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Obama's Gift to Trump**

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ABSTRACT

The current Trump White House inherited an aggressive and secretive military drone programme, developed by the previous two administrations. This previously allowed President Obama to satisfy his security community through active killings of suspected terrorists, while at the same time maintaining the image of being a peacemaker to the outside world. Now, in 2017, his successor- facing significant resistance both domestically as well as internationally- seems content to let the security community make its own decisions on how to employ this programme. As a result, these drones are a mostly forgotten yet still deadly tool, with very little oversight or accountability for who gets killed and why.



THE US MILITARY DRONE PROGRAMME: OBAMA’S GIFT TO TRUMP

“Americans are deeply ambivalent about war”, President Barack Obama said after securing his second term in office¹. Five years earlier, his run for the White House had been based on a groundswell of liberal discontent with eight years of Republican led foreign policy² and signs of military fatigue³, marked by the increasingly failing War on Terror. When Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, that award reflected his image of a foreign policy dove. He was understood to focus on bringing troops back home and focus his political agenda on domestic challenges. In many ways, this idea persisted throughout his eight years in office, and the contrast between his administration’s international image and that of his neoconservative predecessor is still mostly intact.

A closer examination, however, suggests a different story, one of several highly aggressive foreign policy moves. The clearest of those, his continuation and expansion of drone strikes worldwide. This has significance beyond Obama’s tenure in the White House: allowing the drone programmes to continue unabated has provided his successor’s administration a deadly tool without anything close to proper democratic oversight. Given the current chaos and apparent lack of strategy, this is undesirable and likely to be deeply harmful to long-term US foreign interests.

To show how Obama’s policies led to such a destructive policy-set, this paper consists of three parts. Firstly, we analyse the reasons for Obama development of the drone programme, and underlying dynamics in society. Secondly, we provide an overview of the current state of the art of the drone programme available to his successor, President Donald Trump. Thirdly, we argue that this situation is doing significant damage to US interests.

¹ Obama, 2013

² Fletcher and Cohen, 2008

³ Beaumont, 2007



PART 1: OBAMA’S GENERALS

The moment a US president steps into the White House, his perspectives change. The language of the campaign trail- typically partisan and full of ideology- makes way for the harsh realities the Commander in Chief faces. This means that especially Democratic presidents change towards more hawkish foreign policy stances. Whereas Republicans already tend to face a more hawkish political base- and therefore need to change less when confronted by White House security advisers- Democratic presidents have a political base that is intuitively sceptical of using military tools. In the case of Obama, this was no different. He managed more so than most, however, to maintain an image of a peacemaker, despite many of his actions going against such a narrative.

The context to explain this difference between reality and public image requires an understanding of Obama’s position when entering the White House, the complicated relationship between US self-image and its actions on the global stage, as well as that of an increasingly complex and ineffective “War on Terror”.

Idealism versus presidential realities

Negotiating the fine line between using US military might to advance its foreign policy agenda without hurting the American self-image of being a force for good and peace across the globe has always been a difficult proposition. This is the case for any president, but especially for perceived liberals such as Obama. As then CIA director, and previous White House chief of Staff, Leon Panetta observed, “no Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it”⁴.

When in 1993 19 US soldiers were killed in Somalia⁵, the Clinton administration was fiercely attacked by both the political right and left. This eventually led to sweeping changes to the decision making of subsequent military action, including policies to minimise US casualties at all cost. The lack of US action during the Rwanda genocide a year later, and the focus on air

⁴ Bergen, 2010

⁵ Gordon and Friedman, 1993



war during the subsequent Balkan intervention, can be traced back directly to the political trauma that the Somalian intervention caused.

After 9/11 attitudes changed, and in many ways the War on Terror normalised military intervention once again in the eyes of the US public. In contrast with their European counterparts, the position of the US military goes largely unquestioned by the American population. Its specific brand of patriotism, and a deep-seated belief in being a primordial force for good in the world, have tended to squash qualms about the morality of US military intervention abroad.

