

The World as Battlefield: The Strategic Incoherence of U.S. Drone Policy

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U.S. foreign policy is strategically incoherent. This is where we need to start this discussion on drones and strategy. The strategic incoherence of U.S. Foreign Policy is actually becoming more and more widely discussed, and agreed. There are those who think we need to “fix that” and return to coherence, and thus plug drones or other uses of force into that rebuilt coherence; there are others who think this is a pipe dream, and I am one of them. Whatever coherence actually used to exist in the world (and that itself is too large a subject for this panel presentation), there is no possibility of a return to that era. That isn’t to say people aren’t trying. But large framing devices like the “Clash of Civilizations” are now laughably irrelevant. You can’t even enforce large narratives with a massive military mobilization, as the U.S. experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So when we ask, ‘Has U.S. drone policy hurt U.S. foreign policy in any way?’ the answer has to be yes, but this is because drone warfare is both product of this incoherence, and one of its contributing causes. In effect, we conduct drone warfare because nobody seems to be able to think of anything better to do to conduct war. We tried the ‘boots on the ground’ approach, spending trillions of dollars, and it didn’t work, so let’s try this. But “this,” i.e. global drone warfare, is creating more incoherence, making the world more chaotic not less, and that includes what the President said in the State of the Union message this past week about “we leverage our power with coalition building,” and then, not two sentences later, “we reserve the right to act unilaterally, as we’ve done relentlessly since I took office to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to us and our allies.”¹ This kind of incoherence actually prevents serious focus on other approaches.

Rosa Brooks names this elephant in the room, that is the incoherence of U.S. foreign policy, in her essay in *Foreign Policy*, “Embrace the Chaos.”ⁱ “U.S. foreign policy is a mess—a big, aimless mess.” The usual suspects are named: “the last century’s technological revolutions...power (along with access to power) has become more democratized and diffuse in some ways, but more concentrated in other ways; the risk to the whole species of global catastrophe, and the accelerating rate of technology and social change. And few around the world are willing to trust in an American leadership that shuts down its own government and has facilitated the U.S. becoming the nations with the greatest rates of income inequality in the developed world, and most states in the developing world. Brooks’ prescription is

¹ <https://medium.com/@WhiteHouse/president-obamas-state-of-the-union-address-remarks-as-prepared-for-delivery-55f9825449b2>

based on a John Rawls; she argues for a rational calculation to help us “delineate the contours of a sensible U.S. global strategy.”

But the rationality and hierarchy of power that defined modernity are gone. We live in the age of postmodernity where power relationships are conflicting, overlapping, and often hidden. The technological revolution that has given us drones has also given rise to the other technologies that create diffusions of power that are seemingly so chaotic. What we have is a much larger package of militarism, weaponizing sexual violence, race murder, omnipresent surveillance and technological war. Relatively small extremist groups have the ability to project enormous power through YouTube and Twitter.

Brian Katulis and I have written about the more profound implications of changed power in the technological age for the Center for American Progress in an article called “Power Shift.” “Power is traditionally defined in foreign policy and global politics as the ability to get things done and achieve certain goals by applying resources. This definition, however, can obscure the multidirectional, multisourced, and overlapping forms of power operating in the world today.”ⁱⁱ

President Obama and his national security advisors certainly talk like they know this is the case. President Obama recognized this in his 2009 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, saying: “In an era when our destiny is shared, power is no longer a zero-sum game.” In his Nobel Prize speech from the same year he argued “old architecture” of thinking about war and peace is “buckling.” But actions speak louder than words, and the conduct of drone warfare in the Obama administration, and its rationales, has been framed in the “old architecture” of Just War theory, even while actually bending and breaking some of these tenets.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this speech, the President called for a move away from a “boundless ‘global war on terror,’” to “a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America,” often in partnership with other countries, leading to the “arrest and prosecution of terrorists.” But, the President argued, this approach is not always possible or wise, and thus “remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones” will be used under a new policy codified in a document called “Presidential Policy Guidance” that the President announced he had signed the day before.

Despite the assurances about revised oversight in the President’s May 2013 speech, six days after the speech, a U.S. drone strike in the tribal region of Pakistan reportedly killed Wali ur-Rehman, the Pakistani Taliban’s second-in-command. Did this strike violate the new policy? Unfortunately, since this document is classified, there is actually no way to independently judge how closely the current use of drones is now following the new policy, nor how much the new policy conforms to the President’s address.^{iv}

The secrecy about the drone program is another aspect of its incoherence. It is not enough to have the Pentagon rather than the CIA administer the program. The program itself and its goals has to be able to be examined. In the first week of 2015, at least nine Pakistanis were killed in a U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan, the first reported drone strike of 2015. It is crucial to address what Scott Horton, human rights attorney, contributing editor at *Harper's Magazine*, and lecturer at Columbia Law School calls America's stealth foreign policy in his new book: *Lords of Secrecy: The National Security Elite and America's Stealth Foreign Policy*.

