

THE GREAT WAR OF OUR TIME

THE CIA'S FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM
FROM AL QA'IDA TO ISIS

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with Bill Harlow

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One of the main issues with which the deputies grappled was that of US drone operations. These operations have been the single most effective tool in the last five years for protecting the United States from terrorists. There is no doubt in my mind that these strikes have prevented another attack on the scale of 9/11. They have decimated al Qa'ida's core leadership in South Asia. Multiple al Qa'ida leaders there have been removed from the battlefield, and the group is having a hard time attracting new recruits, raising money, and plotting. The strikes have also weakened the leadership of al Qa'ida in Yemen and they have disrupted attacks against the United States by the group there.

Perhaps the best evidence of the effectiveness of the strikes are Bin Ladin's own thoughts on the subject. In documents recovered from his residence after the 2011 US raid that killed him, we learned that Bin Ladin considered drone strikes the most effective US weapon against his group. We also learned that he obsessed with discovering how drone operations worked and what countermeasures might defeat them.

Discussions about the law were always an important part of any deputies' meeting, particularly those on drones. Collateral damage is permitted under the laws of war. When done right, drone strikes are incredibly precise and collateral damage is minimal, and every effort is made to prevent such damage. Collateral damage is not zero, but it is close to zero, as these unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and the missiles they carry are among the most precise weapons in the history of warfare.

What to make, then, of the claims of significant collateral damage? They are highly exaggerated. The claims flow from propaganda on the part of al

Qa'ida and other groups that want the strikes to stop. They are also a result of counting as US collateral damage the women and children killed by air force strikes by the countries where the United States operates drones. And they stem from human nature—a reporter visits a mother and father of a deceased terrorist, who honestly believe that their son is innocent and would never join an extremist organization. The parents tell the reporter that, and his death gets marked as collateral damage.

When I was deputy director, a superb American reporter contacted the government to say that she was going to write a story about the significance of the collateral damage from drone strikes. She pointed out that her company, a leading U.S. media outlet, had helped pay for a compilation of a comprehensive list of drone strikes and their outcomes. She had dates and locations of individual strikes over an extended period of time and the number of women and children killed in a number of the strikes. She said the number of innocents killed was much higher than the estimates that she was hearing from US officials and asked for a comment.

Because CIA tries to carefully monitor the truth about what damage is actually caused by US drone operations, I was tasked by my superiors in the administration to invite her to my office to talk about the data. I requested that she send her list of alleged US strikes to us ahead of time. I had each of the strikes on her list investigated.

When I sat down with her, I went through the entire list. It had three categories: (1) US strikes on her list that had occurred but had killed no women and children while her list said they had, (2) US strikes on her list that in reality were strikes by the local military, and (3) US strikes that simply had not happened and for which there was no local military action either. By far, the largest category was the first. I would tell her, “Your data says there were six people killed in this particular strike, including three children. I can tell you that there was a US strike on that day but that only two adult males were killed.” The only other thing I wanted to do—but could not do—was show her the US government’s video of each strike, so she could see with her own eyes the number and type of people killed. It turned out that there were no women and children killed in any of the strikes on her list.

I spent well over an hour with the reporter—going over every alleged strike on her list—and at the end she decided to walk away from the story, as she no longer believed that the study was credible. In fact, I believe she walked out of my office concerned that the data were deliberately misleading. She was a reporter who was most interested in getting the facts right, and she

impressed me greatly that day.

In deciding to allow me to have this conversation with the reporter, the government recognized that we had a classic dilemma. The public hears bad things about the accuracy of these strikes. We say, "They are very accurate, trust us." The response is "Show us some proof and we will believe you." But we can't because of the sensitivities involved. It is not surprising that this argument is unconvincing. While such media interactions like the one I had can help, what we have to rely on is that the congressional oversight process works as it should. For a long time, congressional committees have played an important role in overseeing drone strikes. As the public's representatives, they must assure themselves that these activities are much more carefully administered than critics suggest, and they must say so to the American people. And they have done so on multiple occasions with regard to US drone strikes.

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Collateral damage is not the only drone issue that many commentators get wrong. Another is the very nature of the weapon system itself. Some call it unique in that the individual firing the weapon is so far away from the target, which makes it impersonal, more like a computer game than a war. The often unstated implication is that because it is impersonal one is somehow more likely to use it than a traditional weapon system. But drones are far from unique. There are many such weapon systems in the US inventory. What is the difference between a drone pilot and a sniper looking through a scope and pulling a trigger a mile across the battlefield? What is the difference between a drone operator and a B-2 pilot dropping ordnance from fifty thousand feet? What is the difference between a drone pilot and an Aegis ship's weapons specialist who pushes the button that causes a cruise missile to travel hundreds of miles to a specific target on the globe? There is much hype about drones—almost none of it bearing any resemblance to reality.

Some very reasonable questions include: Don't drone strikes actually create more terrorists? Don't they radicalize the friends and relatives of those killed by drones? Don't they radicalize others who deeply believe, despite the facts, that many civilians, including women and children, are being killed in drone strikes? Don't they put on the battlefield more terrorists than they take off? Perhaps—we just don't know. What leads people to choose violence in the

pursuit of their political and religious ideals is complicated. But even if the critics of drones are right and they create more terrorists than they kill, what is the alternative? You must deal with the immediate threat in front of you—the terrorist who is planning to attack the United States and kill our citizens—even as you work to deal over the longer term with the issues that created that threat in the first place.

Here is another way to think about this particular aspect of the drone issue. Counterterrorism operations using weapons fired from drones target individuals the United States believes pose a direct and imminent threat to Americans—either overseas or in the homeland. Are we better off as a country dealing with that threat by using unmanned aerial vehicles where no US servicemen or servicewomen are put in peril, or by putting US boots on the ground and therefore at risk? I think the answer is an easy one.

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