

Celebrating our “Warrior President”

One of the Most Militarily Aggressive American Leaders in Decades

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Peter Bergen, the [Director of National Security Studies](#) at the Democratic-Party-supportive New America Foundation, has a [long Op-Ed in The New York Times](#) today glorifying President Obama as a valiant and steadfast “warrior President”; it begins this way:

THE president who won the Nobel Peace Prize less than nine months after his inauguration has turned out to be **one of the most militarily aggressive American leaders in decades.**

Just ponder that: not only the Democratic Party, but also its progressive faction, is wildly enamored of “one of the most militarily aggressive American leaders in decades.” That’s quite revealing on multiple levels. Bergen does note that irony: he recalls that Obama used his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech to defend the justifications for war and points out: “if those on the left were listening, they didn’t seem to care.” He adds that “the left, which had loudly condemned George W. Bush for waterboarding and due process violations at Guantánamo, was relatively **quiet when the Obama administration, acting as judge and executioner, ordered more than 250 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2009, during which at least 1,400 lives were lost.**”

To explain the behavior of “the left,” Bergen offers this theory: “From both the right and left, there has been a continuing, dramatic **cognitive disconnect** between Mr. Obama’s record and the public perception of his leadership: despite his demonstrated willingness to use force, **neither side regards him as the warrior president he is.**” In other words, progressives are slavishly supportive of “one of the most militarily aggressive American leaders in decades” because they have deluded themselves into denying this reality and continue to pretend he’s some sort of anti-war figure.

That’s not unreasonable speculation, but I ultimately don’t believe that’s true. Leaving aside Bergen’s over-generalization — some factions on “the left” have been quite vocal in condemning Obama’s actions in these areas — most Democrats are perfectly aware of Obama’s military aggression. They don’t support him **despite** that, but rather, that’s one of the things they love about him. After years of being mocked by the Right as [Terrorist-coddling weaklings](#), Obama — [strutting around](#) touting his [own strength](#) — lets them feel strong and powerful in exactly the way that Bush and Cheney’s swaggering let conservatives prance around as tough-guy, play-acting warriors. Rather than ignore this aggression, [Democratic think tanks](#) point with beaming pride to the corpses piled up by the Democratic Commander-in-Chief to argue that he’s been such a resounding foreign policy “success,” while Democratic pundits [celebrate](#) and [defend](#) the [political value](#) of his majestic kills.

Yesterday on his MSNBC morning show, Chris Hayes conducted an excellent, [two-part](#) discussion of Obama's escalated civilian-killing drone attacks, with a heavy emphasis on the innocent people, including numerous children, who have been killed. He showed a harrowing video clip of a Yemeni man's anguish as he described the pregnant women and children killed by Obama's 2009 cluster bomb strike; featured the U.S. drone killing of 16-year-old American citizen Abdulrahman Awlaki in Yemen; and interviewed human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith, who described the 16-year-old Pakistani boy he met at a meeting to discuss civilian drone deaths and who, a mere 3 days later, [had his own life ended by an American drone](#).

Later that day, Hayes [tweeted this](#): "A bit taken aback by the ugliness that drone conversation seems to bring out in some people." What he meant was the avalanche of angry Twitter attacks from steadfast Obama loyalists who gleefully defended the drone program, mocked concerns over civilian deaths, and insisted that he should not be covering such matters because they may harm Obama in an election year (of course, it's not only the President's followers, but, as Hayes noted, [the President himself](#) who is quite adept at finding humor in his drone attacks).

Contrary to Bergen's generous belief that progressives are deluding themselves about Obama's militarism, many are fully aware of it and, because it's a Democrat doing it, have become aggressively supportive of it. That, without a doubt, will be one of Obama's most enduring legacies: transforming these policies of excessive militarism, rampant secrecy and civil liberties assaults from right-wing radicalism into [robust bipartisan consensus](#) (try though they might, not even progressives will be able to turn around and credibly pretend to object to such things the next time there is a GOP President).

