

Drones and Dreams

By [John Zogby](#)

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[Zogby Analytics](#)

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We are Americans. Not just a continent, not just a melting pot. We are an idea, a set of dreams built on an idea. Yes, we are also a nation-state with the need and instinct to protect ourselves and our wealth – especially after we have been attacked and must look over our shoulders constantly to prevent the next attack. And, make no mistake about it: it is difficult to feel sorry for someone who threatens us with words and actions. So now it's Pow! Poof! Gone! Good!

It is also hard to feel badly when a gangster is gunned down or a gang member is stabbed. But we don't allow our police to do these things with impunity.

Because we are supposed to be different. The use of unmanned drones to commit murder overseas just doesn't fit into our story. This is just not us. For decades our fictional superheroes have fought crime and always brought criminals to justice. They had superpowers and superior technology at their disposal, but they withheld it. The threat of force was always enough. These supermen and wonder women are our ideals, our prototypes of what people do when they have the power.

My fear of what happens to us by using drones is not ideological. This is neither a liberal nor conservative screed on my part. It is a plea for sanity. I am old enough to remember vividly the heated debates in the summer of 1968 between Gore Vidal on the left and William F. Buckley on the right. The name calling was shameless and they came very close to a fistfight on ABC during the Democratic National Convention. But this time they would be comrades. Vidal's essays presciently warned about the United States becoming the "national security state" – billions for defense, an impenetrable infrastructure of unsustainable military bases to prop up an economy, the suspension of civil liberties during wars of words. Buckley was a cold warrior – but, importantly, he was first and foremost a libertarian. In his later years he waged campaigns to decriminalize marijuana and to free those wrongly accused of murder.

But what they both agreed upon was that this is America. Our power comes from being an idea that everyone wants. And for those who don't want it? Freedom as long as they don't threaten others. And if they do pose a threat? We defeat them with our most powerful weapons: justice in the form of policing, courts, and prison. We have departments of Homeland Security, Defense, intelligence, Justice, after all. And we have the weight of our idea in the world of public opinion.

Let me anticipate some criticism. This is terribly naïve, some will say. Why should the United States be held to a different standard than anyone else? Answer: Because we are the United States of America and WE created that standard. Sadly, this is what others see and

why some (many) resent us. We can drop the higher standard and just be another nation – but then we are not who we say we are.

Then there are a few who will say that I am just a pollster and I should just stick to the numbers. Frankly, I am not entirely sure what the numbers show on the US' use of drones to kill civilians. But I am also an American and a human being – and an observer. If the numbers disagree with me I have never been afraid to show it.

In this column just a few weeks ago I suggested that President Barack Obama will be revered in history because of the barrier he has broken. Among the worst violators of our civil liberties are men with names like Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. President Harry Truman authorized the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They are among our greatest Presidents and are honored for leadership during wars. Like them, Mr. Obama's legacy may never be tainted at all.

We have been through this all before. Stunned by the assassination of our 35th President John F. Kennedy, the Senate Special Committee on Assassinations in the mid-70s revealed US complicity in two dozen attempts to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro and even checked out theories of differing pro-Castro and anti-Castro links to the death of JFK. And then there was US complicity in assassinations in Iran, Guatemala, and South Vietnam. These were all during the Cold War and this not a proud moment in our history. That is why the Committee recommended and a Democratic Congress voted to prohibit US involvement in political assassinations. A Republican President signed it. It is the law of the land – and it was the right thing to do.

But now our Justice Department justifies the use of impersonal unmanned drones to kill “suspected” terrorists on the streets of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. It is the wrong thing. It is the wrong message to burgeoning democracies.

It is just not who we are supposed to be.

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