

Blood is Their Argument: The Real Campaign Trail

By [Chris Floyd](#)

Region: [USA](#)

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chris-floyd.com

"...for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument?"
-- Shakespeare, Henry V

Even as the presidential candidates meet in ersatz agon to spew their self-serving lies and scripted zingers in a "debate" on foreign policy, the real campaign — the campaign of blood and bone, of death and terror, being waged in Pakistan by the American government — goes on it all its horror.

This week, the Mail on Sunday — one of Britain's most conservative newspapers — [published a story](#) outlining, in horrific detail, the true nature of the drone killing campaign begun by George W. Bush and vastly expanded by Barack Obama. Coming on the heels of a recent report ("[Living Under Drones](#)") by teams at Stanford and New York universities on this ongoing war crime, the Mail on Sunday story brings the humanity of the victims — and the inhumanity of perpetrators — to the fore. The story concerns legal action being taken in Pakistan on behalf of families of drone-murder victims by Pakistani lawyer and activist Shahzad Akbar and the UK-based human rights group, Reprieve. As the MoS reports, two court cases have been filed that could "trigger a formal murder investigation into the roles of two US officials said to have ordered the strikes."

The MoS quotes the Living With Drones report to set the context:

...Between 2,562 and 3,325 people have been killed since the strikes in Pakistan began in 2004. The report said of those, up to 881 were civilians, including 176 children. Only 41 people who had died had been confirmed as 'high-value' terrorist targets.

As the paper notes, full figures on the killings are hard to come by, due to the convenient fact that "the tribal regions along the frontier are closed to journalists." The true death count of civilians is almost certainly far higher.

So who are the thousands of people being slain by brave American warriors sitting at computer consoles on a military bases on the other side of the world? From the MoS:

The plaintiff in the Islamabad case is Karim Khan, 45, a journalist and translator with two masters' degrees, whose family comes from the village of Machi Khel in the tribal region of North Waziristan. His eldest son, Zahirullah, 18, and his brother, Asif Iqbal, 35, were killed by a Hellfire missile fired from a Predator drone that struck the family's guest dining room at about 9.30pm on New Year's Eve, 2009.

Mr Khan said: 'We are an educated family. My uncle is a hospital doctor in Islamabad, and we all work in professions such as teaching. We have never had anything to do with militants or terrorists, and for that reason I always assumed we would be safe. Zahirullah,

who had been studying in Islamabad, had returned to the village to work his way through college, taking a part-time job as a school caretaker. 'He was a quiet boy and studious – always in the top group of his class.' Zahirullah also liked football, cricket and hunting partridges. Asif, he added, was an English teacher and had spent several years taking further courses to improve his qualifications while already in work. Asif had changed his surname because he loved to recite Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet.

Well, that's what they claim, right? No doubt the button-pushing drone "pilot" parked safely in his cushy padded chair back in Nevada could ascertain through the computer screen that the quiet student and the poetry-loving teacher were actually "active terrorists, who are trying to go in and harm America," to quote the Nobel Peace Laureate in the White House, in his only public acknowledgement of the drone campaign. Such miscreants, said the Laureate, are the only people ever killed by this "targeted, focused effort."

Mr Khan, who had been working in Islamabad at the time, hurried back to the village when he got the news. This is what he found:

He got home soon after dawn and describes his return 'like entering a village of the dead – it was so quiet. There was a crowd gathered outside the compound but nowhere for them to sit because the guest rooms had been destroyed'.

Zahirullah, Mr Khan discovered, had been killed instantly, but despite his horrific injuries, Asif had survived long enough to be taken to a nearby hospital. However, he died during the night.

'We always bury people quickly in our culture. The funeral was at three o'clock that afternoon, and more than 1,000 people came,' Mr Khan said. 'Zahirullah had a wound on the side of his face and his body was crushed and charred. I am told the people who push the buttons to fire the missiles call these strikes "bug-splats".'

'It is beyond my imagination how they can lack all mercy and compassion, and carry on doing this for years. They are not human beings.'

In this, however, Mr Khan is wrong, and therein lies the tragedy: the people who killed his brother and thousands of other innocents, and have carried on doing it for years, are indeed human beings — all too human. The lack of mercy and compassion they exhibit is one of our endemic human traits — and one that has been assiduously, relentlessly, deliberately — and profitably — cultivated for years by our bipartisan elites, who sow fear and hatred and dehumanization to advance their agenda of domination, playing upon — and rewarding — what is worst in our common human nature, while mocking, denigrating and punishing what is best.

One of the officials targeted in the lawsuit is former CIA general counsel John Rizzo. As the paper notes:

Mr Rizzo is named because of an interview he gave to a US reporter after he retired as CIA General Counsel last year. In it, he boasted that he had personally authorised every drone strike in which America's enemies were 'hunted down and blown to bits'.

He added: 'It's basically a hit-list. The Predator is the weapon of choice, but it could also be someone putting a bullet in your head.'

That's nice, isn't it? Noble, worthy, honorable, isn't it? Again, these are the mafia thug values being embraced, lauded, supported and reinforced at every turn by the most respectable figures throughout American politics and media, including of course the popular media, where TV shows and movies abound with tough guys "doing whatever it takes" to kill the dehumanized "enemy" and "keep us safe."

The second case now before the Pakistani courts involves "signature strikes," the policy of killing unknown people simply because you don't like how they look or how they act. No evidence — not even false evidence, not even the thin scraps of rumor and innuendo and ignorance that constitute the overwhelming majority of "intelligence reports" — is required before the well-wadded Cheeto-chewer in Nevada crooks his finger and fires a drone. The MoS quotes a Pakistani official describing the signature strikes:

'It could be a vehicle containing armed men heading towards the border, and the operator thinks, "Let's get them before they get there," without any idea of who they are. It could also just be people sitting together. In the frontier region, every male is armed but it doesn't mean they are militants.'

