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Obama Administration Calmly Debates Killing More Americans

by JASON HIRTHLER
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The critical reader could be forgiven for feeling like he or she had stepped into a surreal universe while reading *The New York Times* on Tuesday? When he read, in a demure column on the left-hand side, that the U.S. was debating slaughtering another American by drone strike. And that this “debate” was occurring in the hallowed halls of justice where according to the U.S. Constitution our duly elected leaders shoulder the not inconsiderable burden of ensuring not only our safety, but also our recourse to a fair trial should we fall foul of the law. That before we are tossed into that mixer of ruinous injustice known as the American penal system, our accusers must bring clear evidence before impartial judges. Evidence of our calumnies and crimes. Of our guilt.

A critical reader may have noticed that this debate was uniformed by any of the above considerations. That in fact it had moved beyond such thorny legal puzzles to more forthright questions such as which branch of the government ought to do the slaughtering. One envisions our suave and insuperable President bent in the thinking man’s pose in a chair before assembled military chiefs, their jowly faces and watery eyes lending a providential gravity to their badges

and epaulettes. Settled on their haunches, their consciences unfettered, they listen to the Decider-in-Chief describe his preference that the Pentagon, and not his personal executive paramilitary (CIA), conduct strikes against Americans. Better for transparency, it is said to be. Although transparency must not a high priority, considering none but the brave are privy to the supposedly classified evidence that the American in question and in Pakistan is actually guilty of plotting against his own country. Not that the existence of the evidence alone would merit a sudden strike without a court ruling. But we digress.

Set aside the Constitution for minute. Shelve the U.N. Charter for a second. Lay down your human rights manifestoes that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have suggested may indicate our drone strikes are war crimes. Put down your humanitarian legal tomes and your laws of armed conflict. Close the Geneva Conventions and that dusty World Court charter. Put aside even the President's own protocols for such strikes.

Just listen to the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Mike Rogers, fulminate about how all this "self-imposed red tape" and judicious deliberation over whom should do the killing is "endangering Americans at home and our military overseas." Indeed, Rogers salivates, these "individuals" (terrorists) would otherwise have already been "removed" (slaughtered) from the battlefield, perhaps keeping safe the fine folks of Michigan (alarmed) whom Rogers proudly represents (poorly). Notice how Pakistan is a "battlefield" though no war has been declared against this once-sovereign state. Note how these individuals were to be liquated for "plotting to attack U.S. interests" abroad, and that even as the battlefield is now global, so too are our interests, which may include a petroleum field beneath some godforsaken Bedouin camp, or a cabal of disheveled insurgents fighting to rid their country of U.S. paramilitaries.

Surely, though, the unnamed threats espoused by the President, without foresight, by Intelligence Chief James Clapper, without proof, and by Mr. Rogers, without sense, take precedence over decades of finely calibrated international law? Law designed to protect weak from strong and defenseless from militant? Surely it is better to err on the side of paranoia than peace? We must prize security above all. Once this oft-repeated maxim of the mass mind surfaces in one's head, it soothes one's fears that we might indeed be living in a parallel universe, one where we seem to celebrate the very things we despise, namely peace and justice and the sanctity of law.

For just a disorienting moment, though, it appeared that we lived in such a place. A world where a Pakistani man whose son is vaporized by an American drone and who demands a reckoning from the local CIA station chief, is first denied a hearing, then abducted for his persistence.

Where this criminally complicit station chief is hustled out of the country at first light and furrowed away in that dense haystack of military bureaucracy. A world in which the executive supervisor of a global assassination program—conducted by airborne robots manned by field officers in Las Vegas La-Z-Boys—is able to publicly flout the law of his land and mistake policy for legislation. A world where anti-frackers are surveilled alongside anti-capitalists, and animal-rights activist and environmentalists strike fear into the hearts of the FBI. Even as our drone program inordinately slaughters civilians and produces, according to former military general Stanley McChrystal, 10 terrorists for every innocent slain.

One feels like Candide traveling alongside Dr. Pangloss, inundated by the philosopher's implacably optimistic and purblind interpretations of the world before him, with its crumbling walls and quaking vistas, its meaningless sheaves of jurisprudence, its fetors of human decay, its rhetors and their high-flown certainties. But then you recall that most of what you read in the *Times* is just a clever fiction anyway, sometimes even worthy of a Voltaire.