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What Bush's Iraq War and Obama's Drone Strikes Have in Common

Conor Friedersdorf

June 2012

An opportunity to kill bad guys can blind presidents and their supporters to the costs and unintended consequences of their actions.



While debating America's drone strikes, the Daily Beast's Andrew Sullivan has been sketching his notion of the responsibilities presidents have to the United States. Opposition to the CIA's

drone war "kind of assumes 9/11 didn't happen or couldn't happen again, and dismisses far too glibly the president's actual responsibility as commander-in-chief to counter these acts of mass terror," he [writes](#). "If you accept that presidential responsibility, and you also realize that the blowback from trying to occupy whole Muslim countries will be more intense, then what is a president supposed to do?"

In a subsequent post, he again invokes presidential responsibility, citing the raid that killed bin Laden. By Glenn Greenwald's logic, he [argues](#), "bin Laden should still be sitting in his room, planning new assassinations and terror attacks. Does he think it's even halfway credible for *any* American president to have contented himself with that? Or is he not living on the same planet I am?"

This is flawed reasoning. It presumes that particular, aggressive military actions are prudent because to do nothing would leave a threat unaddressed. But actions have costs and benefits that must be compared. Do the drone strikes make us better off, despite the terrorists they create? Did the Bin Laden raid make us safer, despite contributing to the destabilization of Pakistan? Andrew Sullivan isn't grappling with these questions. He's presuming that the benefits outweigh the costs without a careful comparison. He's writing as if the president has a responsibility to act regardless of the answer.

The United States generally, and Sullivan himself, have fallen prey to this kind of thinking before. As he wrote in 2008, grappling with what errors of analysis led him to support the Iraq War:

The deciding factor for me in the end was that I could never be ashamed of removing someone as evil as Saddam from power. I became enamored of my own morality and the righteousness of this single moral act. And he was a monster, as we discovered. But what I failed to grasp is that war is also a monster, and unless one weighs all the possibly evil consequences of an abstractly moral act, one hasn't really engaged in a truly serious moral argument. I saw war's unknowable consequences far too glibly.

Four years later, Sullivan isn't weighing all the possibly evil consequences of the Obama administration actions he is defending, nor is he properly weighting the "unknowable consequences" of ongoing bombing campaigns in multiple foreign countries. This is evident because in place of arguments comparing costs and benefits, he is invoking the specter of another September 11, much like Rudy Giuliani did during the debate over Iraq, as if it militates for but never against aggressive action; and he is asserting that Obama has a responsibility to act as if that settles it.

These are forms of thinking I remember well from 2003. *Saddam Hussein is a bad man. He sponsored terrorist attacks on Israel. He used WMDs against his own people. He'd love nothing more than to harm America, and is likely stockpiling weapons. A president would be irresponsible, given all that information, to just let him sit in his palaces planning future mayhem. If you accept the president's responsibility to protect America what else would you have him do but act? To do otherwise kind of assumes 9/11 didn't happen or couldn't happen again.*

Iraq, Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs. Throughout recent American history, such blunders began in part with arguments about how the president had a responsibility to *do something*. Even today, as experts in Israel and the United States insist that striking Iran's nuclear facilities would ultimately make the country more, not less likely to develop and deploy nuclear weapons, there are voices insisting that President Obama has a responsibility to order an attack on the country.

Sullivan understands the folly of a strike on Iran. How he can simultaneously write as if a presidential responsibility to act is sufficient to justify our present drone program I cannot understand. Nor do I see why he assumes that the bin Laden raid was worth [the destabilizing effect it had on Pakistan](#), a matter on which I am agnostic, because as yet there's no way to know the answer.

Because Sullivan exposes himself to counterarguments, there are caveats built into the drone policy that he so often ends up defending. "Of course, we need to be incredibly careful to limit civilian casualties even further," he writes. "Counting every military-age man in the vicinity of a Jihadist as a terrorist is a total cop-out. We should see the real casualty numbers and adjust accordingly. But we also have to stop the Jihadist threat. It is real. And a president does not have the luxury of pretending it isn't."

But foregoing an aggressive act that does more harm than good is not the same as pretending that the jihadist threat doesn't exist. Core to Sullivan's mistake is his implicit conflation of those things. It's also frustrating that he grants that the present number of civilian casualties is too high, and that it's illegitimate to count all military age men in the vicinity of a drone strike as jihadists, yet defends the drone strikes anyway. His position isn't that they would be legitimate if they were reformed, and that he'll support them if that happens. He favors the policy now, despite those flaws.

The caveats turn out to be mere rhetoric. The same is true of this passage:

There does seem a danger, especially in Yemen, that drones may be focusing the Islamists' attention away from their own government and onto ours. Which is why this program needs to be very carefully monitored, excruciatingly reviewed, constantly questioned. So yes, I'm with Conor on the need for more accountability and transparency on this.

Sorry, Sullivan is not with me "on the need for more accountability and transparency" if he thinks the drone program should proceed, even at present levels of accountability and transparency. That is his position. To defend the continuation of drone strikes is to affirm that they are the prudent course *as they are being implemented*. If you truly think there is a "need" for "more accountability and transparency," and think those qualities are essential to a drone program that does more good than harm, you ought to be squarely opposed to our current drone program.

Sullivan keeps mounting defenses of drone strikes in the abstract, and then acting as if he's persuasively defended Obama's particular program of drone strikes, which he proceeds to support. I don't doubt that Sullivan would like more accountability and transparency, but he is proving himself willing to support a drone program that is, by his own logic, opaque and unaccountable.

