

A National Defense Strategy of Sowing Global Chaos

In the new U.S. National Defense Strategy, military planners bemoan the erosion of the U.S.'s "competitive edge," but the reality is that they are strategizing to maintain the American Empire in a chaotic world, explains Nicolas J.S. Davies.

By Nicolas J.S. Davies

Presenting the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States on Friday at the Johns Hopkins University, Secretary of Defense James Mattis painted a picture of a dangerous world in which U.S. power – and all of the supposed "good" that it does around the world – is on the decline.

"Our competitive edge has eroded in every domain of warfare – air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace," he said. "And it is continually eroding."

What he could have said instead is that the United States military is overextended in every domain, and that much of the chaos seen around the world is the direct result of past and current military adventurism. Further, he could have acknowledged, perhaps, that the erosion of U.S. influence has been the result of a series of self-inflicted blows to American credibility through foreign policy disasters such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

There were also two important words hidden between the lines, but never mentioned by name, in the new U.S. National Defense Strategy: "empire" and "imperialism."

It has long been taboo for U.S. officials and corporate media to speak of U.S. foreign policy as "imperialism," or of the U.S.'s global military occupations and network of hundreds of military bases as an "empire." These words are on a long-standing blacklist of "banned topics" that U.S. official statements and mainstream U.S. media reports must never mention.

The streams of Orwellian euphemisms with which U.S. officials and media instead discuss U.S. foreign policy do more to obscure the reality of the U.S. role in the world than to describe or explain it, "hiding imperial interests behind ever more elaborate fig leaves," as British historian A.J.P. Taylor described European imperialists doing the same a century ago.

As topics like empire, imperialism, and even war and peace, are censored and excised from political debate, U.S. officials, subservient media and the rest of the U.S. political class conjure up an illusion of peace for domestic

consumption by simply not mentioning our country's 291,000 occupation troops in 183 other countries or the 39,000 bombs and missiles dropped on our neighbors in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan since Trump took office.

The 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped on these and other countries by Obama and the 70,000 dropped on them by Bush II have likewise been swept down a kind of real time "memory hole," leaving America's collective conscience untroubled by what the public was never told in the first place.

But in reality, it's been a long time since U.S. leaders of either party resisted the temptation to threaten anyone anywhere, or to follow through on their threats with "fire and fury" bombing campaigns, coups and invasions. This is how empires maintain a "credible threat" to undergird their power and discourage other countries from challenging them.

But far from establishing the "Pax Americana" promised by policymakers and military strategists in the 1990s, from Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney to Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton, the results have been consistently catastrophic, producing what the new National Defense Strategy calls, "increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing, rules-based international order."

Of course the drafters of this U.S. strategy document dare not admit that U.S. policy is almost single-handedly responsible for this global chaos, after successive U.S. administrations have worked to marginalize the institutions and rules of international law and to establish illegal U.S. threats and uses of force that international law defines as crimes of aggression as the ultimate arbiter of international affairs.

Nor do they dare acknowledge that the CIA's politicized intelligence and covert operations, which generate a steady stream of political pretexts for U.S. military intervention, are designed to create and exacerbate international crises, not to solve them. For U.S. officials to admit such hard truths would shake the very foundations of U.S. imperialism.

Opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran – the so-called nuclear deal – from Republicans and Democratic hawks alike seems to stem from the fear that it might validate the use of diplomacy over sanctions, coups and war, and set a dangerous precedent for resolving other crises – from Afghanistan and Korea to future crises in Africa and Latin America. Iran's success at bringing the U.S. to the negotiating table, instead of falling victim to the endless violence and chaos of U.S.-backed regime change, may already be encouraging North Korea and other targets of U.S. aggression to try to pull off the same trick.

But how will the U.S. justify its global military occupation, illegal threats and uses of force, and trillion-dollar war budget once serious diplomacy is seen to be more effective at resolving international crises than the endless violence and chaos of U.S. sanctions, coups, wars and occupations?

From Bhurtpoor to Baghdad

Major Danny Sjursen, who has fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and taught history at West Point, is a rare voice of sanity from within the U.S. military. In a poignant article in Truthdig, Major Sjursen eloquently described the horrors he has witnessed and the sadness he expects to live with for the rest of his life. "The truth is," he wrote, "I fought for next to nothing, for a country that, in recent conflicts, has made the world a deadlier, more chaotic place."

Danny Sjursen's life as a soldier of the U.S. Empire reminds me of another soldier of Empire, my great-great-great grandfather, Samuel Goddard. Samuel was born in Norfolk in England in 1793, and joined the 14th Regiment of Foot as a teenager. He was a Sergeant at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. During 14 years in India, his battalion led the assault on the fortress of Bhurtpoor in 1826, which ended the last resistance of the Maratha dynasty to British rule. He spent 3 years in the Caribbean, 6 years in Canada, and retired as Commandant of Dublin Castle in 1853 after a lifetime of service to Empire.

Danny's and Samuel's lives have much in common. They would probably have a lot to talk about if they could ever meet. But there are critical differences. At Bhurtpoor, the two British regiments who led the attack were followed through the breach in the walls by 15 regiments of Indian "Native Infantry." After Bhurtpoor, Britain ruled India (including Pakistan and Bangladesh) for 120 years, with only a thousand British officials in the Indian Civil Service and a few thousand British officers in command of up to 2.5 million Indian troops.

The British brutally put down the Indian Mutiny in 1857-8 with massacres in Delhi, Allahabad, Kanpur and Lucknow. Then, as up to 30 million Indians died in famines in 1876-9 and 1896-1902, the British government of India explicitly prohibited relief efforts or actions that might reduce exports from India to the U.K. or interfere with the operation of the "free market."

As Mike Davis wrote in his 2001 book, Late Victorian Holocausts, "What seemed from a metropolitan perspective the nineteenth century's final blaze of imperial glory was, from an Asian or African viewpoint, only the hideous light of a giant funeral pyre."

And yet Britain kept control of India by commanding such loyalty and subservience from millions of Indians that, in every crisis, Indian troops

obeyed orders from British officers to massacre their own people.

Danny Sjursen and U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and other post-Cold War U.S. war zones are having a very different experience. In Afghanistan, as the Taliban and its allies have taken control of more of the country than at any time since the U.S. invasion, the U.S.-backed Afghan National Army has 25,000 fewer troops under its command than it did five years ago, while ten years of training by U.S. special operations forces has produced only 21,000 trained Afghan Commandos, the elite troops who do 70-80% of the killing and dying for the corrupt U.S.-backed Afghan government.

But the U.S. has not completely failed to win the loyalty of its imperial subjects. The first U.S. soldier killed in action in Afghanistan in 2018 was Sergeant 1st Class Mihail Golin, originally from Latvia. Mihail arrived in the U.S. in November 2004, enlisted in the U.S. Army three months later and has now given his life for the U.S. Empire and for whatever his service to it meant to him. At least 127 other Eastern Europeans have died in occupied Afghanistan, along with 455 British troops, 158 Canadians and 396 soldiers from 17 other countries. But 2,402 – or 68%, over two-thirds – of the occupation troops who have died in Afghanistan since 2001, were Americans.

In Iraq, an American war that always had even less international support or legitimacy, 93% of the occupation troops who have died were Americans, 4,530 out of a total of 4,852 “coalition” deaths.

When Ben Griffin, who later founded the U.K. branch of Veterans for Peace, told his superiors in the U.K.’s elite SAS (Special Air Service) that he could no longer take part in murderous house raids in Baghdad with U.S. special operations forces, he was surprised to find that his entire chain of command understood and accepted his decision. The only officer who tried to change his mind was the chaplain.

The Future of Empire

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff have explicitly told Congress that war with North Korea would require a ground invasion, and the same would likely be true of a U.S. war on Iran. South Korea wants to avoid war at all costs, but may be unavoidably drawn into a U.S.-led Second Korean War.

But besides South Korea, the level of support the U.S. could expect from its allies in a Second Korean War or other wars of aggression in the future would probably be more like Iraq than Afghanistan, with significant international opposition, even from traditional U.S. allies. U.S. troops would therefore make up nearly all of the invasion and occupation forces – and take nearly all of the

casualties.

Compared to past empires, the cost in blood and treasure of policing the U.S. Empire and the blame for its catastrophic failures fall disproportionately – and rightly – on Americans. Even Donald Trump recognizes this problem, but his demands for allied countries to spend more on their militaries and buy more U.S. weapons will not change their people's unwillingness to die in America's wars.

This reality has created political pressure on U.S. leaders to wage war in ways that cost fewer American lives but inevitably kill many more people in countries being punished for resistance to U.S. imperialism, using air strikes and locally recruited death squads instead of U.S. "boots on the ground" wherever possible.

The U.S. conducts a sophisticated propaganda campaign to pretend that U.S. air-launched weapons are so accurate that they can be used safely without killing large numbers of civilians. Actual miss rates and blast radii are on the "banned topics" blacklist, along with realistic estimates of civilian deaths.

When former Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari told Patrick Cockburn of the U.K.'s Independent newspaper that he had seen Iraqi Kurdish intelligence reports which estimated that the U.S.- and Iraqi-led destruction of Mosul had killed 40,000 civilians, the only remotely realistic estimate so far from an official source, no other mainstream Western media followed up on the story.

But America's wars are killing millions of innocent people: people defending themselves, their families, their communities and countries against U.S. imperialism and aggression; and many more who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time under the onslaught of over 210,000 American bombs and missiles dropped on at least 7 countries since 2001.

According to a growing body of research (for example, see the UN Development Program study, Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping-Point for Recruitment), most people who join armed resistance or "terrorist" groups do so mainly to protect themselves and their families from the dangers of wars that others have inflicted on them. The UNDP survey found that the final "tipping point" that pushes over 70% of them to take the fateful step of joining an armed group is the killing or detention of a close friend or family member by foreign or local security forces.

So the reliance on airstrikes and locally recruited death squads, the very strategies that make U.S. imperialism palatable to the American public, are in fact the main "drivers" spreading armed resistance and terrorism to country after country, placing the U.S. Empire on a collision course with itself.

The U.S. effort to delegate war in the Middle East to Saudi Arabia is turning it

into a target of global condemnation as it tries to mimic the U.S. model of warfare by bombing and starving millions of innocent people in Yemen while blaming the victims for their plight. The slaughter by poorly trained and undisciplined Saudi and Emirati pilots is even more indiscriminate than U.S. bombing campaigns, and the Saudis lack the full protection of the Western propaganda system to minimize international outrage at tens of thousands of civilian casualties and an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis.

The need to win the loyalty of imperial subjects by some combination of fear and respect is a basic requirement of Empire. But it appears to be unattainable in the 21st century, certainly by the kind of murderous policies the U.S. has embraced since the end of the Cold War. As Richard Barnet already observed 45 years ago, at the end of the American War in Vietnam, "At the very moment the number one nation has perfected the science of killing, it has become an impractical instrument of political domination."