The US public, from both sides of the political spectrum, still perceives its country as the “city upon a hill”⁶, a shining light for the rest of the world to follow towards liberal peace and prosperity. Views differ on what exactly the American role is in nudging the rest of the world along towards this “end of history”⁷. But its very nature means that in public opinion, rallying behind the flag is a generalised phenomenon, especially when it comes to “supporting the troops”⁸. In some ways, however, such patriotic belief in the military is informed by a relative ignorance about world affairs among the US public⁹.

This provides a misplaced optimism about the effect of military action, certainly when compared to a much more sceptical European audience¹⁰, and often a less critical outlook on White House decision making. Patriotic attitudes and the subsequent oft-repeated phrase “politics ends at the water’s edge” only adds to such dynamic in which the president has significant leeway to pursue relatively unquestioned foreign policy. When the War on Terror began, this issue became an even more prominent element in US foreign policy. The anonymous, complex nature of the enemy, as well as the broad scope of operations, means that

⁶ Winthrop, 1630

⁷ Fukuyama, 1993

⁸ Salaita, 2013

⁹ Tauber et al, 2013

¹⁰ There is a difference in the public criticism of supporting the drone program throughout the world, and it shows how comfortable the United States are with interventions. In Germany, politicians who publicly show support for drones, are criticized harshly. Opinion is afraid that drones will go against the long-standing defence only national security policies. The drone program, will make foreign intervention easier, and this scares the nation-states who are not acclimated to military intervention the same way the US is. Officials in Washington who show support for the drone program receives very little criticism from the general public as well as from other officials.



public opinion has been surprisingly mild on the continuous and- thus far- ineffective military operations in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, when Barack Obama entered the White House in 2009, he inherited a country in disarray. George W. Bush had left office during the worst economic crisis in decades; foreclosure hit millions of families, unemployment was on the rise and government finances had become unsustainable. Wars were being fought in both Iraq and Afghanistan while the “War on Terror” was opening new fronts across the globe.

The platform on which Obama got elected was built around bringing back domestic stability and prosperity, while at the same time withdrawing from aggressive foreign intervention. From the very first months onward, his administration seemed to keep this promise: the car-industry was bailed out while troops were withdrawn from Iraq. Health care reform was prioritised while objectives in Afghanistan were moderated. An economic stimulus package was introduced while Guantanamo Bay was ordered closed¹¹. National challenges trumped foreign policy concerns during the early stages of Obama’s reign.

While this White House strategy was consistent with Obama’s campaign promises, as well as reflecting reasonable assessment of the mood of the nation, it did raise problems. Not only did US overextension across the globe cause obstacles to this reprioritisation; it also reinforced concerns among Pentagon leadership and the wider security community about Obama’s credentials. There existed significant concerns about him being Commander-in-Chief material, and this was not helped by his liberal 2008 campaign image. The president did not immediately shake this off when entering 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Moreover, president Bush had significantly expanded the institutional capacity to deal with the increased threat levels: the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, widened mandates for existing security services, and strengthened political and legal coverage. This all meant that Obama’s administration under much greater pressure from the security community than had traditionally been the case¹².

¹¹ The fact that- despite a presidential order- Guantanamo Bay was never actually closed is yet another example of how political image and reality differ, especially during the Obama years.

¹² A case in point is the Patriot Act. Obama voted against this bill as senator, but he never actually attempted to rescind it as president. In fact, in a number of instances his administration even expanded its scope. This is not only explained by the initial scepticism by the security community that greeted the president after winning the



Once faced with security briefings and the sense of responsibility on his shoulders as president, it seems that Obama lost most of the sharp criticism he levelled against the Bush administration during his earlier political career. His liberal base, however, never made this shift along with him. As a result, he still needed to fulfil at least some basic promise of a more dovish approach to global affairs than the Bush administration. Fortunately for Obama, the very nature of the global conflict he inherited allowed him to both follow his sense of presidential responsibility as well as cater to his political base.