Well, I think that the use of drones are—it's very significant. It points to the way we've redirected our entire attitude towards waging war today. We prefer covert war. We give the CIA a greater and greater role in waging this war. The CIA has become the opposite of what it was established to be in 1947, which is an intelligence analysis shop. Now it's focused very heavily on operations, and many of them sustained, like this drone war, which is a 10-year war.

Now, the CIA gets to exercise that control by saying everything is secret, it's covert, it can't be discussed publicly. And as a result of saying that, the American people actually know much less about what's going on in Pakistan and about the strikes and the consequence of the strikes than people in Pakistan know or even people in Europe and other nations know. And that's because of the American media's hesitancy to report on it. So, we have not had the sort of policy discussion that we really should be having in this country about whether the use of drones in Pakistan is effective or whether it makes sense in terms of U.S. foreign policy.

And I think the case against drones is a very, very powerful case, certainly in the case of Pakistan, because in the bottom line what you've seen since the drone war began is a transition in public opinion in Pakistan where the entire political spectrum is united against the United States, really an unbelievable feat for the U.S. to have accomplished.^v

This is a huge failure on the part of the Obama administration, largely created through a drone program that is effectively driving our foreign policy in a war for the sake of war direction. It is remarkably ineffective and also dangerously destabilizing and chaotic. It is also very likely illegal according to international law. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, has said that the use of drones is not combat as much as 'targeted killing'. He has repeatedly tried to get the US to explain how they justifies the use of drones to target and kill individuals under international law. The US has so far refused to do so. In a report to the UN he has said the US government (and by implication the UK government) "should specify the bases for decisions to kill rather than capture particular individuals and should make public the number of civilians killed as a result of drone attacks, and the measures in place to prevent such casualties".^{vi}

What is clear is that even more chaos is being created in the world through

blowback related to the use of drone warfare. This must absolutely be front and center in this discussion as we follow closely upon the attacks in Paris. The Yemen-based branch of al Qaeda officially claimed responsibility for the massacre at the Paris headquarters of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo as revenge for the repeated publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. A senior leader of the Yemni al Qaeda group said American-born AQAP leader Anwar al-Awlaki was the man in charge of coordinating contacts with the attackers, French-Algerian brothers Said and Cherif Kouachi. Awlaki himself was killed in a U.S. drone strike in southern Yemen in September 2011.^{vii} How much then were these attackers in Paris also motivated by revenge for the killing of Awlaki?

A document leaked by “Wickileaks” in December of 2014 by the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence is critical of the “high value targeting” (HVT) such as those conducted in Yemen, Pakistan and elsewhere, involving air strikes and special forces operations against insurgent leaders. The attacks “can be effective, but can also have negative effects including increasing violence and greater popular support for extremist groups.” Are the Paris attacks a symptom of this? The leaked document says HVT attacks “may increase support for the insurgents, particularly if these strikes enhance insurgent leaders' lore, if non-combatants are killed in the attacks, if legitimate or semi-legitimate politicians aligned with the insurgents are targeted, or if the government is already seen as overly repressive or violent”.^{viii}

Drone strikes are popular because they are made to seem effective, especially in the absence of hard information, in reducing the threat of terrorism without loss of American lives, and without the cost of “boots on the ground.” This is an incredibly dangerous moral position to take. Bodies are still being blown up on battlefields, it's just not American bodies any more. Civilians in bombed areas are being killed, despite the much-vaunted idea that drones are so “targeted” in their killing of militants that civilian deaths are minimal. A March 2011 drone strike killed at least 38 civilians in Pakistan.^{ix} A Pakistani tribal elder, Malik Faridullah, described the result of the so-called “precision bombing.”^x “There were no bodies, only body parts — hands, legs and eyes scattered around. I could not recognize anyone. People carried away the body parts in shopping bags and clothing or with bits of wood, whatever they could find.”

This is war today: the whole world is a potential battlefield and the goal is blow people apart from the sky.

