

America's Covert War of Terror: A Journey into Moral Depravity

Interview with Rep. Dennis Kucinich

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When 26 members of the US Congress [wrote to President Obama recently](#) urging him to get a grip on his use of drones as 'faceless ambassadors that cause civilian deaths,' one man in particular was responsible.

Congressman for Ohio Dennis Kucinich has been a career politician for more than 40 years – but he's no Washington insider. Described at times by friend and foe alike as 'the most liberal man in America,' Kucinich maintains a principled stand against US militarism.

Kucinich has viewed America's targeted killings programme against alleged terrorists with alarm for some years. Recently he has agitated for the United States to be open about its covert wars, and for Congress to assert its right to declare war – or not – in places like Pakistan and Yemen. And Kucinich, twice a Presidential primary contender, is also trying to introduce a Bill that would outlaw the assassination of American citizens by US agencies like the CIA.

On the day that the Bureau spoke with him, a UN expert in Geneva had just labeled a CIA drone tactic used in Pakistan as '[a war crime](#)'. We began by asking him about the implications:

Dennis Kucinich: Well I think it is only a matter of time before the international discussion on this makes it crystal clear that if the drone programs are not shut down, then what we are looking at is the potential of war of all against all, a pulverisation of national sovereignty and a rejection of the structure of international law. So, you know, there is the idea of war crimes becomes compelling only if nations respect the jurisdiction of a tribunal.

I certainly have called for the US to join the International Criminal Court. We have ventured into a world since 9/11 where international law is set aside and where the implements of war are becoming so ubiquitous that all the rules are being ignored and conflict zones are expanding. Where suspected terrorists – and we do not know what they are really suspected of doing, you know – they can be suspects now, and they can be executed. Or they can just be perceived to be a male of combat age and be executed.

Q: What do you hope to achieve with your recent letter to President Obama?

DK: Well, it has already achieved something. When you bring together dozens of members of Congress in a common statement about a US policy that lacks a legal basis, that doesn't have transparency, then, I think, people start to take notice. Congress, unfortunately, has been slow to claim its responsibility under the US Constitution, 'the power to declare war'. When the Constitution was written the war-power was bifurcated in this way. Under article 1 the Congress founders wanted to restrain what they called 'the dog of war' by putting it into the hands of a legislator whose constituents would be affected by it, and would therefore have to face the people at some point.

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But what has happened is that in this post 9/11 world is that the declarations of war have basically vanished, replaced by an administration's assertion of the power to declare a global war. And that has been buttressed, that was under the Bush administration, now under the Obama administration it is the derogation to the executive of the power to strike at any nation at any time for any reason. Expanding drone wars across Africa, across the Middle East, and I think ultimately risking blow-back.

Q: In Yemen recently there has been a very steep escalation, not just in drone strikes but apparently covert air strikes, naval bombardments, and possibly ground forces.

DK: Yes, it is a war, you know. We do not need to go through an Orwellian exercise of semantics or the twisting of meaning here. We understand that we are at war in Yemen. Now in order for Congress to be fully aware of this matter, I am planning to bring to the floor of the House a resolution which seizes upon the requirements of the War Powers Act, that the administration is going to either have to seek a declaration from Congress or will have to stop.

You are looking here at an executive power that is unleashed. Our system of justice, according to the Constitution, is highly structured. There are broad areas of our constitution that have to do with people being investigated, arrested, charged, having a trial, and then if they are convicted being properly sentenced and incarcerated.

What we have done here with the drone programme is to radically alter our system of justice. Because, remember, if the whole idea is that we are exporting American values, those drones represent American values. And now we are telling the world that American values are summary executions, no rights to an accused, no arrest process, no reading of charges, no trial by jury, no judge, only an executioner.

If you have only an executioner that is not justice, that is something else. Not only the United States but the world community should be properly appraised about these so-called targeted killings. And because the emphasis is on killing, this is murder. If someone shot a grocer and his defense was 'it was a targeted killing' he would be put on trial for his life. But we are told that these targeted killings are somehow to be considered apart from any legal system.

Q: There's recently been some transparency, where the President and others have spoken publicly about the covert drone campaigns. But the Department of Justice position is that 'we still can't talk to you at all about it because it is secret.' How can those apparently irreconcilable positions be held by the government?