Obama's sugar-coated charm offensive won U.S. imperialism a reprieve from global public opinion and provided political cover for allied leaders to actively rejoin U.S.-led alliances. But it was dishonest. Under cover of Obama's iconic image, the U.S. spread the violence and chaos of its wars and regime changes and the armed resistance and terrorism they provoke farther and wider, affecting tens of millions more people from Syria and Libya to Nigeria and Ukraine.

Now Trump has taken the mask off and the world is once again confronting the unvarnished, brutal reality of U.S. imperialism and aggression.

China's approach to the world based on trade and infrastructure development has been more successful than U.S. imperialism. The U.S. share of the global economy has declined from 40% to 22% since the 1960s, while China is expected to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest economy in the next decade or two – by some measures, it already has.

While China has become the manufacturing and trading hub of the global economy, the U.S. economy has been financialized and hollowed out, hardly a solid basis for future growth. The neoliberal model of politics and economics that the U.S. adopted a generation ago has created even greater wealth for people who already owned disproportionate shares of everything, but it has left working people in the U.S. and across the U.S. Empire worse off than before.

Like the "next to nothing" that Danny Sjursen came to realize he was fighting for in Iraq and Afghanistan, the prospects for the U.S. economy seem ephemeral and highly vulnerable to the changing tides of economic history.

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

In his 1987 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, historian Paul Kennedy examined the relationship between economic and military power in the histories of the Western empires who colonized the world in the past 500 years. He described how rising powers enjoy significant competitive advantages over established ones, and how every once-dominant power sooner or later has to adjust to the tides of economic history and find a new place in a world it can no longer dominate.

Kennedy explained that military power is only a secondary form of power that wealthy nations develop to protect and support their expanding economic interests. An economically dominant power can quickly convert some of its resources into military power, as the U.S. did during the Second World War or as China is doing today. But once formerly dominant powers have lost ground to new, rising powers, using military power more aggressively has never been a successful way to restore their economic dominance. On the contrary, it has typically been a way to squander the critical years and scarce resources they could otherwise have used to manage a peaceful transition to a prosperous future.

As the U.K. found in the 1950s, using military force to try to hold on to its empire proved counter-productive, as Kennedy described, and peaceful transitions to independence proved to be a more profitable basis for future relations with its former colonies. The drawdown of its global military commitments was an essential part of its transition to a viable post-imperial future.

The transition from hegemony to coexistence has never been easy for any great power, and there is nothing exceptional about the temptation to use military force to try to preserve and prolong the old order. This has often led to catastrophic wars and it has always failed.

It is difficult for any political or military leader to preside over a diminution of his or her country's power in the world. Military leaders are rewarded for military strategies that win wars and expand their country's power, not for dismantling it. Mid-level staff officers who tell their superiors that their weapons and armies cannot solve their country's problems do not win promotion to decision-making positions.

As Gabriel Kolko noted in *Century of War* in 1994, this marginalization of critical voices leads to an "inherent, even unavoidable institutional myopia," under which, "options and decisions that are intrinsically dangerous and irrational become not merely plausible but the only form of reasoning about war and diplomacy that is possible in official circles."

After two world wars and the independence of India, the Suez crisis of 1956 was

the final nail in the coffin of the British Empire, and the Eisenhower administration burnished its own anti-colonial credentials by refusing to support the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden was forced to resign, and he was replaced by Harold Macmillan, who had been a close aide to Eisenhower during the Second World War.

Macmillan dismantled the remains of the British Empire behind the backs of his Conservative Party's supporters, winning reelection in 1959 on the slogan, "You've never had it so good," while the U.S. supported a relatively peaceful transition that preserved Western international business interests and military power.

As the U.S. faces a similar transition from empire to a post-imperial future, its leaders have been seduced by the chimera of the post-Cold War "power dividend" to try to use military force to preserve and expand the U.S. Empire, even as the relative economic position of the U.S. declines.

In 1987, Paul Kennedy ended *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* with a prescient analysis of the U.S. position in the world. He concluded,

"In all of the discussions about the erosion of American leadership, it needs to be repeated again and again that the decline referred to is relative not absolute, and is therefore perfectly natural; and that the only serious threat to the real interests of the United States can come from a failure to adjust sensibly to the newer world order."

But after Kennedy wrote that in 1987, instead of accepting the future of peace and disarmament that the whole world hoped for at the end of the Cold War, a generation of American leaders made a fateful bid for "superpower." Their delusions were exactly the kind of failure to adjust to a changing world that Kennedy warned against.

The results have been catastrophic for millions of victims of U.S. wars, but they have also been corrosive and debilitating for American society, as the perverted priorities of militarism and Empire squander our country's resources and leave working Americans poorer, sicker, less educated and more isolated from the rest of the world.

When I began writing *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq* in 2008, I hoped that the catastrophes in Afghanistan and Iraq might bring U.S. leaders to their senses, as the Suez crisis did to British leaders in 1956.

Instead, eight more years of carefully disguised savagery under Obama have squandered more precious time and good will and spread the violence and chaos of

U.S. war-making even farther and wider. The new National Defense Strategy's implicit threats against Russia and China reveal that 20 years of disastrous imperial wars have done nothing to disabuse U.S. leaders of their delusions of "superpower status" or to restore any kind of sanity to U.S. foreign policy.

Trump is not even pretending to respect diplomacy or international law, as he escalates Bush's and Obama's wars and threatens new ones of his own. But maybe Trump's nakedly aggressive policies will force the world to finally confront the dangers of U.S. imperialism. A coming together of the international community to stop further U.S. aggression may be the only way to prevent an even greater catastrophe than the ones that have already befallen the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Or will it actually take a new and even more catastrophic war in Korea, Iran or somewhere else to finally force the United States to "adjust sensibly to the new world order," as Paul Kennedy put it in 1987? The world has already paid a terrible price for our leaders' failure to take his sound advice a generation ago. But what will be the final cost if they keep ignoring it even now?

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Trump Complies with War-Hawk Wishes

President Trump is plunging ahead with expanded Mideast wars, with emerging escalations in Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere, building on the bloody policies of his predecessors, as retired Col. Ann Wright explains.

By Ann Wright

The militarization of U.S. foreign policy certainly didn't start with President Donald J. Trump; in fact, it goes back several decades. However, if Trump's first 100 days in office are any indication, he has no intention of slowing down the trend.

During a single week in April, the Trump administration fired 59 Tomahawk missiles into a Syrian airfield, and dropped the largest bomb in the U.S. arsenal on suspected ISIS tunnels in Afghanistan. This 21,600-pound incendiary percussion device that had never been used in combat – the Massive Ordnance Air

Blast or MOAB, colloquially known as the “Mother of All Bombs”—was used in the Achin district of Afghanistan, where Special Forces Staff Sergeant Mark De Alencar had been killed a week earlier. (The bomb was tested only twice, at Elgin Air Base, Florida, in 2003.)

To underscore the new administration’s preference for force over diplomacy, the decision to experiment with the explosive power of the mega-bomb was taken unilaterally by General John Nicholson, the commanding general of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. In praising that decision, President Trump declared that he had given “total authorization” to the U.S. military to conduct whatever missions they wanted, anywhere in the world – which presumably means without consulting the interagency national security committee.

It is also telling that President Trump chose generals for two key national security positions traditionally filled by civilians: the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor. Yet three months into his administration, he has left unfilled hundreds of senior civilian governmental positions at State, Defense and elsewhere.

While President Trump has not yet enunciated a policy on the subject of political assassinations, there has so far been no indication that he plans to change the practice of relying on drone killings established by his recent predecessors.

Back in 1976, however, President Gerald Ford set a very different example when he issued his Executive Order 11095. This proclaimed that “No employee of the United States government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination.”

President Ford instituted this prohibition after investigations by the Church Committee (the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, chaired by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho) and the Pike Committee (its House counterpart, chaired by Rep. Otis G. Pike, D-New York) had revealed the extent of the Central Intelligence Agency’s assassination operations against foreign leaders in the 1960s and 1970s.

Permitting Assassinations

With a few exceptions, the next several presidents upheld the ban. But in 1986, President Ronald Reagan ordered an attack on Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi’s home in Tripoli, in retaliation for the bombing of a nightclub in Berlin that killed a U.S. serviceman and two German citizens and injured 229. In just 12 minutes, American planes dropped 60 tons of U.S. bombs on the house, though they failed to kill Gaddafi.

Twelve years later, in 1998, President Bill Clinton ordered the firing of 80 cruise missiles on al-Qaida facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan, in retaliation for the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Clinton administration justified the action by asserting that the proscription against assassination did not cover individuals whom the U.S. government had determined were connected to terrorism.

Days after al-Qaida carried out its Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush signed an intelligence "finding" allowing the Central Intelligence Agency to engage in "lethal covert operations" to kill Osama bin Laden and destroy his terrorist network. White House and CIA lawyers argued that this order was constitutional on two grounds. First, they embraced the Clinton administration's position that E.O. 11905 did not preclude the United States' taking action against terrorists. More sweepingly, they declared that the ban on political assassination did not apply during wartime.

The Bush administration's wholesale rejection of the ban on targeted killing or political assassinations reversed a quarter-century of bipartisan U.S. foreign policy. It also opened the door to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct targeted killings (a euphemism for assassinations).

The U.S. Air Force had been flying unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), since the 1960s, but only as unmanned surveillance platforms. Following 9/11, however, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency weaponized "drones" (as they were quickly dubbed) to kill both leaders and foot soldiers of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

The United States set up bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan for that purpose, but after a series of drone attacks that killed civilians, including a large group gathered for a wedding, the Pakistani government ordered in 2011 that the U.S. drones and U.S. military personnel be removed from its Shamsi Air Base. However, targeted assassinations continued to be conducted in Pakistan by drones based outside the country.

The Obama Approach

In 2009, President Barack Obama picked up where his predecessor had left off. As public and congressional concern increased about the use of aircraft controlled by CIA and military operators located 10,000 miles away from the people they were ordered to kill, the White House was forced to officially acknowledge the targeted killing program and to describe how persons became targets of the program.

Instead of scaling the program back, however, the Obama administration doubled

down. It essentially designated all military-age males in a foreign strike zone as combatants, and therefore potential targets of what it termed “signature strikes.” Even more disturbing, it declared that strikes aimed at specific, high-value terrorists, known as “personality strikes,” could include American citizens.

That theoretical possibility soon became a grim reality. In April 2010, President Obama authorized the CIA to “target” Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen and a former imam at a Virginia mosque, for assassination. Less than a decade before, the Office of the Secretary of the Army had invited the imam to participate in an interfaith service following 9/11. But al-Awlaki later became an outspoken critic of the “war on terror,” moved to his father’s homeland of Yemen, and helped al-Qaida recruit members.

On Sept. 30, 2011, a drone strike killed al-Awlaki and another American, Samir Khan – who was traveling with him in Yemen. U.S. drones killed al-Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, an American citizen, 10 days later in an attack on a group of young men around a campfire. The Obama administration never made clear whether the 16-year-old son was targeted individually because he was al-Awlaki’s son or if he was the victim of a “signature” strike, fitting the description of a young military-age male. However, during a White House press conference, a reporter asked Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs how he could defend the killings, and especially the death of a U.S.-citizen minor who was “targeted without due process, without trial.”