It is difficult even for those who want war mythologies of American patriotism and the heroic to find “heroism” in flying remote aircraft over villagers and launching missiles at them, a point made two former military members in their objection to a new award, announced in 2013, for the “Distinguished Warfare Medal” for drone pilots and “cyberwarriors.” What really seemed to gall these combat vets was that the medal would rank above both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star, given for wounds sustained in battle. “In other words, a drone pilot flying a mission from an

armchair in Nevada might be afforded greater recognition than a rifleman wounded in a combat zone.” They regarded this as “ridiculous” because “[t]hose on the front lines require real courage because they face real danger” of being physically wounded, not just risking a monitor that would “go fuzzy.” A “Nintendo” medal should not be elevated, they contended, “above those awarded for “true heroism and sacrifice.” The award was ultimately cancelled.^{xi}

But these veterans of combat said they continued to be alarmed because “[o]ur most senior leaders in the Pentagon, civilian and military alike, increasingly understand warfare through the literal lens of a drone camera.”

That much certainly seems true. On the other hand, recent research shows that this is a dangerous distortion of what is really happening to people involved in conducting drone warfare. Drone operators, it appears, are subject to mental, psychical from conducting “Nintendo” combat in this way. Wounded to the mind are real wounds, in fact.

The chief moral problem of the drone program is far more extensive than whether there are “heroes” or not. The larger problem is that drone warfare seems sanitized and with far fewer moral dilemmas about the conduct of war, and thus can seem tailor-made for to a scenario portrayed as one of “new threats” like terrorism. It is hard enough to get people to be willing to witness to the carnage of the battlefield in more traditional wars. Drones are incredibly effective at hiding the bodies from the American people who want security but don’t want to see what it costs in terms of lives.

Drones are also presented as “cheaper,” and with the Iraq war now estimated to cost three trillion dollars this can also seem attractive to the American people. Drones make killing seem “safe” and “easy.” It gives too much power to who want the U.S. to engage in killing. The ability to kill without risk of American lives promotes enormous moral risk. Augustine pointed out this exact issue when he argued the lustful love of power was the chief moral risk of using violence.

What to Do Instead of Drones:

We Can Just Stop: Just Peace

The new paradigm of peace called Just Peace is organized around ten “practice norms” that are based in proven strategies that prevent or reduce conflict and end war. In the summer of 2013, on an official visit to Islamabad Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters that the Obama administration has a “very real timeline for ending the U.S. Drone Program in Pakistan, and that “we hope it’s going to be very, very soon.” Almost immediately, the State Department jumped in and “clarified” the Secretary’s statement, explaining that there is no definite timetable and that “in no way would we ever deprive ourselves of a tool to fight a threat if it arises.” It is my interpretation that Secretary Kerry was very much intending to stop the drone

program as part of what Just Peace calls “independent initiatives to reduce threat,” and he ran into the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its desire to keep the drone program and run a shadow foreign policy.

Address rapidly accelerating climate change and its destabilizations

Drones seem like we are “doing something” about the sources of extremism in the world, but they are actually distractions away from dealing with what is seeding this. Let’s take Yemen as an example. Yemen is on the verge of becoming a failed state. According to a NATO document, Yemen suffers from a confluence of near-crises: Its oil reserves are set to disappear within the next 5 – 10 years along with government resources.” The government seemingly has no “post-oil” plans for funding itself. “The same could be said for water: uncontrolled extractions, imperfect legal regimes and unequal decentralization plans mean that Sanaa could potentially be the first capital city to run out of water.” With regional tensions and secessionist movements, this is a situation where groups like Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) take hold.^{xii} Water shortages might also spark tensions and resource wars in an already unstable area. The fact that 80% of conflicts in Yemen come down to water is troubling. Looking to the African continent, water wars between Ethiopia and Eritrea or strong tensions between Egypt and Sudan could replicate across the red sea on the Arabian peninsula.

Yes, Yemen defies “quick fixes,” but what actually worsens the issues is the failure to focus on the real sources of conflict. Concentrating on water conservation and developing alternative energy sectors can increase jobs in a society where a massive amount of young people are out of work, and decrease the seedbed for extremism.

Fund Women’s Groups

Extremists today such as ISIS weaponize women’s bodies through rape, kidnapping and forced sexual enslavement. This is a direct form of attack on the body politic of a nation, as women continue to represent, as cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas writes, the boundaries of the community. These extremists are weaponizing women’s bodies through penetrating those boundaries. When you sexually subjugate women, then, you humiliate them and subjugate an entire people.

You cannot drone your way out of this tactic of extremism; likewise, a “rescue the women” approach such as the Bush Administration promoted in Afghanistan, has its own blowback problems, where a Western human rights focus ended up helping the Taliban target women’s rights as an aspect of Western imperialism.

Instead, women around the world know their own situation best. Local women’s organizations, and optimally many smaller groups rather than large groups designed to attract foreign money, are best suited to deal with the traumatic effects of sexual violence on women, and on their communities, rebuild social networks frayed by extremism, and effect more sustainable economic progress.

