

President's Obama's Promise: Global War on Terror to Continue, with Fresh Makeup. Assassinating People Prevents Them From Attacking Us

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The United States uses Predator and Reaper drones to kill people at a distance, sometimes at random, sometimes Americans or children, and after a decade of this practice, in the face of scattered popular protest, President Obama gave a speech about it on May 23 that was preceded by waves of advance media buzz that the President was going to change some of the policy in the global war on terrorism.

Who in a sane state of mind would expect any change of policy when the president gives a speech about counter-terrorism at the National Defense University?

In effect, two American administrations have followed the same pre-emptive killing policy that can be summed up simply: "Assassinating people prevents them from attacking us, whether they want to or not, and it's not up to us to figure out what they want."

No administration official since 2001 has put it quite that way, of course, but it is a fair summary of the country's fear-based endless war against an abstraction, terrorism, that is made more palpable by the very actions taken to fight it.

Another way to summarize a dozen years of pre-emptive war is that the United States is within its rights to defend itself against all enemies, real and imagined.

What Do You Call It When One Man Decides Who Lives or Dies?

Since American terror policy is contradictory and semi-secret, it appears incoherent. In March 2012 on CNN, Attorney General Eris Holder expressed the administration's point of view in a manner suitable to Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass." Here, rendered in the quasi-poetic form it deserves, is Holder's explanation of lethal drone strikes:

*Some have called such operations 'assassinations.'
They are not. And the use of that loaded term is misplaced.
'Assassinations' are 'unlawful killings.'
Here, for the reasons that I have given,
the US Government's use of lethal force
in self-defense against a leader of al Qaeda
or an associated force
who presents an imminent threat of violent attack
would not be unlawful*

*and therefore would not violate
the executive order banning assassination....*

** * **

In Holderworld, it is somehow not an assassination to commit a killing that fits the widely accepted definition of “assassination” as “the murder of a prominent person or political figure by a surprise attack, usually for payment or political reasons.... An assassination may be prompted by religious, [ideological](#), political, or military motives....”

You Don’t Need Law When There’s No Political Challenge

As Holder well knows, as does Obama, both being lawyers, there is no clear constitutional, statutory, court precedent, or other legal grounding for assassination by drone. The only basis in law is untested legal argument, some of which remains secret. But as both men know, the assassination policy has solid grounding in both politics and psychology.

And so the President framed his counter-terrorism speech with 9/11, which is as logical and useful as it is exceptional and misleading, telling his audience falsely but with Humpty Dumpty mastery of words, “And so our nation went to war.”

That has been the delusional national consensus since 2001, even though it’s not war in any constitutional, historic, or honest sense.

But war justifies everything, at least for awhile. And that may be the meaning behind Obama’s speech, a sense that time may be running out on the “nation at war” meme, and perhaps it’s time for the clever leader to get ahead of the politics and the psychology by at least seeming to change course a little.

The President acknowledges much of the damage our self-chosen wars have done to us at home and abroad. He ticks off government surveillance, torture, secret prisons – but not renditions. He says, “And in some cases, I believe we compromised our basic values.”

Then he tried to sell us an inherent contradiction: “we stepped up the war against al Qaeda, but also sought to change its course,” by which he seemed to mean we stopped torturing as many people and generally tried to break fewer domestic and international laws.

But on the other hand, we should still be afraid: “our nation is still threatened by terrorists. From Benghazi to Boston....” He did not clarify when Benghazi became part of “our nation.”

At a Crossroads and Choosing to go in All Four Directions?

The President rambled on in this contradictory fashion, warning the nation that, “America is at a crossroads” and quoting Madison that “No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare” – then assuring us that our war on terrorism would continue.”

“We must make decisions based not on fear,” the President said, suggesting that we need to understand the threat we face. Then a short while later he added, “that the scale of this threat closely resembles the types of attacks we faced before 9/11.”

“Most, though not all, of the terrorism we face is fueled by a common ideology,” Obama said, echoing the recent words of South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham: “the war against radical Islam, or terror, or whatever description you like.” Contrary to a good many of his

fellow Americans, the President went on to assert that “the United States is not at war with Islam.”

Then he used the magic language, defining the enemy as “al Qaeda and its associated forces.” Given the limitations of the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, the Pentagon has been using the catch-all “and its associated forces” to argue the legality of doing whatever they want to whomever they want, or just not interfering with the free hand of the CIA or other clandestine forces.

Obama suggested that “we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror,’” and went on to offer no boundaries to our willingness to attack whomever we define as an enemy in any part of the world.

Assassination by Drone to Remain Presidential Prerogative

With regard to assassination by drone, the President claimed “our actions are effective.... These strikes have saved lives.” He offered no serious evidence to support either claim, neither of which appears to be provable.

Amidst much vague reassurance about how drone strikes would be fewer, and kill fewer innocents, he also made an unsupported claim that strains credulity: “For me, and those in my chain of command, these deaths will haunt us as long as we live, just as we are haunted by the civilian casualties that have occurred through conventional fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

To dispel the haunting, the President immediately played the fear card again: “To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties....”

Earlier in the day, the Obama Administration admitted to killing four American citizens, and unnumbered others, without any legal due process. Yet in his speech he said, “For the record, I do not believe it would be constitutional for the government to target and kill any U.S. citizen — with a drone, or a shotgun — without due process.”

The President went on to discuss engaging with the Muslim American community, being troubled intimidating reporters, modifying the legal basis for continued war-making, and mitigating the horrors of Guantanamo. All these are issues he could have addressed at any time during his presidency, and he offered no pressing reason for addressing any of them now. Nor did he outline any clear new direction on any of them.

Boiled down, the President’s speech signaled that he had noticed that there were problems waging global war, that he would try to make it neater and prettier, but that it would continue – be afraid.

The one apparent exception to the contradictory verbal soft talk was a fleeting comment about three-quarters of the way through. Without offering any analysis, or even any means of doing this, he said: “We must strengthen the opposition in Syria, while isolating extremist elements — because the end of a tyrant must not give way to the tyranny of terrorism.”

This echoed Secretary of State John Kerry’s comment in Jordan on May 22: “In the event that we can’t find that way forward, in the event that the Assad regime is unwilling to negotiate Geneva 1 in good faith, we will also talk about our continued support and growing support for the opposition in order to permit them to continue to be able to fight for the

freedom of their country.”

Now there’s something to be afraid of.

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