Commander-in-Chief

The fight against terrorism contains several elements mentioned above that make it easily manipulated from a political perspective. The political and media environment allowed Obama to satisfy both political as well as security concerns during his tenure. This was because of a lack of verifiable goals, the lack of clearly identified enemies, the smaller scale yet larger number of required military operations, and the overarching sense of imminent threats and fear created. By reducing overseas troop levels while upping the ante of covert operations, he managed to find the balance between his liberal base and institutional hawks.

Obama would immediately approve the 2009 troop surge requested by theatre commander Gen. David McKiernan in Afghanistan. This did not diminish an institutional image of an activist president with little regard for traditional security and the military. As a relatively inexperienced senator, his track record had been one of voting against the war in Iraq, against the Patriot act, and arguing for legal limitations to the scope of the fight against terrorism. To develop an effective working relationship with the military chain of command, the intelligence community, the Department for Homeland Security and other such agencies, Obama would have to prove his toughness; if not publicly, at least internally. All of this needed to be done while still maintaining the image that his electoral campaign had promised. Toning down his predecessor's aggressive foreign and military policy.

2008 elections, but also by the fact that President Obama genuinely seemed convinced that these increased powers were necessary to protect the American public from global threats.



During the course of 2009, the relationship between the White House and the Pentagon grew tenuous. Stories in the media¹³ began surfacing about the strained communication between the administration and military leadership. When later in the year leaks from both sides indicated a deep level of mistrust¹⁴. Military leadership questioned whether the president's staff even understood the dire state of the war at that time¹⁵. After replacing McKiernan with Gen. Stanley McChrystal as commander in Afghanistan, his assessment turned out not much more upbeat than his predecessor's. A furious Obama¹⁶ was facing a dilemma, and would eventually- and reluctantly- approve further troop increases.

These orders, however, were only given within strict parameters of a counter-insurgency campaign, thereby setting the tone for the later, more low-key operations that the Obama Presidency became known for. Only a year later, McChrystal was also replaced, this time by Gen. David Petraeus. This marked the beginning of a normalisation between the president and his generals. It also marked a switch to other types of military intervention, less visible to public scrutiny yet aggressive nonetheless. President Obama had found the right military tool which would satisfy his security advisors, while still maintaining an acceptable image to his dovish base: drone strikes.

The use of drones was further increased because- despite war weariness among the general population- the “War on Terror” and the associated fears never dissipated under Obama. In fact, even though his administration tried to abandon the phrase itself¹⁷, there was never a complete withdrawal from either Iraq or Afghanistan in the way that had been promised during the 2008 presidential campaign. As a result, covert operations and more sophisticated strategies only grew in number between 2009 and 2017.

¹³ Crowley, 2009; Woodward, 2009; Hastings, 2010

¹⁴ Woodward, 2010

¹⁵ Bergen, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Spillius, 2009

¹⁷ Burkman, 2009



PART 2: OBAMA'S DRONES

When President Bush initiated the War on Terror in 2001, Predator¹⁸ drones were publicly and officially put in place through the CIA to be used in combat. The method fits well with the covert nature of intelligence agencies, as the CIA had already used them in the 1990s. In parallel, the U.S Air Force contracted the MQ-9- conceived as a hunter-killer drone- Reaper in 2002, and the first nine were deployed five years later¹⁹. It is more powerful than the Predator and is designed for precision and targeting high value targets²⁰. Their use quickly accelerated and, by 2010, the U.S Air Force owned 57 drones, and had ordered another 272, both Predators as well as Reapers²¹.