Gibbs’s response did nothing to help the U.S. image in the Muslim world: “I would suggest that you should have had a far more responsible father if they are truly concerned about the well-being of their children. I don’t think becoming an al-Qaida jihadist terrorist is the best way to go about doing your business.”

On Jan. 29, 2017, al-Awlaki’s 8-year-old daughter, Nawar al-Awlaki, was killed in a U.S. commando attack in Yemen ordered by Obama’s successor, Donald Trump.

Weddings and Funerals

Meanwhile, the media continued to report incidents of civilians being killed in drone strikes across the region, which frequently target wedding parties and funerals. Many inhabitants of the region along the Afghan-Pakistan border could hear the buzz of drones circling their area around the clock, causing psychological trauma for all those who live in the area, especially children.

The Obama administration was strongly criticized for the tactic of “double-tap” – hitting a target home or vehicle with a Hellfire missile, and then firing a second missile into the group that came to the aid of those who had been wounded

in the first attack. Many times, those who ran to help rescue persons trapped inside collapsed buildings or flaming cars were local citizens, not militants.

The rationale traditionally offered for using drones is that they eliminate the need for “boots on the ground” – whether members of the armed forces or CIA paramilitary personnel – in dangerous environments, thereby preventing loss of U.S. lives. U.S. officials also claim that the intelligence UAVs gather through lengthy surveillance makes their strikes more precise, reducing the number of civilian casualties. (Left unsaid, but almost certainly another powerful motivator, is the fact that the use of drones means that no suspected militants would be taken alive, thus avoiding the political and other complications of detention.)

Even if these claims are true, however, they do not address the impact of the tactic on U.S. foreign policy. Of broadest concern is the fact that drones allow presidents to punt on questions of war and peace by choosing an option that appears to offer a middle course, but actually has a variety of long-term consequences for U.S. policy, as well as for the communities on the receiving end.

By taking the risk of loss of U.S. personnel out of the picture, Washington policymakers may be tempted to use force to resolve a security dilemma rather than negotiating with the parties involved. Moreover, by their very nature, UAVs may be more likely to provoke retaliation against America than conventional weapons systems. To many in the Middle East and South Asia, drones represent a weakness of the U.S. government and its military, not a strength. Shouldn't brave warriors fight on the ground, they ask, instead of hiding behind a faceless drone in the sky, operated by a young person in a chair many thousands of miles away?

Insider Attacks

Since 2007, at least 150 NATO personnel have been the victims of “insider attacks” by members of the Afghan military and national police forces being trained by the coalition. Many of the Afghans who commit such “green on blue” killings of American personnel, both uniformed and civilian, are from the tribal regions on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan where U.S. drone strikes have focused. They take revenge for the deaths of their families and friends by killing their U.S. military trainers.

Anger against drones has surfaced in the United States as well. On May 1, 2010, Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad attempted to set off a car bomb in Times Square. In his guilty plea, Shahzad justified targeting civilians by telling the judge, “When the drone hits in Afghanistan and Iraq, they don't see children,

they don't see anybody. They kill women, children; they kill everybody. They're killing all Muslims."

As of 2012 the U.S. Air Force was recruiting more drone pilots than pilots for traditional aircraft – between 2012 and 2014, they planned to add 2,500 pilots and support people to the drone program. That is nearly twice the number of diplomats the State Department hires in a two-year period.

Congressional and media concern over the program led to the Obama administration's acknowledgment of the regular Tuesday meetings led by the President to identify targets for the assassination list. In the international media, "Terror Tuesdays" became an expression of U.S. foreign policy.

To many around the world, U.S. foreign policy has been dominated for the past 16 years by military actions in the Middle East and South Asia, and large land and sea military exercises in Northeast Asia. On the world stage, American efforts in the areas of economics, trade, cultural issues and human rights appear to have taken a back seat to the waging of continuous wars.

Continuing the use of drone warfare to carry out assassinations will only exacerbate foreign distrust of American intentions and trustworthiness. It thereby plays into the hands of the very opponents we are trying to defeat.

During his campaign, Donald Trump pledged he would always put "America First," and said he wanted to get out of the business of regime change. It is not too late for him to keep that promise by learning from his predecessors' mistakes and reversing the continued militarization of U.S. foreign policy.

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<http://www.afsa.org/killer-drones-and-militarization-us-foreign-policy>]

Handing Killer Drones to Donald Trump

When President Obama expanded use of lethal drones, many Americans trusted him to act judiciously, but now those exceptional powers have passed to the hot-headed Donald Trump, notes Jesselyn Radack.

By Jesselyn Radack

The news is rife with President Trump's threatened and actual military misadventures: in Syria, Yemen, and North Korea. But these military actions take on a new gravity considering the vast and secret powers Trump inherited.

Former President Obama escalated the use of drone strikes – including in non-battlefield arenas such as Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen – so it is no surprise that President Trump has continued with abandon. While Obama put some constraints on drones, Trump gave the secretive, unaccountable CIA new authority to conduct drone strikes against “suspected militants.”

Specifically, President Obama's constraints on drones included that targets pose an “imminent threat,” that their capture is “not feasible,” and that there be “near certainty” civilians will not be injured or killed. However, Obama didn't always hew closely to his own policy, which evolved throughout his Presidency as legitimate criticism of drone strikes increased.

One of the most famous Americans targeted and killed by a drone, al Qaeda propagandist Anwar al-Awlaki, met none of the early purported criteria. Still, the Justice Department under Obama maintained that the President had the unilateral authority to target and kill American citizens like al-Awlaki. That power now rests with President Trump who has undertaken aggressive and messy military actions in the early days of his presidency.

Trump has pushed for a \$54 billion increase in defense spending. Americans can expect Trump will use their money for expensive military actions like the botched raid in Yemen that killed innocent women and children and an American soldier and resulted in destruction of a \$75 million military helicopter. Or, for decisions that upend years of international relations policy, such as launching 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Syria. (Replacing them will probably cost at least \$1 million per missile).

Fearing the Buzzing Drone

This does not bode well for the millions of people living under the daily buzz of U.S. military drones. The power to target and kill using drone strikes went too unchecked in the Obama administration because we “trusted” him.

Although small pockets of national security, civil liberties, and peace groups complained about the Trust Doctrine, which seemed to apply to the most controversial conduct in which our country was engaged – from torture to surveillance to drone operations – people in positions of power were generally unwilling or unable to imagine what this power would look like in the hands of someone unpredictable, petty, and vengeful.

The Obama administration exalted the drone program's "surgical precision," the internal checks and balances built in, and the careful calculations before taking strikes. Because many saw Obama as a reasonable, intelligent President and capable leader who won the Nobel Peace Prize, Americans too calmly and too quietly accepted the secret killing practices being waged halfway around the world from U.S. Air Force bases in our backyards in Nevada and California.

The drone program is plagued by secrecy and unaccountability. That was true even before Trump put strike authority with the CIA and possibly relaxed civilian kill standards. Several whistleblowers have come forward to point out abusive practices and high turnover within the program, misleading government statements on the accuracy of strikes and targeting capabilities, and an overall pressure to launch strikes while falsely presenting the propagandist narrative that drone warfare allows precision targeting with no harmful effects at home in the U.S. This false narrative persists because politicians want us to believe it – and so do we.

We opened Pandora's box and unleashed drones upon humankind. But in this case, the damage was entirely foreseeable.

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Robot-Delivered Death in Dallas

The Dallas police decision to use a robot-delivered bomb to kill the cornered shooter blamed for murdering five police officers raises troubling legal, technological and public-safety questions, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

As in many cities around the country, Black Lives Matter held a demonstration in Dallas to protest the police shootings of two more black men, Alton Sterling of Louisiana and Philando Castile of Minnesota. During the demonstration, Micah Xavier Johnson, an Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, mounted his own personal, deadly protest by shooting police officers guarding the nonviolent rally. Five officers were killed and seven wounded.

After negotiating for some time with Johnson, who was holed up in a community college parking garage, police sent in a robot armed with explosives and killed him. Dallas Police Chief David Brown said, "We saw no other option but to use our bomb robot and place a device on its extension for it to detonate where the subject was," adding, "Other options would have exposed our officers to grave danger."

The legal question is whether the officers reasonably believed Johnson posed an imminent threat of death or great bodily injury to them at the time they deployed the robot to kill him. Johnson was apparently isolated in the garage, posing no immediate threat. If the officers could attach explosives to the robot, they could have affixed a tear gas canister to the robot instead, to force Johnson out of the garage. Indeed, police in Albuquerque used a robot in 2014 to "deploy chemical munitions," which compelled the surrender of an armed suspect barricaded in a motel room.

But the Dallas police chose to execute Johnson with their killer robot. This was an unlawful use of force and a violation of due process.

The right to due process is a bedrock guarantee, not just in the U.S. Constitution, but also in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a treaty we have ratified, making it part of our domestic law. Due process means arrest and fair trial. It is what separates democracies from dictatorships, in which the executive acts as judge, jury and executioner.

There were also practical public-safety concerns that should have been considered. During the standoff, Johnson reportedly told police there were "bombs all over" downtown Dallas. The police didn't know if that was true. In order to protect the public, they could have interrogated him about the location of the bombs after getting him out of the garage with tear gas.

Apprehension and interrogation are recommended in a 2013 study conducted by the Pentagon's Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force. The study was cited in "The Drone Papers," leaked to The Intercept by an anonymous whistleblower who was a member of the intelligence community. It concluded, "kill operations significantly reduce the intelligence available from detainees and captured material" and recommended capture and interrogation rather than

killing in aerial drone strikes.

The Obama administration currently uses unmanned armed drones to kill people in seven countries, effectively denying them due process.

There is a slippery slope from police use of armed robots to domestic use of armed drones. The Dallas police department's robot was apparently manufactured by Northrup Grumman, the same company that makes the Global Hawk drones, used for surveillance in Obama's drone program.

More than half the U.S.-Mexico border is patrolled with surveillance drones. Customs and Border Protection is considering arming them with "non-lethal" weapons. That could include rubber bullets, which can put out an eye.

The killing of Johnson is evidently the first time domestic law enforcement has utilized an armed robot to kill a suspect. It will not be the last. Police departments are becoming increasingly militarized, using assault weapons, armored personnel carriers, grenade launchers, and ear-splitting sirens known as LRADs. Much of this equipment is purchased from the Pentagon at a significant discount.

But the answer to our national epidemic of racist police killings is not to further militarize law enforcement. We must completely rethink and restructure policing. That means requiring advanced degrees for police officers, intensive screening for racism, and rigorous training in how to handle cross-racial situations. It means moving toward community-based policing and citizens police-review boards with independent authority. And it means coming to grips with the pernicious racism that permeates our society.

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, a former criminal defense attorney, and past president of the National Lawyers Guild. Her most recent book is **Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues**. Follow her on **Twitter**. This article originally appeared in **The Hill** newspaper.

