

Killer Drone News Blackout Continues As Mainstream Media Ignore Four Whistleblowers

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The polls show it and commentators of all political stripes often cite the figures: Killer drone attacks by the U.S. military and the CIA in the Greater Middle East and Africa have strong U.S. public support.

According to the Pew Research Center's most recent poll in May, 58 percent — up slightly from 56 percent in February 2013 — approve of "missile strikes from drones to target extremists in such countries as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia."

The numbers of Americans disapproving of drone attacks actually increased from 26 percent to 35 percent over that two-year period — a hopeful sign, but still very much a minority view.

But how well informed can U.S. citizens be on this subject when the major news media time and again ignore or under-report drone-strike stories — as we have discussed [here](#) and [here](#) in recent weeks? Stories — such as *The Intercept's* October series based on a trove of classified materials provided by a national security whistleblower — that would likely raise serious questions about the drone program in many more Americans' minds if they were actually given the information?



Drone whistleblowers from left: Cian Westmoreland, Michael Haas, Brandon Bryant and Stephen Lewis. Photograph: Simon Leigh for the Guardian

And now, in the latest example of journalistic negligence, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other mainstream news organizations in late November continued their apparent policy of no-bad-news-reporting-about-drones.

This time, the major media chose to ignore four former Air Force drone-war personnel who went public with an [open letter](#) to President Obama. The letter urged the President to reconsider a program that killed “innocent civilians,” and which “only fueled the feelings of hatred that ignited terrorism and groups like ISIS, while also serving as a fundamental recruiting tool [for extremists] similar to Guantanamo Bay.”

In strong, dramatic language, the four men — in the letter and subsequent press appearances — challenged the official Obama White House/Pentagon/CIA public view that civilians are rarely killed by drones, and that drones make Americans safer and are helping defeat terrorists. Rather, they said that the U.S. drone war plays right into the hands of ISIS and other extremist groups by terrorizing local populations and killing innocent civilians, resulting in heightened anti-U.S. feeling and more recruits for ISIS.

Now it’s not every day that four former drone operators go public with their anguish-filled stories of the drone program killing innocent people and creating blowback against the United States.

In fact, there has not been any day like that. Until now, that has never happened. You would think that this would meet some textbook definition of news — something new, uncommon, dramatic and consequential. When President Obama or a [proven liar](#) about the drone program, CIA Director John Brennan, propagandize about drones and how wonderful and precise and well-nigh infallible they are in crushing extremists, not killing civilians and making us safe — that is what the mainstream media dutifully reports as news. But when four drone whistleblowers — who sat at the very heart of the system guiding Hellfire missiles from Predator drones to human targets in Afghanistan and Iraq — come forward to undermine that tidy little story, those same news outlets turn their collective back.

Voicing such sharp criticism of a top-secret program with which they were all involved is an especially risky move given that the Obama administration has shown itself to be the most anti-whistleblower administration ever. Obama’s Justice Department has prosecuted more than twice as many whistleblowers under the Espionage Act as all previous presidents combined since the passage of the law in 1917.

The letter to Obama, also addressed to Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter and CIA Director Brennan, said that the Bush and Obama administrations “have built a drone program that is one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world.” They expressed guilt, and are experiencing PTSD, as a result of “our roles in facilitating this systematic loss of innocent life.”

In a pointed reference to the Obama administration’s statements in support of the drone program, the letter stated: “We witnessed gross waste, mismanagement, abuses of power, and our country’s leaders lying publicly about the effectiveness of the drone program.”

And, drawing a link between the recent Paris attacks and drone killings creating more terrorists and blowback, the whistleblowers added: “We cannot sit silently by and witness tragedies like the attacks in Paris, knowing the devastating effects the drone program has overseas and at home. Such silence would violate the very oaths we took to support and defend the Constitution.”

These former Air Force personnel — three former Predator sensor operators (Staff Sergeant Brandon Bryant, Senior Airman Stephen Lewis and Senior Airman Michael Haas), and one former drone program infrastructure technician (Senior Airman Cian Westmoreland) — had a combined 20-plus years of remotely operating drone strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq from Creech Air Force Base, Nevada. All had Afghanistan drone experience, and all but Westmoreland also had Iraq experience. This gave them special, first-hand insight into a program whose operators, in Haas’s words, viewed targeted human beings as “ants...just black blobs on a screen” and considered children who came into view on their screens as “fun-sized terrorists.”

Haas and other whistleblowers expanded on the points in their letter in an interview with *Guardian* reporters, which resulted in two [eye-opening articles](#) by Ed Pilkington and Ewen MacAskill. This was followed by a lengthy [appearance](#) on *Democracy Now!* and a [news conference](#) in connection with the premiere in New York of a new documentary, “Drone,” in which two of the whistleblowers (Bryant and Haas) make appearances. [Agence France-Presse](#) (AFP), *Reuters* and [Newsweek](#) all carried stories, as did [The Intercept](#), [Shadowproof](#) and other online news sites.