Underlining their political importance and the elusive nature of the “War on Terror”, drone technology has not developed nor improved enough to make such increased deployment justifiable based on purely military ground²². The Bush administration approved the Predator programme, and accompanying Hellfire missile tests were completed with success. As late as July 2001, however, the U.S denounced the use of drones as a weapon of targeted killings. In essence, the White House was unsupportive of CIA lobbying for their expansion. On September 4th, 2001, five days before the terrorist attacks which triggered the “War on Terror”, the Predator was discussed during a cabinet meeting. Condoleezza Rice- secretary of state under Bush- agreed with the CIA that the Predator was needed, but strictly for reconnaissance flights in Afghanistan. Just a week later, after 9/11, an updated drone programme was activated. Predator drones hit Afghanistan by September 16th and armed Predators by October 7th. Later that year, and Bush gave “sweeping authority” to the CIA to use the programme more freely²³.

¹⁸ Since 2002, the MQ-1B Predator has been equipped with two hellfire missiles allowing it to strike at a range of up to eight kilometres.

¹⁹ Ackerman, 2010

²⁰ U.S Air Force, 2006

²¹ The Reaper cruise speed is 370 kph, whilst the Predator cruise speed is at 217 kph. The Predator is more vulnerable to be shot down at low altitudes, but the drones are usually flown at a range outside the reach of Taliban's weapons.

²² This has been disputed by Obama (2016): “The truth is that this technology really began to take off right at the beginning of my presidency, and it wasn't until about a year, year and a half in where I began to realize that the Pentagon and our national-security apparatus and the CIA were all getting too comfortable with the technology as a tool to fight terrorism, and not being mindful enough about how that technology is being used and the dangers of a form of warfare that is so detached from what is actually happening on the ground. And so we initiated this big process to try to get it in a box, and checks and balances, and much higher standards about when they're used.”

²³ Posner, 2014



Mounting drone deployment

A number of early CIA drone attacks turned out to be a disaster. On February 4th, 2002, one agency's Predator released a Hellfire missile at a "tall man" and his lieutenants in the outskirts of the city Khost. They suspected it to be Osama Bin Laden²⁴. The analysts had the wrong target, killing several civilians²⁵. Regardless, the deployment of drones only accelerated from this point on. The Afghan Predator programme was to become the CIA's blueprint for deadly activity in Pakistan. Langley conducted targeted killings outside of declared war zones already on November 4th, 2002.

Bush also gave the CIA and later the military authority to kill U.S citizens abroad if there was strong evidence that the American was involved in organizing or carrying out terrorist acts against the United States or U.S. interests²⁶. Clearly, his administration was not hesitant to send drones into Afghanistan or elsewhere. The only obstacle slowing down Bush' speedy drone deployment was the production. The approval from the administration came within a short time frame after the "War on Terror" had been initiated. From that moment on, production could not keep up with the orders coming from the White House. Robert Gates replaced Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense in the two final years of the Bush administration, and demanded an acceleration of both the delivery of drones, and their production.

Obama found the perfect storm in which he could mature drone deployment. Obama was not averse to war nor the use of force, but he was averse to placing troops on the ground risking American lives. Following the Bush administration, Obama had to tread carefully when creating and presenting the anti-terrorist programme he created. Drones were by no means the solution to the end of warfare in the Arabian Peninsula, nor the end of American intervention. They were simply easier to shove under the carpet, with no American lives directly being put in harm's way. The main argument revolving around the use of drones was the precision, the ability to strike over vast distances and the accuracy. Obama's philosophy of warfare and military intervention merged into one with the new military doctrines introduced by Bush.

²⁴ Today this strike would be characterized as a 'signature strike'.

²⁵ Shaw, 2014

²⁶ Obama later adapted the same policy, and it is still in place under the new occupant of the White House. (Smith and Tate, 2010)



Obama entered office in 2009. Gates continued as secretary of defense for the two first years of the new administration²⁷. The White House inherited two controversial policies from his predecessor: the rendition and harsh interrogation (torture) of terrorist suspects as well as the ability to kill terrorist suspects outside active war zones.²⁸ Two days after entering office, Obama signed an executive order dismantling Bush's 'torture' policy, but he kept the assassination program in place²⁹. It was the perfect balance between appeasing his political base and his security apparatus. The day after, he signed off on a drone strike by the CIA in Pakistan, clearly showing his commitment to the drone program. The strike killed one militant, ten civilians and five children³⁰.