Study Says Drones Generate More Terrorism

Using lethal drones to kill "bad guys" on the other side of the planet is offensive to many people on moral grounds, but a new study finds it is also

ineffective in reducing terrorism, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A recent study by Emily Manna about drone strikes and terrorism in Pakistan warrants attention as a useful contribution to discussion of the effectiveness of such strikes as a counterterrorism tool.

The issue of just how useful the firings of missiles from unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly called drones, are in killing suspected terrorists on the ground, has multiple dimensions. Larger legal and moral questions arise with this form of remote-control violence being inflicted in disparate places ranging across many international boundaries – especially in the absence of any well-defined and up-to-date congressional authorization for the overseas use of force.

A narrower question of effectiveness concerns how much the killing of individual members, including even leading members, leads to the weakening or demise of any existing terrorist group. The tactic is only one of several approaches toward trying to eliminate a terrorist group, and not necessarily one of the more effective ones.

Groups with a well-developed internal structure, which also tend to be the more formidable and sophisticated groups, are adept at filling vacancies. Sometimes the replacement turns out to be more able than the leader who was bumped off. This was true when Israel's killing of Hezbollah secretary general Abbas Musawi led to the succession of the more capable Hassan Nasrallah. It also was true when the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, cleared the way for the more adept Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to take over and to expand the group into what we now know as ISIS.

Another set of issues that are just important concerns hostile reactions to this use of force by the United States, leading to anger and resentment that pushes some people across the line into extremist violence and thus breeding more terrorists than there were before.

There is some reason to believe that most such counterproductive effects occur at some remove from the location of drone strikes; word of the destructive application of U.S. power can spread quickly and widely, but any favorable effects of removing a bad guy from the neighborhood would tend to be more local. If net positive effects are to be observed, they would more likely be relatively close to the scene of a drone strike.

Manna's research suggests that, at least in Pakistan, the effects are negative even in the neighborhood of a drone strike. Her methodology involved looking at

individual provinces and correlating terrorist activity in the same month as, and the month following, drone strikes. The principal finding was a statistically significant rise in terrorist attacks in a province after it became the target of U.S. drone strikes.

The U.S. program of drone strikes never was the result of a calculated process of analyzing the effects of different counterterrorist tools and choosing this tool as more effective than some others. Rather, the tool was seized on because it was the only way to reach some suspected terrorists in remote areas, at least short of staging a major military ground expedition into those areas.

But if the result of a tactic – in counterterrorism or any other endeavor – is a net minus rather than a net plus, then it ought not to be used even if it is the only tactic available. As more analyzable data from the drone program become available, they ought to be used to take fresh looks at the rationale for the entire program. And political leaders need to resist the temptation to seize upon certain tactics as a way of responding to popular demand to “do something” about terrorism.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies and author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

Ramstein: A Key Link in the Kill Chain

As the U.S. military relies more and more on remote-controlled drones to kill people half a world away, one of the key links in the chain of death is in southwest Germany, the Ramstein Air Base, reports Norman Solomon for The Nation.

By Norman Solomon

The overseas hub for America’s “war on terror” is the massive Ramstein Air Base in southwest Germany. Nearly ignored by U.S. media, Ramstein serves crucial functions for drone warfare and much more. It’s the most important Air Force base abroad, operating as a kind of grand central station for airborne war – whether relaying video images of drone targets in Afghanistan to remote pilots with trigger fingers in Nevada, or airlifting special-ops units on missions to Africa, or transporting munitions for airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Soaking up billions of taxpayer dollars, Ramstein has scarcely lacked for anything from the

home country, other than scrutiny.

Known as “Little America” in this mainly rural corner of Germany, the area now includes 57,000 U.S. citizens clustered around Ramstein and a dozen smaller bases. The Defense Department calls it “the largest American community outside of the United States.”

Ramstein serves as the biggest Air Force cargo port beyond U.S. borders, providing “full spectrum airfield operations” along with “world-class airlift and expeditionary combat support.” The base also touts “superior” services and “exceptional quality of life.” To look at Ramstein and environs is to peer into a faraway mirror for the United States; what’s inside the frame is normality for endless war.

Ramstein’s gigantic Exchange store (largest in the U.S. military) is the centerpiece for an oversize shopping mall, just like back home. A greeting from the Holy Family Catholic Community at Ramstein tells newcomers: “We know that being in the military means having to endure frequent moves to different assignments. This is part of the price we pay by serving our country.”

Five American colleges have campuses on the base. Ellenmarie Zwank Brown, who identifies herself as “an Air Force wife and a physician,” is reassuring in a cheerful guidebook that she wrote for new arrivals: “If you are scared of giving up your American traditions, don’t worry! The military goes out of its way to give military members an American way of life while living in Germany.”

That way of life is contoured around nonstop war. Ramstein is the headquarters for the U.S. Air Force in Europe, and the base is now pivotal for using air power on other continents.

“We touch a good chunk of the world right from Ramstein,” a public-affairs officer, Maj. Tony Wickman, told me during a recent tour of the base. “We think of it as a power-projection platform.”

The scope of that projection is vast, with “areas of responsibility” that include Europe, Russia, and Africa – 104 countries in all. And Ramstein is well-staffed to meet the challenge, with over 7,500 “active duty Airmen” – more than any other U.S. military base in the world except the Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

Serving the transport needs of war efforts in Iraq and Syria (countries hit by 28,675 U.S. bombs and missiles last year) as well as in many other nations, Ramstein is a central pit stop for enormous cargo jets like the C-5 Galaxy and C-17 Globemaster. The Ramstein base currently supports “fifteen different major combat operations,” moving the daily supply chain and conducting urgent

airlifts.

Last July, when Ankara gave Washington a green light to use Turkey's Incirlik Air Base for launching airstrikes in Syria, vital equipment quickly flew from Ramstein to Incirlik so F-16s could start bombing.

But these days a lot of Ramstein's attention is focused southward. The base maintains a fleet of fourteen newest-model C-130 turboprops, now coming in mighty handy for secretive U.S. military moves across much of Africa. With its sleek digital avionics, the cockpit of a C-130J looked impressive. But more notable was the plane's spacious cargo bay, where a pilot explained that it can carry up to 44,000 pounds of supplies – or as many as 92 Army Airborne “jumpers,” who can each be saddled with enough weapons and gear to weigh in at 400 pounds. From the air, troops or freight – even steamrollers, road graders, and Humvees – leave the plane's hold with parachutes. Or the agile plane can land on “undeveloped air fields.”

With Ramstein as its home, the C-130J is ideal for flying war matériel and special-operations forces to remote terrain in northern and western Africa. (The Pentagon describes it as “a rugged combat transporter designed to take off and land at austere fields.”)

In mid-2014, the itinerary of a single trip got into a fleeting news story when a teenage stowaway was found dead in a wheel well of a C-130J at Ramstein, after the plane returned from a circuit to Tunisia, Mali, Senegal, and Chad. Stealthy intervention has escalated widely in the two years since journalist Nick Turse found that the U.S. military was already averaging “far more than a mission a day on the continent, conducting operations with almost every African military force, in almost every African country.”

The officers I met at Ramstein in early spring often mentioned Africa. But the base mission of “power projection” hardly stops there.

Implausible Peace

In the American foreign policy lexicon, peace has become implausible, a faded memory, a mythic rationale for excelling at war. An airlift squadron at the Ramstein Air Base, which proudly calls itself the “Fighting Doves,” displays a logo of a muscular bird with dukes up.

On lampposts in a town near Ramstein's gates, I saw campaign posters for Germany's Left Party (*Die Linke*) with a picture of a dove and a headline that could hardly have been more out of sync with the base: *Wie lange wollt ihr den Frieden noch herbei-bomben?* “How much longer do you want to keep achieving peace by bombing?” Such questions lack relevance when war is perceived not as a means

to an end, but an end in itself.

More than ever, with relatively few U.S. troops in combat and air war all the rage, the latest military technology is the filter of the American warrior's experience. When Ramstein's 60,800-square-foot Air and Space Operations Center opened in October 2011, the Air Force crowed that it "comes with 40 communication systems, 553 workstations, 1,500 computers, 1,700 monitors, 22,000 connections, and enough fiber optics to stretch from here to the Louvre in Paris." (Mona Lisa not included.)

A news release focused on "the critical mission of monitoring the airspace above Europe and Africa" and "controlling the skies from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Needles." But the Defense Department didn't mention that the new hyper-tech center would be vital to the USA's drone war.

Ramstein receives visual images from drones via satellite, then relays the images to sensor operators and pilots at computer terminals in the United States.

"Ramstein is absolutely essential to the US drone program," says Brandon Bryant, a former Air Force sensor operator who participated in drone attacks on Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia for five years while stationed in New Mexico and Nevada. "All information and data go through Ramstein. Everything. For the whole world."

Bryant and other sensor operators had Ramstein on speed dial: "Before we could establish a link from our ground-control station in the United States to the drone, we literally would have to call Ramstein up and say 'Hey, can you connect us to this satellite feed?' We would just pick up the phone and press the button and it automatically dials in to Ramstein." Bryant concluded that the entire system for drone strikes was set up "to take away responsibility, so that no one has responsibility for what happens."

The U.S. government's far-flung system for extrajudicial killing uses Ramstein as a kind of digital switchboard in a process that fogs accountability and often kills bystanders. A former Air Force drone technician, Cian Westmoreland, told me that many of the technical people staffing Ramstein's Air and Space Operations Center are apt to be "none the wiser; they would just know a signal is going through."

Westmoreland was stationed in Afghanistan at the Kandahar Air Field, where he helped build a signal relay station that connected to Ramstein. He never moved a joystick to maneuver a drone and never pushed a button to help fire a missile. Yet, in 2016, Westmoreland speaks sadly of the commendations he received for

helping to kill more than 200 people with drone strikes.

“I did my job,” he said, “and now I have to live with that.”

During his work on the drone program, Westmoreland developed “a new kind of understanding of what modern warfare actually is. We’re moving towards more network-centric warfare. So, orders [are] dealt out over a network, and making systems more autonomous, putting less humans in the chain. And a lot of the positions are going to be maintenance, they’re technician jobs, to keep systems up and running.”

Those systems strive to reduce the lag time from target zone to computer screen in Nevada. The delay during satellite transmission (“latency” in tech jargon) can last up to six seconds, depending on weather conditions and other factors, but once the signal gets to Ramstein it reaches Nevada almost instantly via fiber-optic cable.

Permission to fire comes from an attack controller who “could be anywhere,” as Bryant put it, “just looking at the same video feeds as us pilots and sensors. He just sits in front of a screen too.”

As Andrew Cockburn wrote in his recent book *Kill Chain*, “there is a recurrent pattern in which people become transfixed by what is on the screen, seeing what they want to see, especially when the screen – with a resolution equal to the legal definition of blindness for drivers – is representing people and events thousands of miles and several continents away.”

Steely Link in a Chain

For all its ultra-tech importance, the Air and Space Operations Center at Ramstein is just a steely link in a kill chain of command, while a kind of assembly-line Taylorism keeps producing the drone war.

