

Silence of the Drones

Exclusive: Even as the United States has withdrawn from Iraq and has begun to wind down the Afghan War, the lethal reach of the U.S. military has been extended into other countries through Predator drones. What is less known is the full human and political costs, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Several friends of mine are among the 35 American activists assembling in Pakistan in recent days in an effort to seek ground truth on the impact of U.S. drone strikes on civilians there. I will be holding them and their Pakistani hosts and co-travelers in the Light, as my Quaker friends like to say, and will now try to do my part in what follows to put this dangerous journey in perspective.

The American group, organized by Code Pink Women for Peace, is meeting this week with a wide swath of Pakistanis, including representatives of the various political parties. Today, former U.S. diplomat and Army Col. Ann Wright was scheduled to address the Institute of Strategic Studies, Pakistan's largest think tank, which advises the Foreign Office.

Similar events are scheduled in Islamabad until the weekend, when hundreds of Pakistanis will join the Americans in a caravan of cars and vans on the six-hour drive from Islamabad to Waziristan in the northwest, where the drones do most of their killing and maiming.

As I said good-bye to two of my friends late last week, their backpacks seemed extraordinarily heavy. It occurred to me later that I was visualizing the extra weight of the twin burden of shame they bear for our country's drone attacks: (1) the toll the drone strikes have taken on Pakistani citizens; and (2) the embarrassment generated by the disingenuous denials by U.S. officials from President Barack Obama, to his counterterrorism adviser John Brennan, to U.S. diplomats, right down to media cheerleaders and lower-ranking computer functionaries.

Hunched under one of those backpacks was Robert Naiman, policy director at Just Foreign Policy. Before departing he wrote "Why I'm Going to Pakistan: Under Scrutiny, the Drone Strike Policy Will Fail."

Here is how he described what the travelers hoped to accomplish:

"If people have to confront the actual reality of the Pakistan drone strike policy – the reality in which its impact is mostly about killing and terrorizing

civilians and alienating Pakistani public opinion from the United States as opposed to the fairy tale in which it is all about wasting top-level 'bad guys' the political story will fall apart."

The Political Story

Reluctant as I am to quote my one-time debate partner Donald Rumsfeld, one of his (autobiographical) aphorisms seems altogether apt here: "Some people lie and get away with it!" President Obama is either advised by liars on civilian casualties from drone strikes, or he thinks he can "lie and get away with it." It has to be one or the other.

Answering a question during a live video "hangout" on Jan. 30, Obama's words were reminiscent of the infamous "modified limited hangout" characteristic of the Nixon White House. Obama insisted that the drone targets were "on a list of active terrorists," as if that made the killing, *ipso facto*, okay.

Asked about the increase in the number of drone strikes under his presidency and whether the loss of civilian life was worth it for U.S. interests, the President said:

"I want to make sure the people understand, actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part they have been very precise precision-strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates. It is important for everybody to understand that this thing is kept on a very tight leash."

Tight Leash?

Just four months later, a May 29 *New York Times* article on Obama's secret "Kill List" revealed how the President rationalized his claim that the number of civilians killed was "not huge." Far from "a very tight leash," it was a numbering gimmick.

The *Times* report quoted several Obama administration officials admitting that all military-age males in a strike zone are counted as combatants, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent. (Yes, you read that right posthumously.)

Small wonder that counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan could claim in June 2011 that there had been zero civilians killed in Pakistan for almost a year. And small wonder that another senior administration official could tell the *Times* several months later that the number of civilians killed by drone strikes in Pakistan was in the "single digits."

In April 2012, Brennan was still at it, describing civilian casualties from drone strikes as “exceedingly rare” as if saying something often enough can make it true.

One former senior intelligence officer did express serious misgivings. “It bothers me when they say there were seven guys, so they must all be militants,” the former officer told the *Times*. “They count the corpses and they’re not really sure who they are.”

So much for posthumous exoneration.

For people with a conscience this is a lot to take in; to reflect on; and to take responsibility for as an American citizen. Serious though these issues are, there are times when a satirical touch can cut to the chase not to trivialize this sadder-than-sad reality, but rather to render it easier to understand and drive them home its full import. In my view, Stephen Colbert performed a useful service a few weeks after the *New York Times* published its report on the “Kill List.”