Now, there is one element of delusion to Democratic support for Obama's militarism, and it plagues not only his most ardent supporters but also Bergen's Op-Ed. Most Democratic praise for "Obama's foreign policy successes" fails even to acknowledge, let alone condemn, the thousands of innocent people whose lives have been extinguished by his militarism. These deaths simply do not exist in their world. When you force them to address it, they'll simply dismiss it away with the military terminology [first popularized by Timothy McVeigh](#) (that's just "collateral damage") and then quickly return to the Bush-era mantra of mindlessly invoking the word "Terrorism" to justify whatever violence the U.S. Government commits. They see themselves, and especially their leader, as so righteous and noble that incidents like [this](#) and [this](#) and [so many others](#) are blissfully kept far away from their consciousness because the reality of what they support cannot be reconciled with their self-perception; that, more than anything, is what explains the bitterness directed at Hayes yesterday: he publicized facts which they desperately prefer be hidden, not just from others but from themselves.

Thus, Bergen — who has spent the last several years dutifully defending in Democratic journals [Obama's escalation in Afghanistan](#) and [escalated drone war](#) — writes almost 2,000 words hailing Obama's spectacular foreign policy achievements. And not once do the words "civilians" or "innocent" appear. There is no mention — zero — of the numerous innocent civilians who have been killed by the policies of militarism Bergen celebrates. They simply do not exist. Bergen — who has [previously claimed](#), contrary to [substantial evidence](#), that civilian deaths from drones in Pakistan are overstated — here does not even acknowledge their existence. As usual, the deaths of numerous innocent foreigners from American drones and bombs and missiles, including children, is the unspeakable, irrelevant truth about

American militarism.

It's certainly not surprising that some think tank "terrorism expert" like Bergen finds civilian deaths at the hands of American militarism to be too insignificant to note, let alone to interfere with his giddy veneration. But the fact that so much of the Democratic Party, including its progressive faction, now follows suit is telling indeed.

One last point: for the full eight years of the Bush administration, Bush, Cheney and scores of other political and media supporters of their militarism who had not served in the military were [routinely](#) derided by [Democrats](#) and [progressives](#) as "[chickenhawks](#)" (an accusation, which, with some caveats and modifications, I [supported](#)). What happened to that? Now we have a President whom Bergen hails as "**one of the most militarily aggressive American leaders in decades**" despite having not served a day in the military, and hordes of non-military-serving Democrats who cheer him as he does so. Similarly, George Bush was mercilessly mocked for [declaring himself](#) a "war President," yet here is Bergen — writing under the headline "Warrior in Chief" — twice christening the non-serving Obama as our "Warrior President." Did the concept of chickenhawkism, like so many other ostensible political beliefs, cease to exist on January 20, 2009?

UPDATE: As several commenters suggest, there is another delusional aspect to the Democratic glorification of Obama's foreign policy which I did not mention here (though I have on many other occasions): the ludicrous notion that continuously killing civilians in the Muslim world — more than a decade after 9/11 — is Keeping Us Safe rather than exacerbating the very Terrorist threat it is ostensibly intended to solve. The crux of the Bush/Cheney mentality was that Terrorism will end just as soon as you kill all the Terrorists — even as those efforts did more to ensure the continuation and escalation of anti-American hatred than any other single cause — and that's the same mindset at the core of the Obama defense.

On another issue, *Reason's* Jesse Walker emails with a correction: "'Collateral damage' entered the general lexicon during the first Iraq War, not after Oklahoma City. I imagine that's where McVeigh picked it up, too." He then added that perhaps "it was widely used pre-Iraq and I just didn't notice it until then. So maybe I should say it entered the general lexicon *at least* as early as Iraq I. But it was definitely in wide use then. I remember us in the antiwar movement mocking news reports for uncritically repeating the euphemism. There was even [a book](#) that used the phrase as its title."

Finally, Jeremy Scahill delivered a superb speech at yesterday's drone summit on what he called "Obama's actual death panels"; Kevin Gosztola has a [typically excellent summary](#) along with the video of the speech.

UPDATE II: According [to CNN today](#), "a suspected U.S. drone strike killed three people Sunday at a high school in northern Pakistan." The article cites "intelligence officials" as claiming that "militants were hiding" at the school. There is apparently no information yet on who was killed, though I hope — and trust — that this won't impede the celebrations over our "Warrior in Chief."

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