

Obama's Drone War: A Black Mark on his Legacy that cannot be Ignored

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Global Research, January 02, 2017

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President Obama's last weeks in office have been marked by a series of exit interviews, conversations that are often as inherently fascinating as any discussion with a man soon to quit the most powerful job on the globe must be.

In [one such interview](#), a thought-provoking piece from *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates, Obama raised the issue of drone warfare, which has become a signature policy of his administration:

"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," Obama added, "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."

That this is the drone narrative Obama wishes to promulgate as he leaves the Oval Office is telling. It is also false.

As Coates' *Atlantic* colleague, Conor Friedersdorf, notes in [a response](#) to the interview, it is true that drone strikes escalated substantially around the time Obama took office. Former President George W. Bush ordered [about 50](#) drone strikes in the latter years of his administration, but Obama has launched more than 10 times that number, [topping 500](#) in the fall of last year.

Yet, as Friedersdorf continues, this escalation did not occur because "this technology really began to take off," as Obama suggests. Rather, Obama approved his first drone strike just two days after he was inaugurated in 2009. "The strike missed its target, and Newsweek [reported](#) that Obama was made aware almost immediately that innocents died in the attack," Friedersdorf writes. "By the end of 2009 the CIA had already conducted its 100th drone strike in Pakistan."

In other words, Obama actively embraced drone warfare from the very beginning of his presidency, and he has been intimately involved in the process throughout. As *The New York Times* famously [revealed in 2012](#) — well after Obama's "year, year and a half"

timeline of reform initiatives — the president personally approves each name added to the kill list of drone strike targets, reviewing “baseball cards” of suspected terrorists to be bombed.

And drone strikes are not the “surgical” procedure Obama makes them out be. While [the president claims](#) “with great certainty” that the “rate of civilian casualties in any drone operation are far lower than the rate of civilian casualties that occur in conventional war,” evidence from outside observers indicates the opposite is true.

“According to the best publicly available evidence,” *Foreign Policy* [reported earlier this year](#), “drone strikes in non-battlefield settings — Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia — result in 35 times more civilian fatalities than airstrikes by manned weapons systems in conventional battlefields, such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.”

For civilians in the Middle East, that level of imprecision means immense [loss of life and suffering](#) for survivors. In Pakistan, for example, [as few as 2 percent](#) of U.S. drone strike victims are high-level terror suspects. So [as many as 50](#) ordinary people, many of them [women and children](#), are killed for every one confirmed terrorist. On Obama’s watch, our government has even engaged in “[double tap](#)” [drone strikes](#), which is when the drone drops one round of Hellfire missiles and briefly flies away — only to return to drop a second round of bombs on first responders attempting to save the injured.

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After hundreds of strikes in half a dozen nations, President Obama wants to leave office claiming that his drone program has killed only around 100 innocents — [independent estimates](#) put that figure [much higher](#) — and that its future practice will be safely contained in a reasonable legal framework of his own making.

This is simply not true. On the contrary, Obama’s drone war is responsible for untold civilian casualties and [has engendered](#) anti-American sentiment among people otherwise inclined to be our allies. It has dangerously [expanded the power](#) of the presidency to include global assassination of anyone, anywhere, without due process — including [children and American citizens](#).

No matter how else we remember President Obama, the drone war is a black mark on his legacy. Its gravity cannot and must not be downplayed.

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