Obama goes on the offensive

All of this was not simply a legacy issue for Obama. He expanded the drone program, creating his foreign policy stamp of covert strikes for an essentially covert war³¹. Whilst 50 drone strikes occurred on Bush's watch, Obama upped it to 506 strikes. While changing diplomatic direction on Iran and Cuba- hailed as victories for Obama's more conciliatory approach-, military action just moved up into the sky, and took a more silent course. Obama oversaw a continuation in Iraq and Afghanistan, airstrikes in Libya to remove Muammar el-Qaddafi, airstrikes against Islamic State, funding of rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad , support of Saudi-

²⁷ Rogers, 2017

²⁸ Both the Bush and Obama administrations have maintained that the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, or AUMF, permits the pursuit of members of al Qaeda and its affiliates wherever they may be located.

²⁹ He authorized a drone strike on January 22, 2009, which missed its targets, killing civilians. Obama was shortly after notified, and by the end of 2009, the CIA had conducted its 100th drone strike in Pakistan. (Friedersdorf, 2016)

³⁰ Zenko, 2016

³¹ Obama has had a hard time defending the drone program throughout his two terms in office. We have seen several cases where Obama is put on the spot, and stirs around the pot trying to make a fair and honest response. On April 7th, 2016, a university law student, at the University of Chicago, asked him about the programme: "How are these killings morally and legally justified and what kind of message does this drone program send about America's values to the world, the American people and to law students like myself, who refuse to put our trust in an opaque process?" Obama's answer was unusually inarticulate and long-winded: "It's fair to say that, in the first couple of years of my presidency, the architecture—legal architecture, administrative architecture, command structures—around how these were utilized was underdeveloped relative to how fast the technology was moving....The decision making was, was not ad-hoc, but it was embedded in decisions that are made all the time about you know a commander leading a military operation, or an intelligence team trying to take out a terrorist. And there wasn't enough of an overarching structure. We have to create an architecture for this, because the potential for abuse, given the remoteness of these weapons and their lethality. We've got to come up with a structure that governs how we're approaching them. And that's what we've done. So I put forward a presidential directive, that's basically a set of administrative guidelines whereby these weapons are being used."



Arabia's airstrikes in Yemen, as well as drone strikes in Pakistan³², Syria, Yemen and Somalia³³.

Officials are more likely to authorize drone strikes when there are no U.S civilian risk involved. This makes it easier to strike using drones, because the moral hazard of pilots is removed from the equation. The drone program also comes with the benefit of having a drone in the sky surveillance for up to 14 hours straight within the need for refuelling. As drones carry missiles on a permanent basis, it gives them the advantage to strike if a suspected target appears.

Failed transparency

Beyond the actual increase in drone strikes, the Obama administration put quite some effort to normalize the use of drones in warfare. The normalisation of drone strikes affected the public as well as institutions, creating a social base which allowed the drone program to succeed. Obama and his senior advisors provided the public with a policy framework carefully elaborating on the activities in the counterterrorism operations. This was formalized in a speech by Obama in May 2013. The Presidential Policy Guidance (PPG) establishes the standards and the steps that have to be taken before the United States takes direct action, i.e. lethal and nonlethal use of force. Nonetheless, there is no clear evidence that these policies were ever implemented, nor did the policy guidelines include CIA's airstrikes in Pakistan where approximately 40 percent of all non-battlefield drone strikes have since occurred.

The Presidential Policy Guidance also states that "The United States prioritizes, as a matter of policy, the capture of terrorist suspects as a preferred option over lethal action and will therefore require a feasibility assessment of capture options as a component of any proposal for lethal action."³⁴. There is a certain irony to this. Without troops on the ground, and with hellfire missiles attached to drones airing 24/7 over suspected targets, to prefer capturing over striking

³² Almost all strikes in Pakistan were executed and backed by CIA, and the information was classified. Due to the inconsistency in statistics and lack of information from the administration, the drone program is harder to understand and examine. (The Economist, 2015)

³³ Pillalamarri and Bergstrom, 2016

³⁴ The United States Department of Justice, 2013



seems mostly symbolic. The document was released in order to continue Obama's transparency promise. This was essentially another attempt to soothe the concerns of his liberal base.