Did you read about any of that whistleblower criticism in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, or see a segment about it on television news? No, you did not. If you know about it at all, it’s probably because of *The Guardian*, *Democracy Now!*, and online political and progressive blogs and websites.

This marked the second time in just the last two months that mainstream news outlets have given a thumbs-down to a significant drone story. In October, *The Washington Post* ignored it and *The New York Times* ran two paragraphs at the end of a 25-paragraph piece about a series of significant drone articles posted in *The Intercept*. The articles were derived from documents, referred to as the “[Drone Papers](#),” that were provided to *The Intercept* by an anonymous intelligence whistleblower. (We wrote about that [here](#).)

As ExposeFacts has previously noted, mainstream news organizations make only occasional forays once or twice a year into reporting that is critical of the drone program (for example, [this New York Times](#) article from 2012 and [one](#) earlier this year).

What many Americans see or hear most of the time from the self-censoring mainstream media is superficial reporting on the latest drone strike that killed a certain number of what are almost always described in sketchy news stories as militants of one type or another. They also get frequent doses of propaganda and soothing assurances from the President and other Obama administration officials that the program of drones and other aerial bombardments is precise, takes special precaution not to kill civilians, but most importantly is making America safer by killing militants while keeping U.S. troops out of harm’s way.

Typical was Obama’s [speech](#) in May 2013 at the National Defense University, where he said this: “And before any [drone] strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set.” He said civilian deaths

constituted “a risk that exists in all wars.” But as Commander-in-Chief, he went on, “I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties – not just in our cities at home and facilities abroad, but also in the very places – like Sana’a and Kabul and Mogadishu – where terrorists seek a foothold.”

And who, if they were paying attention at the time, can ever forget major-league truth abuser John Brennan, when he was Obama’s top counterterrorism adviser, saying in June 2011 that for almost a year, “there hasn’t been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we’ve been able to develop.” In reporting that whopper, *The New York Times* in August 2011 further [reported](#) this: “Other officials say that [Brennan’s] extraordinary claim still holds: since May 2010, C.I.A. officers believe, the drones have killed more than 600 militants – including at least 20 in a strike reported Wednesday – and not a single noncombatant.”

Given the Obama administration’s control of the drone narrative and the paucity of mainstream press coverage, the 35 percent opposition figure shown in the Pew Research Center’s poll in May is a bit surprising for being as high as it is. Especially given that so many Americans buy into the notion that the nation is in a war against terrorism, that drones make us safe, and that killing remotely by drones is preferable to sending U.S. soldiers into combat areas and risking their lives.

Curiously, that same Pew Research Center poll, in addition to showing 35 percent opposition, found that 48 percent said “they are very concerned that U.S. drone strikes endanger the lives of innocent civilians.” This higher figure suggests that even some Americans currently favoring drone attacks have doubts about how well civilians are protected — and thus might be open to opposing drone use if the mainstream media would let them know what the four whistleblowers said.

Or if the mainstream press would let them know what was contained in *The Intercept*’s “Drone Papers” articles — such as the revelation that during one five-month period of Operation Haymaker in northeastern Afghanistan, “nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. In Yemen and Somalia where the U.S. has far more limited intelligence capabilities to confirm the people killed are the intended targets, the equivalent ratios may well be much worse.”

It’s worth noting that *The Guardian*, *AFP* and *Reuters* — outlets that did cover the four drone whistleblowers — are all headquartered outside the United States and are not part of the inside-the-Beltway media crowd that influence what is and isn’t news at the national and U.S. governmental level.

Also, because those news outlets all have high levels of newspaper and Internet-based circulation in numerous countries, what they report can make citizens of other countries better informed than Americans about certain aspects of U.S. life. This meant, for example, that Singapore readers of [The Straits Times](#) and the Dublin, Ireland readers of [TheJournal.ie](#) got to read about the four whistleblowers via an AFP article online. Meanwhile, sadly and ironically, readers of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were left in the dark.

Across the waters in the drone-deploying United Kingdom, public opinion on drone use appears to be the direct opposite of the United States. A Pew Research Center poll in July 2014 found that the U.K. public opposed the use of drones by a 59-33 percent margin.

With *The Guardian* and others providing more critical coverage of drones than U.S. mainstream media, and with the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism regularly pumping out [information](#) that challenges U.S. government claims about limited civilian drone-strike deaths, it's a good bet that U.K. citizens are more exposed to criticisms of the drone programs than are their U.S. counterparts.

Additionally, many members of Parliament are much more critical of Britain's drone policies than are members of Congress critical of U.S. policies, and they are often in the [news](#) with their criticisms and concerns. Not so in the United States where, with no serious congressional oversight or debate about drones, there is seldom any anti-drone news generated in the House or Senate — which means citizens hear nothing from the legislative branch to counter the White House views.

As long as major U.S. news organizations continue to ignore, downplay or under-report drone stories, much of the American public will remain under-informed or ill-informed about what our drone strikes are doing to the citizens of many other countries, while at the same time turning ever more people against the United States.

(Disclosure: The four drone whistleblowers are represented by attorney Jesselyn Radack, who is national security and human rights director of the ExposeFacts WHISPeR program.)

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