“I think that’s part of the strength of the secrecy of the program,” Bryant said. “It’s fragmented.” Meanwhile, “We were supposed to function and never ask questions.”

Worlds away, the carnage is often lethally haphazard. For example, [classified documents obtained by The Intercept shed light](#) on a special ops series of airstrikes from January 2012 to February 2013 in northeast Afghanistan, code-named Operation Haymaker. The attacks killed more than 200 people, while only 35 were the intended targets. Such numbers may be disturbing, yet they don’t convey what actually happens in human terms.

Several years ago, Pakistani photographer Noor Behram described the aftermath of

a U.S. drone attack: “There are just pieces of flesh lying around after a strike. You can’t find bodies. So the locals pick up the flesh and curse America. They say that America is killing us inside our own country, inside our own homes, and only because we are Muslims.”

Even without a missile strike, there are the traumatic effects of drones hovering overhead. Former *New York Times* reporter David Rohde recalled the sound during his captivity by the Taliban in 2009 in tribal areas of Pakistan: “The drones were terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death.”

But such matters are as far removed from Little America in southwest Germany as they are from Big America back home.

The American drone war has long been unpopular in Germany, where polling indicates that two out of three citizens oppose it. So President Obama was eager to offer assurances during a visit to Berlin three years ago, declaring: “We do not use Germany as a launching point for unmanned drones...as part of our counterterrorism activities.” But such statements miss the point, intentionally, and obscure how much the drone war depends on German hospitality.

Attorney Hans-Christian Ströbele, a prominent Green Party member of the Bundestag, told *The Nation* that “the targeted killings with drones are illegal executions at least in countries which aren’t in war with Germany. These illegal executions offend against human rights, international law and the German *Grundgesetz* [Constitution]. If German official institutions permit this and do not stop these actions, they become partly responsible.”

With 10 percent of the Bundestag’s seats, the Greens have the same size bloc as the other opposition party, the Left Party.

“To kill people with a joystick from a safe position thousands of miles away is a disgusting and inhumane form of terror,” Sahra Wagenknecht, co-chair of the Left Party, told me. “A war is no video game – at least not for those who have not the slightest chance to defend themselves.... These extrajudicial killings are war crimes, and the German government should draw the consequences and close down the air base in Ramstein.... In my view, the drone war is a form of state terrorism, which is going to produce thousands of new terrorists.”

A lawsuit filed last year in Germany focuses on a drone attack in eastern Yemen on Aug. 29, 2012, that killed two members of the Bin Ali Jaber family, which had gathered in the village of Khashamir to celebrate a wedding.

“Were it not for the help of Germany and Ramstein, men like my brother-in-law

and nephew might still be alive today,” said Faisal bin Ali Jaber, one of the surviving relatives behind the suit. “It is quite simple: Without Germany, US drones would not fly.”

But the German judiciary has rebuffed such civil suits – most recently in late April, when a court in Cologne rejected pleas about a drone strike that killed two people in Somalia, including a herdsman who was not targeted.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has played dumb about drone-related operations in her country. “The German government claims to know nothing at all,” Bundestag member Ströbele said. “Either this is a lie, or the government does not want to know.”

The general secretary of the Berlin-based European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Wolfgang Kaleck, sums up the German government’s strategy as “See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing.” He charges that “Germany is making itself complicit in the deaths of civilians as part of the U.S. drone war.”

Anger Over Spying

After an uproar over U.S. National Security Agency spying in Germany caused the Bundestag to set up a special committee of inquiry two years ago, it became clear that surveillance issues are intertwined with Ramstein’s role in a drone program that relies on cell-phone numbers to find targets.

The Green Party’s representative on the eight-member committee, Konstantin von Notz, sounded both pragmatic and idealistic when I interviewed him this spring at a Berlin cafe. “We assume that there is a close connection between surveillance and Ramstein,” he said, “as data collected and shared by German and U.S. intelligence services already led to drone killings coordinated via Ramstein.”

Left Party co-chair Wagenknecht was emphatic about the BND, Germany’s intelligence agency. “The BND delivers phone numbers of possible drone targets to the NSA and other agencies,” she told *The Nation*. “The BND and our foreign minister bear part of the blame. They do not only tolerate war crimes, they assist them.”

The United States now has 174 military bases operating inside Germany, more than in any other country. (Japan is second, with 113.) The military presence casts a shadow over German democracy, says historian Josef Foscopo, a professor at the University of Freiburg.

“As long as there are Allied troops or military bases and facilities on German soil,” he wrote in a 2014 article, “there will be Allied surveillance measures carried out on and from German soil, which means, in particular, American

surveillance.”

For surveillance and an array of other spooky purposes, the U.S. government created what would become the BND at the end of World War II. “We grew it carefully,” a retired senior Defense Intelligence Agency official, W. Patrick Lang, said in an interview. “They’ve always cooperated with us, completely and totally.”

Intelligence ties between the two governments remain tightly knotted. “When it comes to the secret services,” Professor Foschepoth told a public forum in Berlin last summer, “there are some old legal foundations where the federal [German] government follows the American interests more than the interests of their own citizens.”

Extending such talk to depict the current U.S. military presence as bad for democracy in Germany is a third rail in German politics. When Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg quoted from Foschepoth’s article at the Berlin forum – and pointedly asked, “Why are American troops here still? Why the bases?” – the panelist from the Green Party, von Notz, vehemently objected to going there.

“I wouldn’t open the discussion or have in the background that this is still an occupation problem or something,” he said. “It’s not a problem of troops somewhere – it’s a problem of lacking democracy, state of law, controlling our secret services today.”

Nine months later, talking with him at Café Einstein on Berlin’s Kurfürstenstrasse, I asked von Notz why he’d pushed back so heatedly against the idea that U.S. military bases are constraining German democracy.

“Germany needs to take full responsibility of what is going on on its territory,” he responded. “The German government can no longer hide behind a U.S.-German relation allegedly characterized by the post-World War II occupation. Germany strictly has to ensure that the U.S. intelligence services comply with the law without ignoring the illegal actions of its own Federal Intelligence Service [the BND].”

Furtive War in Africa

Whatever the state of its democracy, Germany is continuing to enable America’s furtive warfare in Africa. Ramstein’s many roles include serving as home to U.S. Air Forces Africa, where a press officer gave me a handout describing the continent as “key to addressing transnational violent extremist threats.” The military orders come from the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) headquarters in Stuttgart, a two-hour drive from Ramstein.

At first, AFRICOM – which calls itself “a full-spectrum combatant command” – was to be a short-term guest in southwest Germany, some 800 miles from Africa’s closest shores. A State Department cable, marked “Secret” and dated Aug. 1, 2008, said that “no decision has been made on a permanent AFRICOM headquarters location.”

Two months later, just as AFRICOM was going into full-fledged operation, a confidential cable from the U.S. Embassy in Berlin reported that “the German government strongly supported the US decision to temporarily base” AFRICOM in Germany.

Yet at the outset, as U.S. diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks show, tensions existed with the host country. Germany balked at extending blanket legal immunity under the NATO Status of Forces Agreement to every American civilian employee at the new AFRICOM facility, and the dispute applied to “all US military commands in Germany.”

While the two governments negotiated behind the scenes into late 2008 (one confidential cable from the U.S. Embassy in Berlin complained about the German Foreign Office’s “unhelpful positions”), AFRICOM made itself at home in Stuttgart.

Nearly eight years later, the “temporary” headquarters for AFRICOM shows no sign of budging. “AFRICOM will stay permanent in Stuttgart if Germany won’t protest against it,” said the Green Party’s Ströbele, who has been on the Bundestag’s intelligence committee for almost 20 years.

He told *The Nation*: “We do not know enough about the AFRICOM facility. Nevertheless there is the assumption that this facility is used to organize and to lead U.S. combat missions in Africa. Because of this reason no country in Africa wanted to have this facility.”

Whatever political hazards might lurk for AFRICOM in Germany, the U.S. government finds those risks preferable to headquartering its Africa Command in Africa. And there are more and more interventions to sweep under rugs.

“A network of American drone outposts” now “stretches across east and west Africa,” reports the Center for the Study of the Drone, which is based at Bard College. One of the new locations is northern Cameroon, where a base for Gray Eagle drones (capable of dropping bombs and launching Hellfire missiles) recently went into full operation, accompanied by 300 U.S. troops, including special-operations forces.

In late winter *The New York Times* reported that the United States “is about to break ground on a new \$50 million drone base in Agadez, Niger, that will allow

Reaper surveillance aircraft to fly hundreds of miles closer to southern Libya.”

In March the Pentagon triumphantly announced that drones teamed up with manned jets to kill “more than 150 terrorist fighters” at an al-Shabab training camp in Somalia.

As drone attacks have widened, they’ve become a growing provocation to a vocal minority of German lawmakers. “We deeply regret Germany’s loss of sovereignty, but the government keeps on acting cowardly,” said Sevim Dagdelen, the Left Party’s leader on foreign affairs.

Another member of the party in the Bundestag, Andrej Hunko, told me that “AFRICOM in Stuttgart and the Air Operation Center in Ramstein are very important hubs for drone strikes led by the U.S. military” – but “it is very difficult for German lawmakers to control this issue.”

Hunke and colleagues filed more than a dozen requests for explanation of drone-related policy from the German government, but he says “the answers were always dodgy.”

The Merkel government deflects formal queries about Ramstein and AFRICOM by claiming to have no reliable information – a stance abetted by the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), now in its third year of serving as a big junior partner to Merkel’s right-leaning Christian Democratic Union. While Left Party legislators and some in the Green Party denounce the stonewalling, they have scant leverage; the two parties combined are just one-fifth of the Bundestag.

Merkel’s stone wall is strengthened by the fact that some Green Party leaders have no problem with U.S. bases. (Citing the very left-wing pasts of several key figures in today’s party, one peace activist near Ramstein tartly remarked that “the Green Party changed from red to green to olive green.”)

In the affluent state of Baden-Württemberg, home to AFRICOM headquarters, the state’s Green minister-president Winfried Kretschmann is a military booster. Likewise, the drone program has nothing to fear from Fritz Kuhn, mayor of Stuttgart, the largest city in Germany with a Green mayor. Kuhn declined to answer any of the questions that I submitted in writing about his views on AFRICOM and its operations in his city. “Mayor Kuhn wants to waive the interview,” a spokesman said.

More than publicly acknowledged, the economic benefits of hosting AFRICOM’s headquarters were major factors in the German government’s decision to allow it to open in the first place, a member of the Bundestag told me.

With the U.S. military footprint shrinking in the country, Germany’s political

establishment saw the chance to welcome AFRICOM as very good news. Today, AFRICOM says that 1,500 U.S. military and civilian personnel are stationed at its Kelley Barracks command center in Stuttgart.

Ready for World War Three

“Ramstein is a preparation center for the next world war,” Wolfgang Jung said as we neared the base. War has overshadowed his entire life. Jung was born in 1938, and his childhood memories are vivid with fear and the destruction that came with bombs (from both sides).

