

On the Immorality of Drone Missile Strikes in Pakistan

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
United States Senate
112 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-0505

March 25, 2012 (by email)

Dear Senator Boxer:

Best greetings. Thank you again for your having recently introduced legislation to effect the rapid removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. While appreciative of this step, I am nonetheless moved to write to request a cessation of drone missile strikes in Pakistan; and that the Senate conduct hearings on these covert operations.

Your House colleagues last year held hearings on the legal aspects of the strikes. Despite certain points of disagreement, the witnesses unanimously recommended Congress to exercise considerably more oversight in the matter.

Those hearings, however, did not go far enough. More fundamental than the question of conformity to international law is that of morality: as Seneca put it, "Propriety forbids what the law allows."

I believe that the immorality of these strikes ought to be apparent to every American official and citizen. Some of the more salient problems are these:

1. **Assassination.** Assassination is universally regarded as odious and morally repugnant. Only in the case of dire necessity is it deemed acceptable -- and only then with great reluctance, and even remorse. One or two strikes, if truly necessary to neutralize top terrorists, might be considered necessary. But ten strikes should raise an alarm; and 200 strikes, the current approximate number, show that all moral restraint has been abandoned.
2. **Inhumanity.** The mechanized, inhumane nature of these killings makes them even worse. With conventional war, there is at least a sense of honor, courage, and mutual respect among combatants. But with drones the victims are slaughtered like animals, with no chance to flee, to surrender, or to fight back -- thereby at least gaining an honorable death. Nothing in the strikes acknowledges the humanity of those slain.
3. **Proportionality.** These attacks are mainly aimed at Taliban militants, not terrorists. Thus the principle of proportionality, a basic tenet of Just War doctrine, is violated. The Taliban never attacked the United States; in their minds, they are defending their homeland. There is no justification to resort to such extreme, violent, and inhumane methods against them.
4. **Civilian casualties.** There seems little disagreement but that the strikes kill many civilians as well as combatants.

5. **Escalation.** In pioneering the use of drone missile warfare, the United States is setting a dangerous precedent, which other countries will certainly follow.

6. **Covert nature.** The covert nature of the operations -- run, as they are, by the CIA, and with no accountability whatsoever -- makes them even more prone to abuse and excess.

7. **Psychological effects.** This important topic may be subdivided as follows:

(a) Effects on operators. Soldiers in combat are themselves subject to risk. In a sense, a soldier is in a "kill or be killed" situation. Thus, when a soldier kills, the conscience, which strongly resists killing, is less injured. But a drone operator, remotely located, is not subject to risk or threat; his or her actions are mere killing (i.e., not motivated by a genuine instinct of self-preservation). Clearly this must have severe negative consequences for the psychological well-being of the operator. We are taking decent American young people and inducing them to be merciless killers and assassins.

(b) Effects on American citizens. The effect above necessarily carries over to the American public, who are ultimately responsible for these actions.

(c) Effects on Pakistanis. Innocent Pakistanis in the region are subjected to great psychological distress because of these attacks. Villagers must watch in mortal dread as drones circle for hours before missiles are actually launched, producing a state of generalized fear, terror, and helplessness. Indeed, news reports from Pakistan have alluded to increased incidence of serious depression and other psychiatric conditions resulting from the attacks. Added to this is rage over the violation of their national sovereignty.

(d) General effects. The strikes contribute to the mistaken belief that societal problems can be solved or improved in any way by resorting to violence. It is most ironic that the United States wishes to fight terrorism by affirming the legitimacy of unusually inhumane and violent measures.

Beyond these moral problems are simple utilitarian ones: that the strikes are doing more harm than good by earning recruits for al-Qaida, radicalizing Pakistan, and ruining the reputation of America and her truest democratic principles.

It appears abundantly clear to me that these strikes are not just unwise and morally wrong, but evil. I ask you to consider these points, and, should you conclude similarly, urge you to act to end the attacks.

Respectfully yours,

John Uebersax, PhD
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