Engage Religion

Often such grassroots networks, especially religious ones, are not recognized and regularly engaged as a source of power for effective change. But as Scott Thomas argues in an article in Foreign Affairs, “If the United States recognizes and utilizes the worldwide religious resurgence, it can harness its power to improve international security and better the lives of millions.” He also warns of the dangers of failing to do so.

A key to “harnessing the power” of religion is recognizing it. Religion is surprisingly at play even when issues are not obviously about “religion.” Economic globalization, a form of power driven by cybercommunication, is clearly a boon to economic development because it is making the world “flat.” Yet some consider globalization an attack on traditional societies. They believe that the rapid pace of change fueled by Internet-driven globalization is destabilizing traditional cultures and fueling the rise of global, antimodernist ideologies. Some prominent antimodernist ideologies that often take the form of religion are a main source of conflict in the world today—and virtually no religion is immune to this new political dynamic.

But the very “antimodernist” religious forces at play in extremism use highly modern technologies of cybercommunication. We can all remember how a threatened Koran burning by an obscure pastor in Florida provoked outrage and even violence in these settings because it is perceived as a threat to this larger, globalized identity and the outrage is available instantly on everybody’s cell phone. This became a foreign policy crisis.

The only effective counter campaign was one launched by a United Church of Christ congregation in the same town in Florida. They used social media to promote a “Read the Koran” initiative from their pulpit and it was picked up by Al Jazeera and provided a counter narrative.

Religion needs to be engaged with the same level of effectiveness against the weaponizing of the bodies of women and girls, a project now being undertaken the Carter Center.

Deliver on a Better Narrative

One of the main reasons the U.S. has lost power around the world is that we no longer act out our own best story, the “American Dream.” The incoherence of our foreign policy is pretty much a projection of the incoherence of our political, economic, and social lives. We don’t have a good story to tell, and nobody believes us when we try to claim that we do. The good story, the one about equality of opportunity and freedom for all, was really only one invented in the post World War II boom, and then honed in the Civil Rights, women’s and LGBT equality movements. We aspired to equality and economic opportunity. It was a great narrative and it is

failing because the gross economic inequality, high rates of incarceration of racial ethnic minorities and immigrants, and political incompetence.

This is not the exclusive problem of the U.S. In France, Paris, where the recent attack took place, is ringed with horrific slums that are breeding grounds for despair. Other European countries do not have a good narrative for the young minorities and immigrants in their midst. The Charlie Hebdo attacks did not happen in a vacuum.

Proactive Rather Than Reactive

Based on U.S. political conflicts, public opinion etc.

ⁱ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/14/embrace-the-chaos/>

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<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2010/12/16/8726/power-shift/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Just War theory is referenced in considerations of the legality and morality of the drone program in Obama administration documents and speeches. The leaked Justice Department memo on the U.S. drone strike policyⁱⁱⁱ that lays out the case for the constitutionality of targeting Americans abroad for execution by drones demonstrates this. The memo makes explicit reference to the “four fundamental laws of war principles...necessity, distinction, proportionality, and humanity (the avoidance of unnecessary suffering). These “four fundamental laws of war principles” or what is commonly called “The Law of Armed Conflict” or LOAC, depends on Just War theory for these principles, referencing customs of ancient cultures, the classical Greek and Roman period and the Christian Just War history.ⁱⁱⁱ

In May of 2013, President Obama gave a much-anticipated speech on drone policy and counterterrorism at the National Defense University.ⁱⁱⁱ The speech was firstly a spirited defense of the moral basis of Just War, in a nearly Augustinian sense, as the President began by talking about human evil: “We will never erase the evil that lies in the hearts of some human beings.” The President then defended his drones policy as legal and conforming to the principles that are congruent with Just War theory, saying “this is a just war — a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense.”

^{iviv} Elias Groll, “Has Obama already violated his new and improved drone policy?” *Foreign Policy* (May 29, 2013).

http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/29/has_obama_already_violated_his_new_drone_policy_wali_ur_rehman_pakistan.

^v http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/5/from_drone_strikes_to_black_sites

^{vi} <http://dronewars.net/aboutdrone/>

vii <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/aqap-al-qaeda-in-yemen-claims-responsibility-for-charlie-hebdo-attack-in-paris/>

viii <http://www.commondreams.org/news/2014/12/18/leaked-internal-cia-document-admits-us-drone-program-counterproductive>

ix Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Drone wars: The temptation of automated conflict," *Washington Post*, On Faith. (December 5, 2011).

x Ibid.

xi Jacob Wood and Ken Harbaugh, "The Limits of Armchair Warfare," *The New York Times* (May 20, 2014). http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/opinion/the-limits-of-armchair-warfare.html?hp&rref=opinion&_r=2.

xii Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)