He lost two schoolmates. His father ended up on the Russian front and died in a POW camp just after the war’s end. As a teenager, Jung saw Ramstein open, and in the decades since then he has become a dogged researcher. The base is not just about drones, he stressed. Far from it.

The entire region is brandishing huge arsenals. Ten miles from Ramstein, the Miesau Army Depot is the U.S. military’s biggest storage area for ammunition outside the United States. In late February the depot received what *Stars and Stripes* reported as “the largest Europe-bound ammo shipment in 10 years” – more than 5,000 tons of U.S. Army ammunition that arrived while the Pentagon was “ramping up missions on the Continent, particularly along NATO’s eastern flank, in response to concerns about a more aggressive Russia.”

In many ways, this heavily militarized stretch of Germany is now a ground-zero powder keg. The consolidated Allied Air Command, “responsible for all Air and Space matters within NATO,” has been at the Ramstein base since 2013.

The command includes a center for missile defense, the nexus of the latest U.S. scenario for a missile shield – which the Kremlin views as a threatening system that would make a first strike against Russia more tempting and more likely. Interviewed by the German newspaper *Bild* in January, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he saw “striving for an absolute triumph in the American missile defense plans.”

Such matters preoccupy Jung and his wife Felicitas Strieffler, also a lifelong resident of the area. She spoke of Ramstein as a grave menace to the world and a blight on the region. Locals dread sunny days, she said, because roaring warplanes take to cloudless skies for training maneuvers.

On a hillside, after climbing a 60-foot tower – a red sandstone monument built in 1900 to honor Bismarck – we looked out over a panorama dominated by Ramstein’s runways, hangars, and aircraft. Strieffler talked about a dream she keeps having: The base will be closed and, after the chemical pollutants are removed, it will become a lake where people can go boating and enjoy the

beauties of nature.

Such hopes might seem unrealistic, but a growing number of activists in Germany are working to end Ramstein's drone role and eventually close the base. On June 11, several thousand protesters gathered in the rain to form a "human chain" that stretched for more than five miles near the Ramstein perimeter.

At the Stopp Ramstein Kampagne office in Berlin, a 37-year-old former history student, Pascal Luig, exuded commitment and calm as he told me that "the goal should be the closing of the whole air base." He added, "Without Ramstein, no [U.S.] war in the Middle East would be possible."

With no hope of persuading the U.S. government to shut down Ramstein and its other bases in his country, Luig wants a movement strong enough to compel the German government to evict them.

The Pentagon top brass can't be happy about the publicity in Germany connecting Ramstein to the drone war. "They like to keep these things low key, just because there are points of vulnerability," former drone technician Cian Westmoreland said, noting that "the military is all about redundancies."

In fact, even while Ramstein's Air and Space Operations Center was going into action nearly five years ago, a similar facility was on the drawing boards for the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. According to some sources, the ultimate goal is to replace Ramstein with Sigonella as the main site for relay of drone signals. (Replying to my inquiry, an Air Force spokesman at Ramstein, Maj. Frank Hartnett, wrote in an e-mail: "There are currently no plans to relocate the center's activities." He did not respond to follow-up questions.)

An investigative journalist working for the Italian newsmagazine *L'Espresso*, Stefania Maurizi, told me in mid-spring that progress toward such a center at Sigonella remained at a snail's pace. But on June 21, she reported that an Italian engineering firm had just won a contract for a building similar to Ramstein's relay center. Construction at Sigonella could be completed by 2018.

As part of the militarization process in Italy – "the Pentagon has turned the Italian peninsula into a launching pad for future wars in Africa, the Middle East and beyond," author David Vine observes – Sigonella already has some infrastructure for satellite communication. Another asset is that Italy is even more deferential to the American military than Germany is.

"Italy has become the launching pad for the U.S. wars, and in particular for the drone wars, without any public debate," Maurizi says. "Our responsibilities are huge and the Italian public is kept in the dark."

And when the Pentagon decides to build big in Italy, it doesn't hurt the momentum that – as Vine documents in his 2015 book *Base Nation* – the lucrative contracts are routinely signed with Italian construction firms controlled by the Mafia.

In any event, no one can doubt that the Defense Department has become utterly enthralled with drones, officially dubbed Remotely Piloted Aircraft.

“Our RPA enterprise” is now “flying combat missions around the globe,” the general running the Air Combat Command, Herbert Carlisle, testified to a Senate subcommittee in March. There was no mistaking his zeal to further expand drone missions, mangled syntax notwithstanding: “They are arming decision makers with intelligence, our warfighters with targets, and our enemies with fear, anxiety and ultimately their timely end.”

General Carlisle said the U.S. military is now flying five times as many drone sorties as a decade ago – a boost that “exemplifies the furious pace at which we have expanded our operations and enterprise.” But he warned that “an insatiable demand for RPA forces has stretched the community thin, especially our Airmen performing the mission.”

Today, almost 8,000 Air Force personnel are “solely dedicated” to Predator and Reaper drone missions. “Of the 15 bases with RPA units,” Carlisle said, “13 of them have a combat mission. This mission is of such value that we plan on consistent increases in aircraft, personnel and results.”

Several weeks after his testimony, Reuters – citing “previously unreported US Air Force data” – revealed that “drones fired more weapons than conventional warplanes for the first time in Afghanistan last year and the ratio is rising.”

Some in-house government appraisals have concluded that the drone war fails because it creates more enemies than it kills. But the “war on terror” is anything but a failure for many corporations or the individuals who spin through the revolving doors of the military-industrial complex.

As a critical node in the Pentagon's global “intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance” (ISR) system, Ramstein is integral to ongoing boondoggles for contractors like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Booz Allen Hamilton, and General Dynamics. The bottomless pit for taxpayers is a bottomless well for firms catering to the Air Force, with its jargon-larded pursuit of “a distributed ISR operation capable of providing world-wide, near-real-time simultaneous intelligence to multiple theaters of operation through ... robust reachback communications architectures.”

Looking back at the milieu of his work in the drone program, Westmoreland has

concluded that “it’s more or less a for-profit venture. When you get out of the military, you expect to get a job in the defense sector, an executive position. And really it’s about racking up as many awards and decorations as you possibly can.”

At the top ranks, Westmoreland sees a conflict of interest: “They have an incentive to keep wars going.” For the military’s leadership, the available dividends are quite large. For instance, former NSA and CIA director Gen. Michael Hayden – an outspoken advocate of the drone program – received \$240,125 last year as a member of the board at Motorola Solutions. That company has an investment in CyPhy Works, a major developer of drones.

Endless war propels an endless gravy train.

A Human Discourse

Like the other drone whistleblowers interviewed for this article, former tech sergeant Lisa Ling was careful not to reveal any classified information. But when we met at a coffee shop in California, what she said at the outset could be heard as subversive of the U.S. drone program: “I would like to see humanity brought into the political discourse.”

Her two decades in the military included several years of work on assimilating Air National Guard personnel into the drone program. Now she expresses remorse for taking part in a program where “no one person has responsibility.”

The new documentary film *National Bird* includes these words from Ling: “We are in the United States of America and we are participating in an overseas war, a war overseas, and we have no connection to it other than wires and keyboards. Now, if that doesn’t scare the crap out of you, it does out of me. Because if that’s the only connection, why stop?”

After leaving the Air Force, Ling went on a humanitarian mission to Afghanistan, planting trees and distributing seeds to people she’d previously seen only as indistinct pixels. The drone war haunts her. Ling asks how we would feel if armed drones kept hovering in the sky above our own communities, positioned to kill at any moment.

In the Little America where the Ramstein Air Base is the crown military jewel, such questions go unasked. For that matter, we rarely hear them in Big America. Yet those questions must be asked, or the forever war will be.

Norman Solomon is a journalist with ExposeFacts.org, a project of the Institute for Public Accuracy; the author of *War Made Easy*; and a co-founder of RootsAction.org. *The Whistleblower & Source Protection Program at ExposeFacts*

provides legal representation for the former drone operators quoted in this article, which first appeared in The Nation magazine at <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-most-important-us-air-force-base-youve-never-heard-of/>. [Re-posted with the author's permission.]

'War on Terror' Blowback Hits Dallas

The blowback from America's "war on terror" swept into Dallas last Friday when an Afghan War veteran allegedly killed five police officers and was killed in turn by a remote-controlled robot deploying a bomb, writes retired Col. Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

In response to the killing of five police officers and wounding of seven more in Dallas, Texas, Police Chief David O. Brown became the first city or state official to order a remote-controlled execution of a suspected killer with whom hours of negotiation had not resulted in surrender.

The decision of the local city police chief to remotely assassinate the cornered suspect rather than make an attempt to incapacitate him is a stark continuation of what appears to be a U.S. military and police tactic of kill rather than capture. Brown has 30 years of law enforcement experience with training at many police schools including the National Counter-Terrorism Seminar in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Due to the past 15 years of U.S. ground and drones wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia, many veterans of U.S. military and CIA paramilitary units are now on local, state and federal police forces. These officers have served under wartime rules of engagement which should be much different from civilian law enforcement.

However, with the militarization of U.S. police forces, it appears that the Dallas police chief used the military tactic of assassination by a remote-controlled weapon system to protect the lives of the police and sacrifice the rights of an accused to trial.

No doubt the police chief will argue that he could have ordered snipers to shoot to kill the suspect and that the method of death didn't matter once the decision was made to kill Afghan war veteran Micah Johnson, the alleged shooter, rather than to incapacitate him.

In that sense, the Dallas Chief of Police and the President of the United States use the same rationale to execute without trial someone suspected of a crime. There are also parallels between Chief Brown's choice of a robot to deliver the lethal explosives and President Obama's extensive use of missile-firing drones.

Do U.S. government officers at all levels – national, state and local – now believe that remote-control killing of a target is safer and cheaper than detaining the accused (whether a suspected international terrorist or a domestic suspect) than arresting the person, holding a trial and imprisoning him or her after a conviction for a crime.

It appears that shooting to kill is easier in all aspects whether it's unmanned aerial drones killing people outside the United States or unmanned ground robots with bombs inside the United States. The next step down this the slippery slope may be the use of small aerial weaponized drones by local police departments to kill suspects, just as this ground drone robot bombed a suspect to death. Already some U.S. law enforcement agencies have deployed aerial drones for surveillance purposes, including border patrol.

It's now time for community activists to ask their city council members what rules of engagement their police officers use when a suspect is cornered. I suspect that in many cities the rules say shoot to kill rather than shoot to incapacitate/capture/detain, certainly the statistics on police shootings seem to indicate that the national tactic for police departments is to shoot to kill.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She was in the US diplomatic corps for 16 years and served in US Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the US government in March 2003 in opposition to the war on Iraq. She has been arrested several times protesting US military assassin drones. She is the co-author of *Dissent: Voices of Conscience*.