The CIA and the Defense Department are obliged to provide overall plans for detaining and/or targeting named high value targets and other "lawful" targets. The plans have to be authorized by the president after "indicating with precision" the various objectives of the strike. After the initial authorization by the president, the agencies do not require additional approvals in order to take strikes against such high-value targets³⁵.

The administration also implemented a rule which emphasized that no strikes would take place outside of an active war zone unless there was "near certainty" that no civilians would be harmed. Outside of active war zones, the military and the CIA had to prove that the targets showed an imminent threat to the United States, as mentioned above³⁶. These criteria, implemented in the midst of Obama's two terms in office, created a significant fall in drone strikes. They did not, however, signify a change in the structure or core doctrine, which is still intact now, in 2017.

The impact of drones

The above-mentioned decrease was also due to al Qaeda's flailing threat in Pakistan. At the height of the drone campaign against al Qaeda in Pakistan, the United States had an average of two strikes a week. A large chunk of these strikes was so called "signature strikes" against groups of militants whose names were not necessarily mentioned nor known. Under international law, a military commander can decide whether a strike is worth the civilian casualties or not, if the target is proportional to the damage it has on the civilian population. A senior defence official said that whether the rule states it or not, the military makes every effort to spare civilian lives when carrying out a strike. The official also said that bomb damage assessments have found no civilian casualties in the recent Yemen strikes, the same numbers were also published directly from the Obama administration³⁷.

³⁵ DeYoung, 2016

³⁶ In 2013, Obama also stated that the United States would limit drone strikes to situations where capture was impossible.

³⁷ Dilanian et al, 2017



Although most of Obama's drone efforts were diligently kept away from the public eye, the importance he attached to the programme was met with some controversy. Initial strikes came with reports of civilian casualties in Yemen and tribal areas in Pakistan. This made Obama turn responsibility over from CIA to the military. Generally, however, Obama's presidency managed to make the United States comfortable with drone strikes, seeing that the public generally did not seem to react negatively, and Congress proved very supportive.³⁸

Bush's foreign policy actions were severely criticised whereas voters were mostly untroubled when Obama ordered extrajudicial killing³⁹. This can be explained by three items. Firstly, by the end of the Bush era there was a clear exhaustion when it came to criticizing warfare. The country was tired, and believed Obama to be a less aggressive leader than his predecessor. Secondly, his image as a careful, dovish Democratic candidate had been carefully cultivated. Thirdly, by withdrawing the most visible elements of the Bush era- troops from Iraq in particular, while improving ties with global allies- Obama's focus on drones was largely invisible to the average voter, and applauded by security experts.

The public will likely never know exactly how many civilians were injured and killed under drone strikes from 2001 until today, since the CIA rendition program occurred under both Republic and the Democratic presidents. In Washington there is generally no interest in investigating actions taken when both parties are directly responsible. The Obama administration insisted throughout his two terms that the drone strikes were lawful. If so, the "law" was written behind closed doors, undisclosed to the public, and even at times withheld from Congress⁴⁰.

Obama has fought a constant battle between demands for transparency towards the public and the laws regarding release of information. His administration promised to become the most transparent in history, but ended up becoming one of the most secretive. Time after time they disregarded calls for openness, waiving transparency rules, first in Pakistan and then in Yemen. The rules never even formally applied to Afghanistan⁴¹. The Obama administration excused their secrecy from public and legal scrutiny with the claim that it was for "national security

³⁸ Pew Research Center: 58% approve, 35% disapprove. May 28th, 2015.