Says Sullivan:

I agree -- how could one not? -- that the drone program can backfire. Which is why I said it has to be conducted with extreme care.

But it is not being conducted with extreme care! People are killed even when we don't know their identities! Civilian casualties are commonplace! Saying that a drone program "has to be conducted with extreme care" is empty rhetoric if you support it despite the obvious lack of extreme care. Does anyone's notion of "extreme care" include killing groups of people whose identity you don't know via a remote control robot flying over a faraway country at 20,000 feet in the air?

In another piece Sullivan wrote on his mistaken support for the Iraq War, he offered these explanations for his error:

- The shock of 9/11 provoked an overestimation of the risks we faced. And our fear forced errors into a deeply fallible system. When doubts were raised, they were far too swiftly dismissed.
- The second error was narcissism. America's power blinded many of us to the resentments that hegemony always provokes. Those resentments are often as deep among our global friends as among our enemies -- and make alliances as hard as they are important. That is not to say we should never act unilaterally. Sometimes the right thing to do will spawn backlash, and we should do it anyway. But that makes it all the more imperative that when we do go out on a limb, we get things right. In those instances, we need to make our margin of error as small as humanly possible.
- The final error was not taking culture seriously enough. There is a large discrepancy between neoconservatism's skepticism of government's ability to change culture at home and its naiveté when it comes to complex, tribal, sectarian cultures abroad.

It seems to me that Sullivan is failing to heed all of these lessons in his support of Obama's drone policy. I've now gone several rounds with him on this subject, and I cannot emphasize enough how much I appreciate both his engagement and the wisdom I've gleaned from his past writing. But perhaps the better man to argue with is Ibrahim Mothana, author of an op-ed just published in the *New York Times*.

Let's close by pitting Sullivan's argument against Mothana.

SULLIVAN:

What frustrates me about Conor's position - and Greenwald's as well - is that it kind of assumes 9/11 didn't happen or couldn't happen again, and dismisses far too glibly the president's actual responsibility as commander-in-chief to counter these acts of mass terror. If you accept that presidential responsibility, and you also realize that the blowback from trying to occupy whole Muslim countries will be more intense, then what is a president supposed to do? I think the recourse to drone warfare is about as reasonable and as effective a strategy as we can find.

IBRAHIM:

"DEAR OBAMA, when a U.S. drone missile kills a child in Yemen, the father will go to war with you, guaranteed. Nothing to do with Al Qaeda," a Yemeni lawyer [warned on Twitter](#) last month.

President Obama should keep this message in mind before ordering more drone strikes like Wednesday's, which local officials say [killed 27 people](#), or the May 15 strike that [killed at least eight](#) Yemeni civilians. Drone strikes are causing more and more Yemenis to hate America and join radical militants; they are not driven by ideology but rather by a sense of revenge and despair. Robert Grenier, the former head of the C.I.A.'s counterterrorism center, [has warned](#) that the American drone program in Yemen risks turning the country into a safe haven for Al Qaeda like the tribal areas of Pakistan -- "the Arabian equivalent of Waziristan."

Anti-Americanism is far less prevalent in Yemen than in Pakistan. But rather than winning the hearts and minds of Yemeni civilians, America is alienating them by killing their relatives and friends. Indeed, the drone program is leading to the Talibanization of vast tribal areas and the radicalization of people who could otherwise be America's allies in the fight against terrorism in Yemen.

There's more:

Yemeni tribes are generally quite pragmatic and are by no means a default option for radical religious groups seeking a safe haven. However, the increasing civilian toll of drone strikes is turning the apathy of tribal factions into anger. The strikes have created an opportunity for terrorist groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Ansar al-Sharia to recruit fighters from tribes who have suffered casualties, especially in Yemen's south, where mounting grievances since the 1994 civil war have driven a strong secessionist movement.

There is, finally, this striking example of how costly the unintended consequences of even a single drone strike can be:

An American drone strike in May 2010 [killed Jabir al-Shabwani](#), a prominent sheik and the deputy governor of Marib Province. The strike had dire repercussions for Yemen's economy. The slain sheik's tribe attacked the country's main pipeline in revenge. With [70 percent](#) of the country's budget dependent on oil exports, Yemen lost [over \\$1 billion](#). This strike also erased years of progress and trust-building with tribes who considered it a betrayal given their role in fighting Al Qaeda in their areas.

Given all that, a good answer to Sullivan's question, "What's a president to do?" is, "Immediately cease all policies that produce more al-Qaeda sympathizers than they eliminate."

[Greenwald](#) and I are [arguing](#) that the U.S.'s current drone program is likely doing that. Sullivan's retort -- the president has to do something -- is insufficient. During the Bush administration, Sullivan emerged as a leading voice opposing torture, a horrific stain on America's reputation and a burden on our conscience. Drone critics would benefit tremendously from his talents as they critique a policy that, as it's being implemented right now, [targets](#) rescuers rushing to the sites of previous drone strikes and mourners at funerals. Under current policy, the people killed by American drones are declared terrorists or militants if they are male and the right age to be in the military.

Sullivan would like to change those particulars. But absent any changes, can he really live with supporting Obama's drone policy, as he is currently doing? Does he stand by the statement that "my support for Obama is primarily because of foreign policy. And thus far, he has exceeded my expectations"? [It's time to raise them.](#)