Gaza: Living and Dying with Drones

While U.S. political leaders claim to uphold universal human rights, nearly all are selective in sympathizing with Israel in its lopsided war against the Palestinians as reflected in the 2014 slaughter in Gaza, recalls Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

Two years ago, on July 7, 2014, the Israeli government launched a horrific 51-

day air, land and sea attack on the people of Gaza. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) fired missiles, rockets, artillery and tank shells relentlessly on 1.8 million Palestinians squashed by Israeli land and sea blockades into a narrow strip 25 miles long and 5 miles wide, one of the most densely populated places in the world.

Of the 2,219 or so Palestinians killed (estimates vary), some 1,545 were civilians and nearly 500 of them were slaughtered by Israeli assassin drones, a style of warfare that has become the norm for both the United States and Israel. Drones fly above Gaza 24 hours a day watching the movements of every Palestinian and ready to fire rockets at those chosen to die by the Israeli Defense Force and its political masters.

This pattern goes back well before 2014. Al Mezan Center for Human Rights documents that, from 2008 until October 2013, out of 2,269 Palestinians killed by Israel, 911 were killed by drones, most during the 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead. In the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense, 143 out of 171 Palestinians killed by Israel were by drone attack.

In the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza, the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights documents 497 Palestinian civilians killed by drones. At the end of the 51 days, besides the 2,219 overall death toll, 1,545 were civilians, including 556 children. Among the 10,600 or so wounded were 2,647 children, according to the Mezan Center.

There was devastation, too, to Gaza's infrastructure. The Mezan Center listed 8,381 houses destroyed and more than 23,000 damaged. The devastation extended to schools (138 damaged or destroyed) and hospitals and health facilities (26 damaged). According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over 273,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip had been displaced of whom 236,375 (over 11 percent of the Gazan population) were taking shelter in 88 United Nations schools.

On the other side, Palestinian militias shot homemade rockets killing 66 Israeli soldiers, five Israeli civilians, including one child, and one Thai citizen in Israel.

The 51-day Israeli attack on Gaza should not be characterized as a war between opposing forces but rather as a massive one-sided attack on Palestinians made at the choosing of Israel with its overwhelming military air, sea and land forces backed up with endless military supplies and equipment from the United States, including the missile system called the "Iron Dome."

Now two years after the Israeli attack on Gaza, the tensions in the West Bank

are exploding. Beginning in October 2015, a few West Bank Palestinian youth have forsaken non-violent confrontation with Israeli military and have taken up knives instead of rocks in the latest intifada against Israeli occupation and oppression, against the continued building of illegal settlements on Palestinian lands and against the imprisonment of hundreds of Palestinian youth.

The use of knives against IDF soldiers has expanded to deaths of Israeli civilians as well, including a 13-year-old girl in her home. Thirty-four Israelis, two U.S. citizens, an Eritrean and a Sudanese have been killed in the knife, gun or car ramming attacks. Meanwhile, 214 Palestinians have been killed by IDF soldiers during this period.

The potential for Israeli response/revenge to these knife attacks is great and would probably not be directed to just the West Bank but also toward Gaza.

As with other conflicts, the stories of death and of survival of civilians trapped in merciless bombings and fighting should compel leaders to work to end conflicts, but seldom do.

Drones at Dinner

A new book, published on July 5, chronicles the 2014 IDF attack on Gaza and focuses on the psychological and physical destruction suffered by the people of Gaza by one particular weapon system – the assassin drone that killed 497 civilians during the 2014 attack.

Palestinian writer Atef Abu Saif recounts the day-by-day life of a family and a community under fire from an enemy in the sky, beginning on July 7, 2014. The book entitled *Drone Eats With Me – A Gaza Diary* is a graphic description of life under fire and particularly with the assassin drone lurking in the sky 24 hours a day waiting for its next victim.

“The drone keeps us company all night long. It’s whirring, whirring, whirring, whirring is incessant – as if it wants to remind us it’s there, it’s not going anywhere. It hangs just a little way above our heads.”

After the drone crosses off another victim, “the noise of this new explosion subsides it’s replaced by the inevitable whir of a drone, sounding so close it could be right beside us. It’s like it wants to join us for the evening and has pulled up an invisible chair.”

Atef describes his life during the 51-day attack: “Our fates are all in the hands of a drone operator in a military base somewhere just over the Israeli border. The operator looks at Gaza the way an unruly boy looks at the screen of a video game. He presses a button and might destroy an entire street. He might

decide to terminate the life of someone walking along the pavement, or he might uproot a tree in an orchard that hasn't yet borne fruit. The operator practices his aim at his own discretion, energized by the trust and power that has been put in his hands by his superiors."

Atef says many entities known and unknown join his family at mealtime: "The food is ready. I wake the children and bring them in. We all sit around five dishes: white cheese, hummus, orange jam, yellow cheese, and olives.

"Darkness eats with us.

"Fear and anxiety eat with us.

"The unknown eats with us.

"The F16 eats with us.

"The drone, and its operator somewhere out in Israel, eats with us.

"Our hands shiver, our eyes stare at the plates on the floor."

While the Israeli drone eats with the families in Gaza, U.S. drones eat with the families in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia and Libya.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army and retired as a Colonel. She also served as a US diplomat for 16 years and resigned in March 2003 in opposition to President Bush's war on Iraq. She is a coordinator for the US campaign for the Women's Boat to Gaza. She is the co-author of *Dissent: Voices of Conscience*.

Of Lethal Drones and Police Shootings

There are chilling parallels between President Obama's overseas drone program and how police treat America's non-white citizens, with the slightest suspicion escalating into official violence and even death, writes Kathy Kelly.

By Kathy Kelly

Two major news stories here in the U.S., both chilling, point out how readily U.S. authorities will murder people based on race and the slightest possibility of a threat to those in places of power.

On July 5, Baton Rouge police killed Anton Sterling in a Louisiana parking lot. Sterling was a 37-year-old black father of five selling CDs outside of a local store. As captured on widely seen cell-phone video, two officers tased him, held

him with their hands and knees down on the ground and then shot him multiple times at close range.

The officers pulled a gun out of Sterling's pocket after they had killed him but witnesses say Sterling was not holding the gun and his hands were never near his pockets. The situation might have escalated further but clearly little concern was shown for the sanctity of a human life deemed a threat to officers.

In the witness-recorded video one, officer promises, "If you f—ing move, I swear to God!"

Police departments in the U.S. often arrest and all too often kill citizens on U.S. streets based on "racial profiling." Young men of certain demographics are targeted based on their "patterns of behavior" for confrontations in which officers' safety trumps any concern for the safety of suspects, and which easily ramps up to killing.

And so it is abroad. The week's other chilling news involved the long-promised release of U.S. government data on drone strikes and civilian deaths. The report covered four countries with which the U.S. is not at war. From 2009 through 2015 in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya, the U.S. admits to its drone strikes having killed between 64 and 116 civilians, although these numbers are only a small fraction of even the most conservative estimates on such deaths made by credible independent reporters and researchers over the same period.

With U.S. definitions of a "combatant" constantly in flux, many of the 2,372 to 2,581 "combatants" that the government reports killed over the same period will have certainly been civilian casualties. Few eyes in the U.S. watch for cell-phone video from these countries, and so the executing officers' versions of events are often all that matters.

In June 2011, CIA Director John Brennan stated there hadn't been "a single collateral death" caused by drone strikes over the previous eighteen months. Ample reportage showed this statistic was a flat lie.

Classified Policies

International law expert Marjorie Cohn notes that what little we know of President Obama's 2013 policy guidelines (still classified) for decreasing civilian deaths is inconsistent even on the point of a known target having been present. Many strikes are targeted at areas of suspicious activity with no idea of who is present.

As former CIA officer Philip Giraldi notes, a March 2015 Physicians for Social Responsibility report claims that more (perhaps far more) than 1.3 million

people were killed during the first ten years of the “Global War on Terror” in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Adding Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen, he finds the current total might easily exceed 2 million with some estimates credibly going to 4 million or beyond. He fears the data released on July 1 will end up normalizing the drone program, writing:

“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.”

The July 1 data minimizes civilian deaths by limiting itself to countries with which the U.S. is not at war. But the United States’ drone arsenal is precisely designed to project violence into areas miles from any battlefield where arrest, not assassination, would before have been considered both feasible and morally indispensable in dealing with suspects accused of a crime.

U.S. figures do not count untold numbers of civilians learning to fear the sky, in formerly peaceful areas, for weapons that might be fired without warning. The drones take away the very idea of trials and evidence, of the rule of law, making the whole world a battlefield. In the U.S. neighborhoods where people like Alton Sterling most risk summary execution, residents cannot be faulted for concluding that the U.S. government and society don’t mind treating their homes as warzones; that lives of innocent people caught up in these brutal wars do not matter provided the safety and property of the people outside, and of the people sent in to quell disorder, are rigorously protected.

My friends and sometime hosts in Afghanistan, the [Afghan Peace Volunteers](#), run a school for street kids and a seamstress program to distribute thick blankets in the winter. They seek to apply Mohandas Gandhi’s discipline of letting a determination to keep the peace show them the difficult work needed to replace battlefields with community.

Their resources are small and they live in a dangerous city at a perilous time. Their work does little, to say the least, to ensure their safety. They aim to put the safety of their most desperate neighbors first.

It makes no one safer to make our cities and the world a battlefield. The frenzied concern for our safety and comfort driving so much of our war on the Middle East has made our lives far more dangerous.

What Brings Peace?

Can we ask ourselves: which has ever brought a peaceful future nearer to people in Afghan or U.S. neighborhoods – weaponized military and surveillance systems or the efforts of concerned neighbors seeking justice?

Gigantic multinational “defense” systems gobble up resources, while programs intended for social well-being are cut back. The U.S. withholds anything like the quantity of resources needed for the task of healing the battle scars that the U.S. and NATO have inflicted on so much of the Muslim world. If our fear is endless, how will these wars ever end?

We have to face the fact that when the U.S. acts as self-appointed “global policeman,” what it does to poor nations resembles what those two officers did to Alton Sterling. We must temper selfish and unreasonable fears for our own safety with the knowledge that others also want safe and stable lives.

We must build community by lessening inequality. We must swear off making the world our battlefield and be appalled to hear the U.S. government seem to tell the world “I will kill you if you f–ing move.”

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org).

US Veterans Join Petition for Snowden

U.S. military veterans, including lethal drone participants, are joining efforts to inform the American public about the secrets of the endless “war on terror” and are supporting Edward Snowden’s whistleblowing, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Lisa Ling, a retired Air Force Sergeant and former U.S. Drone Program Operative, has joined a petition campaign to get the Norwegian government to shield National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden from extradition so he can receive Norwegian PEN’s Ossietszky Prize for outstanding achievements and courage.

A [petition](#) started by Roots Action was launched on Snowden’s behalf, requesting that the Norwegian government commit to providing Snowden guaranteed protection from extradition to the United States where he faces criminal charges for disclosing classified secrets relating to the NSA’s collecting of data on Americans.

Ling spoke with Flashpoints radio host Dennis J. Bernstein from Oslo, Norway, explaining why she is such a strong supporter of Snowden and her thoughts about the U.S. drone program, which has killed hundreds of victims, including innocent women and children.

