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Politics and Markets

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Obama's Drone Problem

Many who support **President Obama** do so because he is committed to a distribution of social welfare that is broader than those proffered by Republicans. The Affordable Care Act, the **Lilly Ledbetter** law, and the use of stimulus money to save the jobs of tens of thousands of municipal employees are examples of this, as are the Obama administration's ongoing initiatives to provide better care for veterans when returning home from combat zones. **Michelle Obama** and **Jill Biden** have made veterans' care a top priority. Mr. Obama's compassion for our sailors, soldiers and airmen seems second to none.

Compassion seems to have its limits, however. For what about all of those innocent civilians killed by US drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen? A recent **Stanford/NYU** study of drone attacks, using data compiled by **The Bureau of Investigative Journalism**, based in London, concludes that from June 2004 through mid-September 2012 drone strikes killed as many as 3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom as many as 881 were civilians (including 176 children), with as many as 1,362 individuals injured. According to **The New America Foundation**, the average non-militant casualty rate over the life of the US drone program is 15 to 16 percent.

Estimated Total Deaths from U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004 - 2012*

Year	Militant Low	Militant High	Unknown Low	Unknown High	Civilian Low	Civilian High	Total Low	Total High
2012	186	293	2	4	0	0	188	299
2011	336	535	27	58	3	9	366	599
2010	579	991	16	20	11	16	608	1028
2009	266	538	59	158	23	27	350	721
2008	176	289	21	22	20	32	219	344
2004-2007	54	88	5	6	95	107	155	200
Total	1597	2734	130	268	152	191	1886	3191

*Through October 1, 2012



This, after the public has been told repeatedly that drone targets are scrupulously and rigorously selected, and that the use of drones leads to surgical strikes that do not lead to large civilian casualties, whether deaths or injuries. The study also reveals that the damage done by US drones is not merely physical. There is a good deal of psychological damage as well, as Pakistani and other civilians live their lives in constant fear of death from the sky.

The frequency of strikes seems to be declining. But President Obama has authorized about 300 US drone strikes in Pakistan, which is six times more than was authorized during the eight years of the Bush administration.

There is no doubt that many of the terrorists who have taken aim at the United States have every intent to carry-out their threats, so it is understandable that the United States will continue to deal with them in a severe way (severe, but the legality under international law is questionable, to say the least). That said, relatives and friends of the dead victims will not soon forget their losses. Would you?

Apart from the serious moral and legal questions that US drone strikes present (among them, "Are all of the supposed 'militants' the proper targets of summary, deadly attack?"), a practical concern has to do with the seeds that are being planted when drones strike innocent civilians, which seeds may lead to future hostilities against America, Americans or America's allies. To borrow a phrase from the late **Jonathan Kwitney**, we seem keen on making "endless enemies" around the world.

The routine killing of innocent civilians from the air is not exactly the best advertisement for American civilization. If the Obama administration would be consistent with respect to its concern for people both here and abroad, it will have to rethink its policy concerning the use of drones, for it appears that the death they deliver comes at too great a human cost.

Obama supporters will also need to get over their encomiums, and recognize that Mr. Obama's morality seems inconsistent. Hugging children along a rope line in Peoria is wonderful. What's not wonderful? The deaths of children, blown to pieces as a consequence of an air campaign effected by order of the President of the United States.

Data table: The New America Foundation

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