

Editorial: Drone kills should continue

Updated 1d 13h ago

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Last week's [U.S.](#) drone strike, which killed al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader at a house in northern Pakistan, was by any measure a step forward in the war on terrorism. One of the organization's most charismatic leaders, Abu Yahya al-Libi, was eliminated. But the attack also added a bit more fuel to the debate over the morality and effectiveness of such remote-control warfare.

OPPOSING VIEW: 'Unlawful and dangerous'

Pakistan registered its ritual disapproval, inevitable given the incursion on its territory. And the ACLU renewed its argument that drone attacks create more enemies than they kill. What's missing from those arguments, though, is a viable alternative.

Strikes from combat aircraft? Well, no. Just last week, a [NATO](#) air attack in Afghanistan killed 18 civilians attending a wedding. Drones are more precise. Commando operations? Vastly more difficult, more dangerous and less likely to succeed. Doing nothing? Not an option, given the overwhelming evidence of al-Qaeda's continuing plots to attack the U.S.

That leaves the drones, which have been a remarkably effective way to hunt down terrorist leaders and keep others cowering. Al-Libi was the latest of [six top al-Qaeda leaders killed](#) in Pakistan and Yemen in the past year. That success has generated bipartisan support and [83% public approval in the U.S.](#) for the program.

But if the drone wars are to be continued, or even ratcheted up, at least three issues merit further attention:

•**Civilian casualties.** Strikes that are aimed at terrorists but also kill non-combatants, including children, are enormously damaging to the [United States](#). They turn local populations against the U.S. and put enormous pressure on governments such as Pakistan's and Yemen's to stop cooperating with U.S. forces.

Accurate counts of civilian casualties are virtually impossible to get, but the U.S. appears to be making progress toward reducing what's euphemistically called "collateral damage." The [New America Foundation](#) estimates that [civilian deaths have fallen](#) from half of all drone deaths in 2008 to fewer than 10% last year, a total of somewhere between 16 and 36 people.

By Lt. Col.. Leslie Pratt via, AP

Drone strikes: From 52 during the Bush presidency to 278 under the Obama administration.

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The anti-American backlash stoked by these deaths argues strongly for concentrating attacks on dangerous and high-ranking leaders who can't realistically be captured or killed any other way.

•**Rules of engagement.** [President Obama](#) and administration officials have begun speaking openly about

the once supposedly secret drone attacks, claiming authority for them under the same post-9/11 law that the Bush administration frequently invoked to justify its actions against suspected terrorists. The [number of drone strikes rose](#) from 52 during the Bush presidency to 278 under Obama, peaking in 2010, according to a Bureau of Investigative Journalism analysis.

A recent story in *The New York Times* revealed that the administration keeps a detailed "kill list" of suspected militants, and that Obama personally approves the addition of every new name and also vets many of the individual drone attacks. Although it's reassuring that Obama recognizes the sensitivities and stakes involved, his hands-on approach raises questions about the appropriate level of direct involvement by a U.S. president in a program of targeted killings.

•**Antiseptic warfare.** Some of the military drones are operated by "pilots" in Nevada, who go home to dinner with their families when their shifts are over. When war starts to resemble a video game, will there be an irresistible urge to overuse the remote-control weapons? And will the same temptation apply to the [50 other](#)

[nations said to have drones or plans to get them?](#)

These are all valid concerns. For the time being, though, the U.S. continues to confront a non-state enemy bent on plotting terror attacks inside America. Unless someone comes up with a better way to protect the nation, the [drone strikes should continue](#), at least until Osama bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahri, is eliminated and al-Qaeda is out of business.

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[Add a comment](#)[Contact](#)**Munther Saleh**

well no offense but i very strongly disagree sir and here's why.

every day about 12 innocent people die for every 1 Al-Qaeda soldier killed, just because the innocent afghani people live in a war-torn country doesn't mean they're used to the killings and wish they them selfs would want to die to stop the violence. these people live real lives just like you and i do and they love life, and they shouldn't be deprived of that just because some terrorists moved next door. America is taking the lazy road by using the drone attacks, instead of using real human soldiers who would carry out intricate strategic attacks, they use a drone controlled from thousands of miles away on a roughly 240 resolution screen to kill anyone who generally fits the minimal specifications of a terrorist, that means anyone who wears a beard, turban, or tr...[See More](#)

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**Dorothy Herman** · Top Commenter

A lot of innocent people are killed in any war. that is the price that civilians pay for hiding terrorists.

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**Edgar Athey** · Top Commenter

Can you cite any sources for that 12 to 1 stat?

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**Eric George** · Top Commenter · Columbus, Ohio

"on a roughly 240 resolution screen to kill anyone who generally fits the minimal specifications

of a terrorist, that means anyone who wears a beard, turban, or traditional Muslim clothing

would be a pending target.

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Simply false. The standards to launch an attack are very high and many terrorists have avoided attack because of lack of certainty about their identity and/or worry about civilian casualties. A "240" resolution screen? Hardly, these drones are equipped with very advanced HD sensors in the visible and invisible parts of the spectrum.

every day about 12 innocent people die for every 1 Al-Qaeda soldier killed"

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Source? Civilian casualties have actually decreased the more drones are used.

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"America is taking the lazy road by using the drone attacks, instead of using real human soldiers who would carry out intricate st...[See More](#)

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[View 10 more](#)**Stewart Pepper** · Top Commenter · Pastor at Mountain View Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

I'm not sure I'm against the attacks because I don't have all the intelligence to make such a decision. But if Russia used a drone to bomb a house in America because they "knew" a terrorist was in it, I'm pretty sure you'd hear a great outcry in our country against such attacks. Perhaps some will say, "we don't harbor terrorists," but if our military is plotting against another country, it is reasonable to assume that someone in that country would view our leaders as terrorists as well. I get the sense we only think this is o.k. because of our military's unchecked power. As soon as another country threatens our superiority (which I think we should keep), watch how quickly we will be demanding such actions stop. Just saying. What goes around, comes around.

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**Tim Martin** · Top Commenter · Works at Spirit of the West Cattle Company

Drones are already being used by the government in US activities. Based on criteria given by Holder missile strikes could be used against US Citizens on US soil. There is a congressional drone caucus (52 if I'm not mistaken) taking \$\$\$ for laws that expand their use over the US. - - - Folks, be careful what you support.

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**James Oerichbauer** · Top Commenter · Apple Valley, Minnesota

One can support the use of drones in warfare without supporting their use for domestic police actions. They are two completely separate items.

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**Tim Martin** · Top Commenter · Works at Spirit of the West Cattle Company

James - in a perfect world that would be right and I whole heartedly agree! Having said that, however they are already being used for, not only domestic police actions, but to monitor farmers in Nebraska, Iowa, etc. - and the clincher for me is that according to Holder's 'criteria' for using drone attacks against US Citizens -(without a trial and including collateral damage such as the death of family, children, and innocents) was NOT rulled out for use against US citizens in the US. It's hard to say it's ok in Yemen but we won't do it in Montana.

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**James Oerichbauer** · Top Commenter · Apple Valley, Minnesota

So contact your Congresspeople to enact laws to ban the use of drones for that purpose.

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