no prisoners in order to avoid the embarrassing sore of Guantánamo. Then he accepted a method for assessing casualties that "counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants" unless there is explicit posthumous proof of their innocence – because they are probably "up to no good".

While Obama's policies may go down a treat in the US, they are fomenting radicalism abroad, the very policy not only undermining our way of life but provoking an extremist hydra with many more heads.

Some sane voices penetrate the gloom. Starting last summer, Cameron Munter, Obama's ambassador to Islamabad, was required to give a thumbs up or down assessment of each drone attack on Pakistani turf, as if he were an emperor in the Colosseum. "He didn't realise his main job was to kill people," said a colleague. Munter is quitting his job early this month because his diplomatic mission has been rendered impossible.

The dearth of US domestic criticism is astounding. The last time a president indulged in an illegal bombing campaign in the sovereign territory of allies (Richard Nixon in 1969, in Cambodia and Laos), the policy nearly got included in the articles of impeachment. We should remember that history, as the Vietnamese capitalised on the backlash, helping to impose the genocidal Khmer Rouge on Cambodia, and a single-party regime that endures 40 years later in Laos.

Ultimately, Mitt Romney faces a dilemma: what must a Republican candidate do to outflank the extremism of his Democratic opponent? The rest of us must be concerned as well: we are sleepwalking into the Drone Age, and few people are debating the dire consequences.

*Clive Stafford Smith is director of the charity [Reprieve](#), which has a project intended to provoke debate on drones.*

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