

Drone strikes: playing God in Pakistan

When is a last resort truly a last resort, particularly in areas well back from recognised battlefields?

Editorial
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 5 June 2012 17:50 EDT

Thomas Aquinas, Augustine and John Brennan – two saints and a counter-terrorism adviser – may give the counsel a president feels he needs before adding another al-Qaida suspect to his kill list. But whatever else these authorities do, they do not constitute due process – and [Barack Obama](#)'s administration knows it. It is doing everything it can to avoid scrutiny. [It is refusing to publish its standards](#) for putting people on terrorist or assassination lists. What are the target limits? When is a last resort truly a last resort, particularly in areas well back from recognised battlefields? And who is providing independent oversight? Professor Obama, the constitutional lawyer who campaigned against the Iraq war and the Bush administration's elastic definitions of torture, would have had a field day cross-examining in court his older and wiser self as president – a man who shuffles through candidates for summary execution by drone strike on a pile of baseball cards. Or would he?

Aaron David Miller, a Middle East adviser to both Republican and Democrat administrations, does not think so. He wrote that there were [no substantive differences](#) between Mr Obama and Mitt Romney on foreign policy, other than the president's having a harsher view of Binyamin Netanyahu and a less hawkish one on Vladimir Putin. The rhetoric may have gone out of the war on terror, but as far as the actions themselves go, Mr Obama was, in Miller's view, [George W Bush on steroids](#). This may be harsh, but it is not ill-informed.

From the very first days of his presidency, Mr Obama's training as a lawyer was put to use not in abolishing the worst practices of the Bush era, but in giving himself the wriggle room to preserve and in some cases expand them. Thus the three major policies of the Bush war on terror – rendition, military commissions and indefinite detention – continue to this day. But Mr Obama has also presided over a massive expansion of secret surveillance of American citizens by the National Security Agency. There is a ferocious crackdown on whistleblowers. He has made more government documents classified than [any previous president](#). And he has become a true believer in drones.

There are at least two concerns about the gathering pace of drone strikes, Mr Obama's weapon of choice against militants sheltering in remote parts of the world – Waziristan, Yemen, or Somalia. The first is that at a crucial juncture of an election campaign – when a clear Republican opponent has emerged from the swamp of the party's selection process – this administration is highlighting the fact that its president is a killer. In this new age of secrecy, three dozen current and former advisers [are allowed to talk to the New York Times](#) about the president's role of personally overseeing the shadow war with al-Qaida. Mr Obama has not been shy about the role he personally played in Osama bin Laden's death. His counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan makes speeches defending drone strikes as [legal, ethical and wise](#). This administration is not on the defensive about its summary executions. It positively seeks to advertise them.

The second is that words are swiftly followed by actions. Drone strikes, which were in abeyance before the failure of Nato's Chicago summit to break the deadlock with Pakistan over reopening military supply lines to Afghanistan, have returned with a vengeance – three attacks in as many days, and 29 people dead. Are they justified if, as the US claimed on Tuesday, al-Qaida's second in command, Abu Yahya al-Libi, is among the victims? Or do inhabitants of North Waziristan have a point when they say the strikes are pulling their province apart. Many people have moved to escape the drones, and anyone who stays lives in terror of being killed. Indeed being a male of fighting age has become a posthumous criterion for being regarded as a terrorist. All this poses questions for a pragmatist like Mr Obama. When and where does this stop? Libi will be surely be replaced. Or have drones become a permanent feature of US power?

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.

;