³⁹ Zenko, 2016

⁴⁰ Jaffer, 2016

⁴¹ Majority of drone strikes take place in Pakistan and Yemen.



purposes”, a common excuse given in such instances. Claims about being transparent with respect to counter terrorist operations flew contrasted to not admitting drones were actually to blame for un(der)reported civilian casualties⁴².

It is true that during the later years of his presidency, Obama reversed some of the laws regarding the authority to strike without permission from Congress. Obama’s initial policies allowed for the CIA to freely use drones for surveillance and hunting down suspected terrorist targets, but eventually they needed permission from the military to strike⁴³. None of these changes, however, were truly structural in nature. His successor made full use of their continued ambiguity. On January 21st, 2017, one day after he took office, Trump decided to switch authority back to the CIA after meeting with officials in the agency⁴⁴.

The Trump administration conducted around 40 strikes in Yemen in one week in March, with 25 on a single day. Another drone strike was also conducted in Pakistan. This was the first in the country since May 2016⁴⁵. Under Obama, there was one strike every 5.4 days, and Trump had an average of one strikes or raids every 1.25 days in his first three months as president⁴⁶.

This is perhaps the most consequential part of Obama’s legacy: having put in place the structure which allow future presidencies to use and abuse the system at will. He may have put restraints on the drone programme during his second term in office- improving the rule of law as well as transparency- but it took Trump one day to reverse these relatively minor policy changes.

⁴² Timm, 2015

⁴³ Shinkman, 2017

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Stone, 2017

⁴⁶ According to Micah Zenko (2017), an expert on drones at the Council on Foreign Relations.



PART 3: OBAMA'S DRONE LEGACY

By further developing the framework of secretive, dehumanised and politically unscrutinised action through drone strikes, Obama has allowed future presidents to use these mechanisms at their will, regardless of their political colour or moral agenda. Obama was in a unique position as an intellectual, relatively liberal and symbolically transformative president to do this. His agenda did not receive the anti-war protests that the Bush administration received, and both sides of the political spectrum supported his efforts as part of continuing war on terror. The result? A system that is underreported, almost invisible to the public's gaze, yet deadly and destructive across the globe.

The fact that his successor turned out to be such a radical departure from the political norm in Washington only serves to highlight the damage even further. As Trump has increasingly delegated decision making to individual agencies and military commanders on the ground, the drone programme knows few limits in any traditional or democratic sense. With the White House and media caught up in daily side drama, attention to foreign policy issues, let alone individual drone strikes, has nearly dissipated.

This is Obama's real drone legacy: not only the consequences of the strikes carried out while he was in office, but especially the creation of a mechanism ready to be used and abused at will by current and future presidents and their security departments. There is very little oversight, and no public awareness to speak of.

Even though using aggressive foreign policy to suit domestic interests was nothing new, and something all recent presidents have used to some degree, the nature of Obama's drone programme did introduce novel aspects. One of those stands out in particular, especially in the light of the volatility of the US political system since Obama left office: the non-warlike nature of drone wars. In combination with the "war on terror", drone technology allows military operations which at all levels except for the target seem far from the violence displayed by other military means.

The chain of command and numbers of personnel involved are small and can bypass traditional military and political structures. Under the Obama administration, both CIA and Pentagon strikes were controlled and supervised by specifically set-up systems without standard



oversight. The decision making was purely focused on the target. Concerns for US casualties or other such traditional problems were no longer relevant. This creates a much lower institutional threshold, one that the Obama administration enthusiastically embraced.

Dehumanising warfare

The actual operations also take on different dimensions. Rather than looking targets in the eyes, or at least firing missiles from their own planes, drone pilots face more of a video game environment. Victims are purposefully dehumanized to make decision making easier. This process is not unique to drone strikes. Indeed, it has been employed in many areas of modern-day warfare. In the case of drones, however, this phenomenon is easiest to replicate and perfect. Add to that the encouragement to use distant, almost-gamer-style language when discussing targets, and the difference between playing Call of Duty- a video game- and actually guiding a real drone strike becomes minimal⁴⁷.

