

## **Drone strikes and the fog of war**

Earlier today, Barrack Obama publicly apologised for the deaths of two aid workers in a drone strike in Pakistan, in January. Warren Weinstein, a US national, and Giovanni Lo Porto, from Italy, were being held hostage by Al-Qaeda when the mistake took place. The target - Ahmed Farouq, leader of Al-Qaeda's Indian branch - was also killed in the strike.

In his apology, Obama attributed the deaths of these non-combatants to the "fog of war"; that opaque medium that has masked the identities of so many casualties during the "War on Terror". It is a term very much at odds with others favoured by White House press officers and spokespeople for the Pentagon, such as "surgical strike" and "smart munitions". Because, what is the point of having the most cutting edge military technology, if it is not to dispel the "fog of war"?

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which is a not-for-profit organisation based at City University London, more than three thousand people have been killed by drones during Obama's presidency, including five hundred civilians. Many more have been grotesquely injured, in rural, impoverished areas of Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan, where there is little hope of receiving medical attention.

There have been reports since 2008 of the CIA using drones to target Taliban strongholds, and then hovering in the area, and blowing up rescuers sifting through the rubble. Another tactic has been to target the funerals of assassinated Taliban commanders. In both cases, it is impossible to distinguish Taliban fighters from civilians.

It is hard to imagine the terror that must be experienced by ordinary villagers when they are assaulted, on a quiet, sunny afternoon, by high explosive missiles. There is no warning and there is no hope of escape. For every person killed, there is a family, and a network of friends, that will never forget.

Of course, there is no acknowledgement, let alone any apology, for the Pakistani civilians who are killed. Just like the Iraqis, who died in such enormous numbers following the 2003 invasion, they are made to feel insignificant, worthless, in the face of blinding technology, that can blast them out of existence at a moment's notice. "Shock and awe", they called it, as if the military-political mindset had learned nothing in Vietnam.

As westerners, under the umbrella of the United States, and its ability to project overwhelming force anywhere in the world, we are used to feeling safe and protected. We get used to the idea that people who have different cultures to our own, who speak different languages, who usually live in poverty, meet violent deaths on a regular basis in the interests of preserving the balance of world power. Because of our freedoms and liberties, we have the moral high ground, which means we have a kind of unwritten license to bestow death on these people. If the tables are turned, and they bestow death upon us, then we see it for what it is: murder. Why can't we hold our own politicians to the same standard?

Imagine being on the outside looking in. The fluffy Americanised world of Hollywood and McDonald's and pop music and gossip magazines and sports channels is instead a near-silent robotic army, which has already killed someone you know for reasons that are not

clear, and has your village under surveillance. Compared to this ruthless and sinister presence, any manner of old-fashioned tyranny would be preferable. Does anybody doubt that the deadly new toys of America and its allies are very effective recruiting tools for anti-western extremists?

The technology is in its infancy, but it is progressing fast. The latest drones being developed by the US Navy look like miniature stealth bombers and they can take off and land autonomously from the decks of aircraft carriers. They will give the US drone programme global strike capability, which will mean no designated "target" is safe.

It is up to voters in America, the UK and elsewhere to decide how we want our money to be spent, and whether we are comfortable with the idea of increasingly autonomous military weapons being used outside the battlefield. If we do not get a handle on this very quickly, and hold our elected leaders to account, we will find the accelerating pace of technological change will drive an ever-widening gap between our understanding of what is going on and what is actually going on, and notions of accountability, democracy and morality will suffer as a result.

When Obama began his presidency, the public mood embodied hope to an unusual degree, and expectations were high. Partly this was because of the disastrous Bush administration that preceded his arrival, and partly it was to do with his mixed race heritage, which seemed to usher in a new dawn of tolerance and enlightenment. There was also an indefinable quality about the man himself, which solicited respect, and confidence. Here was a man of intellect, of courage and ideals, who would offer a break from the past, and use his high office to change the world for the better.

Based upon the extraordinary novelty of installing a non-white face in the White House, it is arguable that the public mood was justified. However, looking a little below the surface, there are two reasons why the sense of optimism did not match the impending reality. Firstly, the often-cited top job in the world has become a hostage to the US political system. As his influence has waned - first losing control of the House of Representatives, and then the Senate - his Republican opponents have had increased leverage to block his initiatives - which they have done, with single-minded zeal. His policy of extending health insurance to more Americans has been met with ferocious opposition since its inception, and even now, the Republican party promises to repeal it as soon as it regains power.

The second reason relates to Obama's style of politics.

He is more of a pragmatist than an idealist, as evidenced by his investment in the drone programme. Technology has given Obama the means of projecting US military might overseas without risking the lives of US service people. In other words, he can be seen to be fighting the "War on Terror" whilst exposing himself to less political risk.

It all goes wrong when an American (or a citizen of a friendly ally) gets killed in a drone strike, and for whatever reason, there is no way of plausibly evading the truth of what has happened. However, these (publicly acknowledged) occurrences are rare, and - judging from the response from Weinstein's family in the wake of the apology - the blame falls most heavily on the terrorists for taking hostages in the first place.

It is tempting to look on missile carrying robots, doing the dirty work of the CIA and the Pentagon, as a portent of doom, à la the Terminator franchise. While, in the long run, this may well be the case, it is not helpful to the present discussion. Whether we like it or not, the technology exists, and it will only ever get more sophisticated. So we must establish the legality of its use. The idea of the roving robot assassin, invisible and accountable to no-one, must not be one that is borrowed over from science fiction, in the same manner as space ships and smart watches. It is battlefield technology, and that is where it should stay.

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