One such signature strike killed more than 40 people in Datta Khel in North Waziristan on March 17 last year. The victims, Mr Akbar's dossier makes clear, had gathered for a jirga - a tribal meeting - in order to discuss a dispute between two clans over the division of royalties from a chromite mine.

Some of the most horrifying testimony comes from Khalil Khan, the son of Malik Haji Babat, a tribal leader and police officer. 'My father was not a terrorist. He was not an enemy of the United States,' Khalil's legal statement says. 'He was a hard-working and upstanding citizen, the type of person others looked up to and aspired to be like.'

"What I saw when I got off the bus at Datta Khel was horrible,' he said. 'I immediately saw flames and women and children were saying there had been a drone strike. The fires spread after the strike. The tribal elders who had been killed could not be identified because there were body parts strewn about. The smell was awful. I just collected the pieces that I believed belonged to my father and placed them in a small coffin.'

...He added that schools in the area were empty because 'parents are afraid their children will be hit by a missile'.

This is another aspect of the drone campaign [that I noted in a recent post here](#) about the drone campaign: it is not just an illegal military operation, it is — and is designed to be — a terrorist campaign. It is meant to terrorize the population of the targeted regions, to keep the people there enslaved to fear and uncertainty, never knowing if the buzzing drone flying high and unreachable above their heads will suddenly spew out a Hellfire missile on their house, their school, their farm, their hospital, and blow them or their loved ones into unidentifiable shreds. It is a terrorist campaign — not a random attack here and there, not an isolated spasm of violence — but a continual, relentless, death-dealing campaign of terror designed to poison the daily lives of innocent people and force their cowed acquiescence to the dictates of domination.

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It goes without saying that this story, or the Living Under Drones report, or the abominable

implications of the terrorist campaign were not discussed during the “debate” Monday night between the two clowns who are fighting for the chance to drench themselves in human blood for the next four years. (For the most thorough — and harrowing — consideration of these implications, including the electoral implications, [see this powerful piece](#) by Arthur Silber.) The fact that the drone campaign is actually one of the greatest threats to the national security of the American people will not impinge upon the “debate.” Why should it? Neither candidate is the least bit interested in the security of the American people. In fact, both are firmly committed to imposing the drone terror campaign on the American people themselves (as Silber, again, [notes here](#)).

[In a recent article](#), Daniel Ellsberg — a courageous and worthy dissident for many decades — shocked many by cataloging the many war crimes and moral atrocities of the Obama Administration, then ending with a fervent rallying cry for us all to support Obama. ([Vast Left has more](#) on this.) Here, Ellsberg echoes a familiar argument during this election cycle, voiced [more vehemently not long ago](#) by another honorable campaigner, Robert Parry. [My response to Parry then](#) applies equally to Ellsberg now, and to all those good progressives who advocate a ‘reluctant’ but ‘realistic’ vote for Obama:

Parry believes he is preaching a tough, gritty doctrine of “moral ambiguity.” What he is in fact advocating is the bleakest moral nihilism. To Parry, the structure of American power — the corrupt, corporatized, militarized system built and sustained by both major parties — cannot be challenged. Not even passively, not even internally, for Parry scorns those who simply refuse to vote almost as harshly as those who commit the unpardonable sin: voting for a third party. No, if you do not take an active role in supporting this brutal engine of war and injustice by voting for a Democrat, then it is you who are immoral.

You must support this system. It is the only moral choice. What’s more, to be truly moral, to acquit yourself of the charge of vanity and frivolity, to escape complicity in government crimes, you must support the Democrat. If the Democratic president orders the “extrajudicial” murder of American citizens, you must support him. If he chairs death squad meetings in the White House every week, checking off names of men to be murdered without charge or trial, you must support him. If he commits mass murder with robot drones on defenseless villages around the world, you must support him. If he imprisons and prosecutes whistleblowers and investigative journalists more than any other president in history, you must support him. If he cages and abuses and tortures a young soldier who sought only to stop atrocities and save the nation’s honor, you must support him. If he “surges” a pointless war of aggression and occupation in a ravaged land and expands that war into the territory of a supposed ally, you must support him. If he sends troops and special ops and drones and assassins into country after country, fomenting wars, bankrolling militias, and engineering coups, you must support him. If he throws open the nation’s coastal waters to rampant drilling by the profiteers who are devouring and despoiling the earth, you must support him. If he declares his eagerness to do what no Republican president has ever dared to do — slash Social Security and Medicare — you must support him.

For Robert Parry, blinded by the red mist of partisanship, there is literally nothing — nothing — that a Democratic candidate can do to forfeit the support of “the left.” He can even kill a 16-year-old American boy — kill him, rip him to shreds with a missile fired by a coddled coward thousands of miles away — and you must support him. And, again, if you do not support him, if you do not support all this, then you are the problem. You are enabling evil.

I confess I cannot follow such logic. But in his article, Ellsberg compounds the puzzlement when he tries to clinch his case by citing Henry David Thoreau, of all people. Ellsberg writes:

I often quote a line by Thoreau that had great impact for me: "Cast your whole vote: not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence." He was referring, in that essay, to civil disobedience, or as he titled it himself, "Resistance to Civil Authority."

In other words, Ellsberg is using a call for resistance to civil authority to justify supporting a civil authority which he himself acknowledges is committing war crimes and destroying American democracy. Again, I find this "reasoning" unfathomable.

But I too often quote a line by Thoreau that has had a great impact for me. In fact, I would say that it encapsulates my entire political philosophy in this dirty, degraded Age of Empire:

"How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

If only more of our compatriots would say the same.

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