

Voice Carry: Extrajudicial Killings of Children

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Last month, President George W. Bush murdered four children. This is not a controversial statement. There is no dispute about the facts. Indeed, Bush's own minions fully acknowledge — even celebrate — the deed. Nor has the political opposition or the national media offered the slightest objection to the principle of presidential murder.

Strange, isn't it? While the American Establishment is now convulsed over the issue of a president ordering wiretaps without court approval, the same president's assertion of the right to kill anyone on earth he chooses without charges, trial or judicial review is readily accepted on all sides. Even when these "targeted assassinations" go horribly awry — as in Pakistan last month, when 18 innocent people, including four children, were obliterated in their homes by Hellfire missiles, as *The Observer* reports — there is no demur, no moral shock. Just tough talk about "doing whatever it takes" to defend civilization from the barbarians.

The misfired Hellfires were directed by unmanned CIA Predator drones, acting on the usual "credible intelligence" that al-Qaida honcho Ayman al-Zawahiri was in the village of Damadola, near the Afghan border. But in this kind of shell game, you can never know which coconut the evil ones might be hiding under — so the CIA destroyed not one but three houses, just to be sure. Thus even if the intelligence had not been the usual half-chewed cud and Zawahiri really had been in Damadola (hugging Saddam's phantom WMD, perhaps), the scattershot attack on the residential area would have guaranteed civilian casualties in any case.

In other words, "collateral damage" — always "regretted" with copious crocodile tears from the damagers — was actually built into the mission. As in Bush's ongoing, ever-intensifying, unreported aerial bombing of urban areas in Iraq — which has killed thousands of civilians, *TomDispatch* reports — the deliberate killing of noncombatants in Damadola and other targets of Bush's "extrajudicial" wrath is meant to convey a clear message: "Knuckle under — or else."

Indeed, the Bush brass in Iraq have been explicit on this point. As Michael Schwartz reports in *Mother Jones*, the regular use of massive, indiscriminate force in anti-insurgent operations — destroying an entire apartment building, and everyone in it, if suspected guerrillas are thought to be hiding there — is a key component of Bush's "larger strategy" in the occupied land. Schwartz quotes an officer who told *The New York Times* that American attacks are meant to "punish not only the guerrillas, but also to make clear to ordinary Iraqis the cost of not cooperating." This, as Schwartz accurately notes, is "the textbook definition of terrorism — attacking a civilian population to get it to withdraw support from the enemy."

But of course the “War on Terror” has always been, in reality, a “War Between Terrors” — state terror versus stateless terror, with one side marshalling a military force of incomprehensible scope and power, and the other side incapable of sustaining anything more than the occasional isolated spasm of bitter fury. In fact, it’s not even a war at all; as many have noted, you can’t wage war on a tactic — “terrorism” (especially when you are employing it yourself). And the small band of criminal cranks loosely grouped under the scarifying rubric of “Islamofascism” poses no threat whatsoever to the national existence of the United States. And no, the well-sustained insurgency in Iraq has nothing to do with the “War on Terror”; it’s a standard response to foreign occupation. Anyway, Bush is fighting with the Islamofascists in that one — the Iran-backed theocrats he has empowered in Baghdad.

But magnifying the threat from the gaggle of knuckle-dragging goons in the bin Laden gang is a key component of Bush’s “larger strategy” in another occupied land: the United States. By declaring endless war on a nebulous enemy whose mafia was spawned in part by the CIA — and by allowing this Islamic Pimpernel to miraculously escape from Afghanistan and roam like a bogey-man in the back alleys of the American mind — Bush has been able to claim the powers of a “war president” to implement a far-ranging authoritarian agenda that his handlers like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld have been pushing since the days of Richard Nixon: a locked-down, militarized state, bent on geopolitical domination and run in secret by a small elite of ideologues and war profiteers without interference from Congress, the courts, the press or the people.

By September 2000, a Cheney-Rumsfeld “think tank,” Project for the New American Century, was openly yearning — in print — for “a new Pearl Harbor” to “catalyze” the American people into supporting this militarist agenda. Six days after what Bush dutifully termed the “new Pearl Harbor” of Sept. 11, 2001, he signed a “presidential finding” allowing the CIA to kill anyone he arbitrarily designates a “terrorist,” The Washington Post reports. The reign of authoritarian rule — of a presidential despot beyond all legal and moral restraint, eagerly ordering torture, rendition, aggressive war and murder — began that day. And it has never been challenged.

Not even when Bush kills children. U.S. and international law expressly forbid both the deliberate targeting of noncombatants and “extrajudicial killing,” even in wartime. Yet, as Reuters reports, Bush personally ordered the Damadola hit — with its guaranteed “collateral damage.” This was, by any standard, deliberate, premeditated murder. But still the Washington Establishment — Democrats included — rose to cheer the killer this week as he mouthed his bloodstained lies and cynical pieties in the State of the Union address.

No doubt the loud and ultimately ineffectual noise about wiretapping will go on. But the voices of those murdered children — killed without mercy, already forgotten — will never be heard again.

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