Another novel aspect of drone strikes is the lack of media oversight. The small-scale, low-expense nature of these operations means that they do not as easily show up in political or media reports as, say, strikes by stealth bombers or actual boots on the ground. Its secretive nature is one that gives much greater leeway to politicians and military commanders alike, and one that is harder to expose by traditional investigative journalism.

There is not a lot of information out in the public about how many drone strikes have taken place, how many civilian lives have been taken, and how many wounded. There are many studies done by independent organizations⁴⁸, providing statistics that all revolve around the same numbers⁴⁹. Almost all strikes in Pakistan were executed and backed by CIA, and the

⁴⁷ Kreps and Zenko, 2014

⁴⁸ See for example the Bureau of Investigative Journalism

⁴⁹ The actual outcomes of the policy are very hard to determine due to lack of evidence as well as civilian casualties. The scale of the program is estimated; since 9/11 over 4000 drones have been employed to surveillance, reconnaissance and lethal attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan alone. –The Globe and Mail, 2013. The congressional budget estimates that there will be spent about \$36.9 billion in the Defence Department across its different branches on a large amount of new medium sized drones through 2020. –Federation of American Scientists



information was classified. Due to the inconsistency in statistics and lack of information from the administration, the drone program is harder to understand and examine⁵⁰.

Finally, unlike commando or other military operations, drone strikes do not offer options to go beyond the binary “execute” or “abort”. Drones do not take prisoners, assess human impact, and they do not have the ability to improvise during changing circumstances. After decades of moving towards making military operations more multifaceted and less focused on being killing machines, the reliance on drones has reversed this course. Commanders are provided less options to deal with unforeseen events. “Abort” is the only alternative to going through with the strike.

The novel nature of Obama’s drone policy, including new legal frameworks on top of military innovation, have set a clear precedent that the Trump administration has continued to follow. Drone strikes still occur on a frequent basis, possibly even more so than under the last administration. This has had very little political costs to the current White House, and significant benefits. They can claim to continue their global fight against terror without paying any significant price, while not having to worry about the usual issues foreign wars bring.

The morality within the decisions of our leaders is important, especially when those decisions might clash with our own values. The drone program has been reported to cause unintended civilian casualties, and this is where the moral issue cannot be ignored. Other than questions revolving around morality, comes the issue of effectiveness. There is a strong case to be made that the commitment to drones in Pakistan has worsened the U.S-Pakistani relationship. There has also been evidence of political scramble, as well as civilian harm in Yemen. Some experts speculate whether the heavy bombing in North Waziristan has not done much other than made terrorists relocate. Former U.S President Jimmy Carter goes even further, arguing that drone attacks actually create more terrorists⁵¹.

The lack of the general public’s concern with overseas, secretive operations is the most concerning aspect of all. Traditionally- poorly informed compared to other Western nations- American voters appreciate the strength displayed through military might, while minimise concerns when it comes to civilian casualties and their long-term effects. It is this unholy

⁵⁰ The Economist, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*



combination- public ignorance with secretive programmes- that drone policy has come to exemplify.

Obama's gift to Trump

Presidents are not voted in to- or held accountable for- achieve specific foreign policy. They never were, and are even less so nowadays. Barack Obama was considered a dovish president by the populace at large, and facts about his actual foreign decision making did not change that. Now, with the political class enthralled by President Trump's ineffective leadership, leaving voters in a state of disbelief, foreign policy is even taking more of beating when it comes to political prioritisation. With the system put in place by Bush ("War on Terror") and Obama (expanded drone programme), the United States is as aggressive as ever across the globe.

Bush's structural failure was not to let three thousand people die in the World Trade Centre, it was his role in the destructive reaction afterwards, leading to an unwinnable fight against invisible terrorists. Obama's failure was not simply to let thousands of innocent people die during drone attacks, it was his role in further strengthening the systems that his successors can abuse, and which raises very significant moral questions. All Trump has to do is continue the default position laid out for him, and use it whenever it suits. No one is paying attention.



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