Ling is featured in the soon-to-be-released documentary film, *National Bird*, which documents, "the dramatic journey of three whistleblowers who are determined to break the silence around one of the most controversial current affairs."

The Roots Action petition notes, "We do not want Snowden's chair to be empty in the University Hall in Oslo due to lack of approval to travel to Oslo, as Ossietzky himself was prevented by Hitler from coming to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1936." Signers of the petition include: Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, Daniel Ellsberg, Coleen Rowley, Thomas Drake, Marsha Coleman-Adebayo, William Binney, William Nygaard and John Kiriakou.

Dennis Bernstein: Why don't you begin with some background on your own military career and why you are in Oslo, speaking out on behalf of NSA Whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Lisa Ling: I was working in the drone program for two years. And I'm here in Oslo in solidarity with Edward Snowden because an important petition was launched ..., and it was basically about having him be able to come here [to Oslo] and accept an award for his whistleblowing.

DB: And there is a concern that he would be, if you will, kidnaped by some version of U.S. law enforcement and taken back to the U.S. to be prosecuted? Is that the concern?

LL: If I were in his position, I would have a fear of extradition.

DB: You were in the drone program – what were your responsibilities there?

LL: Basically, what I did is, I worked on the system that gathered data. I was more in the technical realm. I was not a drone pilot or a sensor operator, or anything like that. I basically worked on the system, behind the scenes.

DB: And when you gathered data, what does that mean? What would you be doing? Who would you gather data about?

LL: What I did was I just worked on a system that collected data from where some individuals...

DB: From individuals in what country?

LL: Different countries, where drones fly over.

DB: You know, so for instance, drones that would be used in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, and other places?

LL: Yes.

DB: And did you work with other folks? What was the morale like inside? Were people excited about the program? Did people at all question it, given the amount of resistance and protests around it?

LL: Well, basically, in a nutshell, you are talking about walking into a war footing while you are still in the U.S. So, one minute you step over a threshold and you are working extremely long hours, the operational tempo is incredibly high. There's, you know, what's been published in the paper and all this ... there's a shortage of troops ... and then you walk outside and somebody is maybe missing a television show, and you just realized that there's a war going on. And there's a disconnect between people and knowing that we're in America's longest war.

DB: By the way, what was your rank in the military?

LL: I was a Tech Sergeant.

DB: In terms of working with the data, I guess it was fed to the pilots who actually did the bombing. Did you ever hear, were there ever reports inside, about whether you hit a target, what you hit, whether you missed a target, was that information that would come back inside?

LL: Not until after I ended up getting out [of the drone program] and received an award that mentioned how many people were impacted by the drone technology that I worked on.

DB: That was an award from the military?

LL: That was a military award, yes.

DB: And what did you learn from that award? How many, what was your impact? Did you, were there numbers involved?

LL: I don't have the exact number with me, but it was a significant number, and I discussed that in the movie that's going to be coming out in October called *National Bird*.

DB: A significant number of people that were killed, based on your intelligence and information gathering?

LL: Well, ... the reason why I'm here [is to be] in solidarity with Edward Snowden, and to applaud his bravery, for making the American public aware of some of the things that are being done in our name. And not all whistleblowers give away classified information. That's not a requirement to be a whistleblower. But what Snowden did took an extreme amount of bravery. He basically gave up his job, gave up his life, and did something to inform the American people so that we could have a badly needed discussion about surveillance.

DB: And I believe Edward Snowden said it was his learning of, among other things, of the drone program that put him over the edge; That made him want to do what he did. It was part of the inspiration. Is that your understanding?

LL: That's my understanding. If you look at it, everything is basically connected now. We're a data driven society. Everything that we do now is data driven, from our politics to our ... I mean everything, basically. And that's something that we need to discuss as citizens: is this how we want to prosecute war? Is this what we want to do? Is this what we want to use the technology for? And, as long as that's in the dark, as long as that information is kept hidden, then the checks and balances that are required for a democracy to function are absent.

DB: Can I ask you just a little bit more about your background? What led you to join the military? And was there a certain point when you decided that you couldn't do this kind of drone-connected work anymore? Could you tell us a little bit about the background, please?

LL: When I joined the military I joined as a medic, as a medical person, and I was in the Army National Guard. And my goal was to be able to help people. So when I joined up I thought, "This is a win, win. I'll be able to learn a skill, I'll be able to help people, how could I be anything but on the right side of history?" And as time went on and I was in the military, what happened was [that] I have an ability to work on electronic equipment, to work on computers. And this was during a time when the internet was being born, basically.

And, so, in an effort to be able to help people with their computers at the time, I moved over to doing that job. And I supported several different areas with regards to technical. I was a technician. And what happened was my unit changed into a drone unit and I didn't know what went on behind the door. I didn't know it, I didn't know.

And there was a period of time where I actually worked on the equipment and it wasn't connected at that time (and, for me, having computer equipment and electronic equipment is like a kid in a candy store.)

And once I got to the other side of that wall, and I was read into that program, I wondered what it was that we were doing. And I questioned my own ethics. And I questioned what I was doing there. And I knew that I had to do something. [...] I wasn't willing to break the law or give away any secrets or anything like that. But I was willing to share my experience. And I did that through a movie that will, like I said, be [...] called *National Bird*.

And I went to Afghanistan because I wanted to see the people in all of their dimensions because when you see things on a screen you don't see ... the human element is removed. And I'm sitting here looking at all this technical equipment that is being used to prosecute a war in our name, a conflict in our name, and it did not sit well with me. The idea that words were sanitized ... there's no such thing as a sanitary war. There's no such thing. These are not targets, they are human beings.

DB: Was there a dialogue inside the military, inside the drone program? Were you the only one feeling concerned, or did this begin to sort of bubble up?

LL: I'm certain that I wasn't... I'm certain that I'm not the only one that has concerns about this. But when the military prosecutes a war [...] they teach you that you have to look at other people as "us versus them." And it doesn't matter who the "them" is. That's just how we do war. And what I came to was that we're talking about human beings with, specifically Afghanistan, with an incredibly rich culture, rich history.

DB: Can you share some of the people who you met there? Maybe one or two people that stand out in terms of your experience with the people?

LL: Most of the people that I met in Afghanistan were very kind. The first thing they wanted to do [...] was give you chai tea and sit down and talk. And it was a place that was just full of humanity. It was full of vibrancy. As somebody visiting the country, I'll never understand their culture. Even though I've been there, I'll never understand their culture, and certainly no one can understand it looking at a screen, and seeing it in two dimensions.

DB: I know that we have interviewed many people, Lisa Ling, some former military and I guess you may have, by now, met some of these extraordinary people. We've had Ann Wright, a former colonel, who actually opened up the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, and then resigned her commission in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. These are extraordinary people. Have you had a chance to spend some time with these, or been inspired by some of the folks?

LL: Oh, absolutely. And Brandon Bryant was one of the first people that came out and spoke of the drone program. And he was one of the first. That was an

incredibly courageous thing to do. I'm here with Cian Westmoreland, who also is speaking out about the drone program. I've met plenty of people...

DB: Is that Westmoreland related to the former general, Westmoreland?

LL: Actually, yes.

DB: Who led forces in Vietnam?

LL: Yes. And he was sharing about that when he spoke today. And, he too, is an incredibly brave young man. And I'm here in solidarity with Edward Snowden who did an incredibly courageous thing. And it just amazes me that out of one hand people are saying that he started a very important dialogue in our country.

And the other thing I want to say about all these people, they're all patriotic people, they're all speaking out as protecting our Constitution. It's important to know that nobody is doing this because they don't like the United States, or for any reason like that.

We just all believe in transparency and we believe that until something sees the light of day

and we have a conversation about it... There is a war on whistleblowers going on right now. What that does is it has the news media [...] unable to protect whistleblowers anymore. And that's a direct result of some of the technology that is out there. The news media needs whistleblowers. They need sources in order to be a part of the checks and balances that makes a functioning democracy happen.

And Edward Snowden started that conversation and released records to the news media, in an effort to do what he was doing correctly. And he looked at Thomas Drake who did everything by the book, and recently the IG came out and said, "This is broken." We need to do something to gain people's trust. That there's a way that you can report wrongs that are being done, without experiencing retribution, in a fair way.

DB: Do you, I don't know how to ask this question. And I ask it with the greatest respect, but do you have a sense or knowledge of some of the folks that you helped to wipe off the face of the earth?

LL: I went to Afghanistan and I did see a family that was impacted by drones. There was an investigation. And it's, as far as I know, the only transcript of a drone strike that's publicly available. And it was devastating. I mean, absolutely devastating. Again, these are human beings.

DB: So you met with families who were directly impacted.

LL: I met a specific family...

DB: That you know...?

LL: I have no idea.

DB: You don't know.

LL: I mean, how can anybody know? And, see this is the thing, right? We talk about, in the United States, that we cannot have any refugees come to our country, because we don't have any way of recognizing who they are. And to have them come would threaten the safety of our citizens. And yet, we know exactly who to drone. And I have a difficult time wrapping my mind around that logic. It just does not make sense to me.

DB: Do you come from a military family?

LL: I do not come from a military family. My father did a short time in the military.

DB: I have to say that it's really, really good to speak with you. I'm wondering if Mr. Westmoreland – I mean his father was definitely major military – was he in the military? Was this a leap for him?

LL: Cian? Yes, he was in the military. And we've actually been traveling to different places. We were just at Sheffield Documentary Festival recently. And, we've been traveling to some other places and talking about and sharing our experience with others, so that people will understand the humanity.

DB: And, I guess, the final thing is, there are so many reports and it seems to be confirmed that the Executive Branch, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, participates directly in the targeting and picking... He gets a list, and he helps to decide who will live and who will die. So if you were sitting with him in that room right before he was going to go over that list, what would you want to tell him?

LL: I'd have to say [that] I've never been President of the United States. I do not know what that job would be like. What I would want to ask is, "Can we not have drones without arms? Can we not have drones without weapons on them?" I know that we're not going to get rid of the technology, just like we haven't gotten rid of nuclear technology, or any other military technology that we have set out to try and not have. I mean there have been regulations, there's been things that have happened but putting drones out of commission is an impossible thing. But what I'd really like to see happen, is I would like to see the weapons removed from them.

Because a lot of people compare drones to conventional aircraft. And what happens with a conventional aircraft is it flies in, it drops a bomb, and it flies out. And in that time, even in a developing country, you could make bomb shelters out of sandbags. And at least there's a chance. But when you're talking about something that loiters over your head for an extended period of time, you don't know whether it's armed or it's not armed. What that does is, there are children on the other side of the world that are afraid to go outside on a sunny day. And to me, that's terror. And so I want to ask, "Can we take the armaments off of drones?"

DB: Well, that's mighty powerful. I do again appreciate the time you are spending with us and the courageous stand that you are taking to set an example and to stand up for Edward Snowden, who has told the truth about so many things that affect so many of us. So I can understand why you are acting on his behalf, while you're there in Oslo, Norway trying to defend his right to accept an international prize, a PEN award.