The Real Story

A Stanford/NYU study titled “Living Under Drones” and released last week concluded that far more civilians have been killed by U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan than U.S. counter-terrorism officials admit.

The study cites statistics compiled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the non-profit organization based at City University in London, indicating 474 to 884 civilian deaths since 2004, including 176 children. The Bureau, a non-profit organization based at City University in London, has eyewitness sources on the ground in Pakistan.

“Real people are suffering real harm” but are largely ignored in government or news media discussions of drone attacks, said James Cavallaro of Stanford, one of the Stanford/NYU study’s authors. As to Robert Naiman’s reference to “wasting top-level bad guys,” the study concluded that only about 2 percent of drone casualties were top militant leaders.

The report also concludes that the drone attacks have not made America safer, but rather have increased resentment against the U.S. among Pakistanis. So, even for those without moral qualms about killing innocent people, the drone attacks make little sense from a practical point of view.

Leaked U.S. diplomatic cables of 2007 and 2008 show that the Pakistani military initially acquiesced in the drone attacks in the northwest tribal area, but acquiescence gradually became the result of coercion. And no one and especially

not the Pakistanis appreciate being coerced. Former President Pervez Musharraf recently said that, no matter what Pakistan wanted, it was too weak militarily to oppose the drone attacks.

Widespread popular resentment is reflected, however, in recent statements by the Pakistani foreign ministry rejecting claims of tacit approval by Pakistan. An official statement on Friday bluntly rejected such claims, adding that “drone attacks are illegal, counterproductive, in contravention of international law and a violation of Pakistani sovereignty.”

The day before, Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar’d, asked why anti-American sentiment in Pakistan is among the world’s highest, answered with one word: “Drones.” And the Pakistani parliament has unanimously demanded an end to the drone strikes.

Groping to Understand

Then why do they? To “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat” the 50 to 100 al-Qaeda who remain in the area and/or other “high-value bad guys?” If you are satisfied with that explanation, you need not read on.

I think we need to consider all the possibilities, however inhuman or outlandish they may seem. If the U.S. aim is to antagonize the 180 million people of a proud, strategically located nation armed with nuclear weapons, and to fill recruitment stations with “militants” bent on avenging relatives and friends on the receiving end of the drones’ “Hellfire” missiles, drone operations are a smashing success.

Could this be the actual aim of U.S. policy? Although stranger things have happened, I am inclined to rule out this suggestion as a mite too cynical and bizarre. This, even though I recognize the power of U.S. arms manufacturers, together with generals driven by the prospect of profit and promotions provided by perpetual war.

The power of this kind of influence, however, should be kept in mind. In recent years, I have learned to be less surprised by the mindset exemplified by people like former General and now CIA Director David Petraeus, who has predicted glibly that our grandchildren will still be fighting the kind of wars in which he, deservedly or not, made his name.

This is the same Petraeus who, still a general in February 2011, shocked Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s aides by suggesting that Afghan parents might have burned their own children in order to blame U.S. military operations. This is the same Petraeus who is running the drone attacks on Pakistan.

Wooden Heads and Lemmings

More likely, hewing to the drone-attack approach can be attributed, at least in part to what Barbara Tuchman in her *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* describes as wooden-headedness:

“Wooden-headedness, the source of self-deception, is a factor that plays a remarkably large role in government. It consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. It is acting according to wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts.”

A variant might be called the “lemming factor,” which is particularly influential during an election campaign with the overriding requirement to shun any sign of weakness or lack of honor for “the fallen.”

“Two lemmings are chatting while standing in the line to the cliff. One says to the other, ‘Of course we have to go over the edge. Anything else would dishonor all the lemmings that have gone before us.’”

Remember, none of our troops get killed in these drone attacks. They can do the killing from a safe distance sitting at a computerized play-station. And the drones are relatively cheap. Most important, we can be seen as doing something against the feared al-Qaeda and other terrorists.

And, somehow, the Pakistanis won't mind very much, goes the thinking. Or what can they do about it, after all?

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton may cling to the (forlorn) hope that relations with those who hold the real power in Pakistan will not really suffer, especially if the U.S. shows determination and uses the traditional mix of flattery, threats, money and sophisticated military hardware to cultivate Pakistani military leaders.