DK: Well, when you have assassination programmes that lack any attempt to establish legal justification, then you have journeyed into moral depravity. International law means nothing, laws of war mean nothing. I am not assigning that condition to any one individual, but I am saying that the programme itself bespeaks an approach which depraves moral law, the constitution, and international law. That sets us into an endless cycle of violence.

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There are innocent people being killed, that can not be disputed. In one of the first strikes that they publicised in the Waziristan area, there was a little town Damadola where I think about 14 people were killed, I think in a strike in January 2006, I am just reciting this from memory. I believe they struck because one of the persons appeared to be the height of one of the individuals they were looking for. The criteria keeps changing and it keeps getting looser and looser.

Now, according to that recent story I think in the New York Times, all males in Waziristan are now viewed as terrorists.

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Q: All adult-aged males, yes.

DK: Yes, and so someday, I hope it is not going to be too far into the future, somebody is going to look back at this and go 'oh my God, why was this permitted?' The US government just goes 'we spent more money on arms than any other country in the world just because we have the most powerful military.' We cannot assume for ourselves the right to impose a war anywhere we well please, and yet we have. And there is little accountability, so what I am trying to bring about in the Congress is to force accountability and transparency. Transparency in terms of 'how are you able, you know, what about this extrajudicial summary or arbitrary executions? What is the legal authority for the government to conduct extrajudicial killings, where did this come from?' Really, where did this come from? Says who?

Q: The administration is saying 'we are being as transparent as we can within operational security.' You don't accept that?

DK: No. Absolutely not. I mean they went ahead and they have never made the case as to how this contributed to US security. As a matter of fact it could be, the argument could be made that it makes us less safe because instead of dealing with the one person that we are killing, we are going to be dealing with all their friends and relatives down the road. We are creating, every bomb that we drop, every missile that we launch, there are sure to be reprisals. And the reprisals, you know, there is no time-date set here, there is no time limit.

I mean, you cannot engage in this kind of conduct with impunity, it is not possible in this world. We have set upon a new frontier of a very rough technological justice which is divorced from moral law. And as such we are inviting a whirlwind of reaction. And for the life of me I can't understand why these questions were not being weighed before we waded into these policies.

Q: In his April 30 speech on drones, Obama's chief counter terrorism adviser John Brennan said that 'If we want other nations to adhere to high and rigorous standards with their use then we must do so as well. We can not expect of others what we will not do ourselves.'

DK: I look at it from my standpoint, as an American, as a member of Congress, what would we do if China, or Russia, or Iran sent a drone over the US? How would we respond? We would see it as, we would see the presence of a drone over our air-space as an act of war, no question about it. And a firing of a drone would invite a full retaliatory response. There is just no question about it, anyone who knows the US know how we would respond to that. Why then does our administration believe that America has some kind of a preemptory position? Why are we immune from international law? Where did we get that special privilege?

Q: One justification put forward is that there are believed to be secret agreements, between the US and Yemen in particular but also in the past with Pakistan, which in some way makes this all right.

DK: Well let's look at this from a number of different levels. The Pakistan government and the United States have a very famous double-game going and our two nations are constantly faking each other out. We have carried the double-game to an art form where we can't tell what is real anymore. Except the bodies lying among the smoking embers of a drone strike, that is real.

When there is no transparency or accountability that is what happens. It is easy for a country to assert cooperation. It is much more difficult for a country to assert non-cooperation and then to cooperate. Because all of this is so murky we can only reach conclusions from what facts are on the ground. And those facts include a lot of dead civilians. So lets say that Yemen asked us to do this, does it follow that we accept the invitation? Nor does it follow that the administration pursues it without Congress and an appropriate declaration. The same is true with Pakistan.

Q: Pakistan has now overtly rescinded any possible agreement, and is openly saying 'please stop bombing us, this is against international law.' Yet the bombing is still carrying on. This seems to be a new development.

DK: Well it is a new development. And if a nation, which at one time asked for our help, resents our help, then any action that takes place effectively loses the protection of the request for cooperation. And then it becomes a clearly outlined act of aggression. And so if it is as Pakistan says it is, and if in fact Pakistan has made this request and asked us to stop and we continue this bombing, then we are at war with Pakistan. I have raised this question more than a year ago on a war powers resolution on a war over Pakistan. And this was when we were just starting to step up the attacks.

