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## Obama Legitimizes the Drone Wars

By Philip Giraldi

June 3, 2016

Cities reduced to rubble, schools and hospitals leveled, prisoners tortured and executed, car bombs exploding. Long lines of refugees, their homes in ruins, stumbling along a road to nowhere with their few remaining possessions carried on their backs. Graphic photos and videos from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa continue to show the downside of the “New World Order,” the global system operating under American direction envisioned by <sup>[1]</sup> President George H.W. Bush in 1991.

They also demonstrate the enormous perceptual gap between much of the world and the United States, which has not had a hostile force penetrate its borders since Pancho Villa rode into New Mexico in 1916. America does not know and does not understand the reality of war, which renders the bellicose pronouncements made by presidential candidates as so much background noise, little more troubling than their comments about what to do about greenhouse gases. Meanwhile, the drums of war continue to beat, with Pentagon sources revealing that <sup>[2]</sup> the United States has been bombing so many people in so many places that its weapons stockpiles are running low.

Responding to increasing demands for some accountability, President Barack Obama has pledged to bring transparency to the drone wars Washington is waging in at least seven countries. Drone missions have received considerable criticism owing to their lack of any legal framework, but the administration argues they are justified by the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which gives a carte blanche to the armed forces to pursue and kill “al-Qaeda associated” terrorists wherever they might be. The additional drone attacks undertaken by the

CIA are “covert actions” made legal by presidential “findings,” and both the intelligence services and the military are reported to be guided by the constabulary principle, which means that the U.S. has authority to strike a “threatening” terrorist target if the local government lacks either the resources or desire to do the job itself.

Reports in the media <sup>[3]</sup> suggest that there will soon be a White House report on the numbers of civilians killed since 2009 in drone strikes, but, as is often the case, the devil will be in the details. The government is trying to demonstrate that the civilian death toll is minimal, though it is unlikely to go as far as CIA Director John Brennan, who argued that the agency’s attacks had killed “no civilians.” It will do that by excluding from consideration “war zones” in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, and also CIA “clandestine” operations. Only Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and possibly Pakistan will be included in the findings, as they are “outside areas of active hostilities.”

The report will also manipulate its own definitions of what constitutes a terrorist or militant, and it will justify some otherwise inexplicable attacks as “self-defense” due to U.S. special forces operating in the area. Guidelines for firing drones’ Hellfire missiles have been somewhat subjective, including, for example, considering any male of military age and carrying a weapon as a likely terrorist and therefore subject to annihilation, even though being an armed male in the tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan is not unusual and hardly equivalent to militancy. In other cases, a tribal gathering where several alleged militants are reported to be present will be considered to be 100 percent terrorist, even though the drone operator has no idea who is on the ground apart from the one or two targets who are plausibly or sometimes not-so-plausibly identified.

The document is also likely to include questionable assumptions about the targets of the attacks and, reading between the lines, should raise some serious doubts about the accuracy of the alleged “pinpoint” strikes delivered by drone. If the past is anything to go by, it will be obfuscated by discussion of legal aspects of the use of drones and will tend to dismiss or even ignore the human tragedy playing out on the ground by granting the U.S. government the benefit of the doubt when a target does not fall into any easily discernible category.

There’s inevitably a political objective behind the report, which is to institutionalize the process of using lethal drones by presidential fiat worldwide. Obama has embraced the drone as his weapon of choice against terrorists, having authorized hundreds of attacks, a vast expansion of the deployment compared to his predecessor, George W. Bush, who approved drone strikes fewer than 50 times in his eight years in office. It is likely that Obama will formalize the procedures for selecting and killing targets by executive order before his term in office ends.

Drone warfare aside, Americans should be appalled by how many people their elected government has directly or indirectly killed since the War on Terror began nearly 15 years ago, particularly as the United States has not actually been at war with anyone during that entire period—and they probably would be appalled if they knew. Bear in mind that there are a lot of ways to die. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously declared killing 500,000 Iraqi children through sanctions that limited the import of food and medicines in the 1990s “worth it.” More recently, the huge dislocations of populations and refugee flows have killed tens or even hundreds of thousands more. One need not have a bullet in the head to die.

Estimates of deaths caused by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are at best guesstimates and depend on what factors are included or excluded. Is starvation due to disrupted food supplies, or death by an illness that would have been treated if the local hospital hadn't been destroyed, the responsibility of the United States? Some think so, even if the death is "collateral" or occurs some time after the traumatic incident.

Tallying the actual death toll ultimately comes down to a reckoning of deaths that would not have occurred but for the military action. Governments will inevitably try to deflate the numbers and dismiss the causal linkages, while other observers will move in the opposite direction.

A March 2015 report by the Nobel Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) suggests that there has been considerable, deliberate understating of the true consequences of the U.S.-led response to terrorism. The report claimed <sup>[4]</sup> that more than 1.3 million people were killed during the first ten years post-9/11 as part of the so-called "Global War on Terror" in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan alone. A year later, one might reasonably update the numbers and add Syria, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen to the carnage—and the current total might easily exceed 2 million. Some other estimates go as high as 4 million. The PSR report stresses that the estimate of the dead is "conservative" and based on the most reliable sources, suggesting that there are large numbers of deaths that have been reported but could not be confirmed.

It is difficult and probably unfair to consider George Bush and Barack Obama to be mass killers along the lines of a Pol Pot or even a Josef Stalin, as they did not seek or condone the deaths of large numbers of civilians. But the lesson to be drawn from their passages through the highest public office is that leading what is nominally a democracy is no impediment to lashing out largely indiscriminately, without regard for those on the receiving end. We as a country are now reduced to preparing reports explaining that we really didn't kill that many civilians with drones while attacking countries we are not at war with by virtue of a plausibly unconstitutional congressional authorization.

The past 15 years have institutionalized and validated the killing process. President Clinton or Trump will be able to do more of the same, as the procedures involved are "completely legal" and likely soon to be authorized under an executive order. And the 2 million or 4 million or maybe eventually 6 million dead will become, as Stalin once put it, not a tragedy but just a statistic.