U.S. policy makers may even harbor the naive expectation that, with continued efforts to “educate” the Pakistanis, they will “shift their strategic calculus” (as then Undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy put it two years ago) away from India, and focus instead on helping the U.S. pull its chestnuts out of the fire in Afghanistan.

If all this seems naive and feckless, that's because it is. But Americans don't know that. And the killing from drone strikes continues. And that's why it is fitting and proper for American activists to be sticking their necks out in traveling to the area to see for themselves.

Is there no one with any sense? The answer is yes. Take former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter who opted out of a third year in Islamabad apparently out of frustration having to implement the hare-brained policies devised at the Pentagon, CIA, and White House.

Highly qualified and perceptive people leave; Munter retired after more than a quarter-century in the Foreign Service on Sunday for reasons that are clear enough, even given the timid valedictory he gave on Sept. 25 at the Carnegie Foundation.

Just five days short of being out-the-door, Munter's words remained diplomatic far too much so. What came through clearly was his exasperation at having to implement a myopic, counterproductive policy toward a nuclear-armed state with the world's sixth largest population.

Although he did not say it right out, Munter words reflected frustration with a feckless U.S. policy unable to look beyond the sacred cow of counter-terrorism and whatever it is the U.S. is still trying to do in Afghanistan.

There, as Munter gingerly put it, U.S. and Pakistani interests "do not align that well," despite the efforts of people like Panetta and Clinton to persuade the Pakistanis to revise their strategic view of the region.

The centerpiece of Munter's presentation was a recounting of a long list of indignities that, as ambassador, he was forced to spend so much of his time cleaning up after.

The Nov. 26, 2011 killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers by U.S. air attacks against suspected insurgents/militants/terrorists (call them what you will) in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area; the refusal of the Pentagon to apologize; Pakistan's shutdown of U.S. supply lines to Afghanistan; the CIA/Raymond Davis affair; the CIA/Navy SEAL incursion into Abbottabad and killing of Osama bin Laden with no prior notification; the mutual acrimony that ensued you name it.

Munter bemoaned the reality that 2011 was a very bad year, without specifically attributing blame. But, guess what he left out of the litany. Drones.

Munter winced when, the last questioner asked him how the U.S. "could possibly persuade people [Pakistanis] to work with us," as drones continue to take their toll. This drew an eloquent filibuster on subjects unrelated to drones.

Munter waxed eloquent on the deep reservoir of good will that America enjoys among Pakistanis; how "95 percent of Pakistanis care deeply about the U.S."; the reasons behind the close military relationship we enjoy; etc., etc.

The questioner asked again, "What about the drones?" Munter swallowed hard and, referred to "Title 50" (of the U.S. Code governing intelligence), and said, "This is an issue that I can't talk a lot about because of the way this works in our government." At that point he seemed to revert to standard talking points:

"When you travel in the country and talk with people who are not part of the elite, I never ever ever ever ever got a question about the drones. ... It's not a deep issue in Pakistan. It's an important one, but not a deep one. That said, among the elites it's a very important issue, and elites matter."

"I'd like to see us be able to talk about drones, to have an honest back and forth about what our policy is," he continued, "but at this point we're not able to do that."

So here's the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan bemoaning, in a far too gentle, non-threatening way, the lack of honest discussion of drones that are attacking the country in which he is the President's senior representative. Remarkable. You see, that's "the way this works in our government."

Maybe Munter will be less tongue-tied today on his first day or retirement. But his speech at Carnegie just days before he left government provides scant hope that he will step out of the ethos of Establishment Washington to expose the immoral and counterproductive policy of drone attacks, rather than filibuster and obfuscate.

And that is a huge part of the problem. With the important exception of the three courageous Foreign Service officers who loudly quit right before the U.S. attack on Iraq, those with direct experience with the shortcomings of U.S. policy rarely let the rest of us in on their conclusions no matter how important the issue.

And so it falls to activists like the ones assembled by Code Pink to get below the State Department talking points and, unfettered by career or end-of-career inhibitions, give us honest answers to questions on key issues like the drones. Let's hope against hope that their findings get appropriate play in U.S. media.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served for 30 years as an Army and then CIA intelligence analyst and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).