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So it goes back to some simple propositions here: the UN Charter was established to protect the sovereignty of every nation and to stop the scourge of war. The United States, as a participant in the UN, has a responsibility not to aggress. Every nation has a right to defend itself, but no nation has the right to aggress against another. We are clearly aggressing against Pakistan, and against Yemen, and against a whole range of countries. This can only lead to more war. With war, these wars, any drone now is an incendiary that spreads war more broadly and it incites more people to join the cause of those who protest the US policies and who seeks to commit violence.

Q: Your critics argue that the covert drone programme is the least worst option. If the drone strikes stopped tomorrow, how would the US be able to control al Qaeda and their allies?

DK: First of all, before drones were invented, the ability of Interpol and others to cooperate with intelligence agencies to actively seek after suspects was not limited. And it may be that the US is finding limitations for its newly claimed role of the sole policeman of the world. And I will promise you this, that the American people are getting tired of footing the bill. The fact that we can do it and have been able to avoid any international questions about it does not mean at some point the world community is going to focus back upon the US and raise questions about the decisions that our leaders have made.

I love this country, I feel that we have had a kind of psychic dismemberment from our foundational causes of nation. How did the nation, that was founded under such egalitarian principles, find itself running a killing bureaucracy, how did that happen? How did we make that journey? This is clearly a story of a nation that is losing its way in the world to a mixture of fear and hubris. This is what has brought me twice to run for president of the US, to challenge this, because it is really a preliminary to the destruction of our own nation from within. We cannot keep doing this, and there is no defense for this.

Q: Medea Benjamin of Code Pink recently told the Bureau that engaging US people with the covert war and targeted killings is difficult, because there is a Democrat in the White House.

DK: It is true, but it is Bush's policies, run by another administration. There is this riddle of 'why can a Democrat get away with what a Republican could never get away with?' But as far as I am concerned that is not germane to my work, there is a principle here. If we fail to hold any executive or any administration accountable, particularly given the broad power a US executive has these days, then we are - and we are talking about the use of military force here which has a potential of killing people - then we are jeopardizing some of our most cherished democratic principles.

Killings become too easy, without a justice system to guide it. It is vigilantism conducted by robots. This is a venture into a realm that would have perhaps been conjured by the likes of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe, but certainly not by Washington or Jefferson.

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Q: When there are drone strikes in Pakistan with credible reports of civilian deaths, we can't find any evidence of these deaths being reported by major US media. Does that concern you?

DK: This is consistent with the Iraq war. It's not bad form to kill civilians, it's only bad form to talk about it. That's the problem. Let me say that there has been a tradition of American journalists in modern times to serve as the spear carriers for the government. They may look like pens but these are the spears of supernumeraries who have reporters' cards. It's what happens when you have fewer and fewer newspapers, and newspapers that are tied to large corporate interests. And a lack of enough institutions in the major media who are willing to serve as an effective counter-balance.

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Look at the New York Times. It bought in wholesale into the war in Iraq, and came back to

apologise. But how do you apologise for all of the dead bodies and the dead soldiers? We feel the dead soldiers, but we should also feel the dead civilians... There is a disturbing tendency to ignore civilian casualties, in any conflicts that we're involved in whether they're declared or undeclared. The only time civilian casualties are used is to articulate a cause for further US involvement in a conflict such as in Syria. There's talk about civilian casualties there, it's a very regretful situation in Syria. And the US will almost daily report on those civilian casualties because there's a cry for intervention. But where there's no interest in intervention, where there's a desire simply to dominate either militarily, politically, strategically, then you'll see the whole issue of civilian casualties buried.

Why do they do that? I think the people of the United States would be horrified if they actually understood how many innocent people are being swept up in the maw of these wars. So people are just permitted to sleep. And it's going to be very disturbing for the American people when they awake from the slumber to look out upon a world where there's carnage everywhere that's created by our nation without any legal process, without any constitutional basis and without any articulated justification.

This is a lightly edited version of an interview conducted with Congressman Kucinich on June 21 2012

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