Reaper Madness: Obama's Whack-a-Mole Killing Machine

09/11/2015

This despite a decade of worldwide moral outrage over its overwhelming civilian casualties, violations of international law, disregard for national sovereignty, dismissal of due process, and continuing secrecy. The Obama administration recently announced that the drone killing program will in fact be increased by 50 % in the coming two years.

Now government documents leaked to the Intercept show conclusively that the US drone program kills thousands of innocents on bad intelligence and careless targeting while being falsely portrayed as a program of impeccable planning and precision execution. The recently leaked "Drone Papers" reveal the extent of willful ineptitude in US drone operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, which rely on systematically faulty intelligence and astonishing inaccuracies in identifying targets. These revelations only further confirm what many of us already knew about the appalling failure, relentless deception and criminal lethality of the US drone program.

"Our entire Middle East policy seems to be based on firing drones," Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told The Intercept. "They're enamored by the ability of special operations and the CIA to find a guy in the middle of the desert in some shitty little village and drop a bomb on his head and kill him."

Targeted killing by drones remains the US weapon of choice, famously called "the only game in town," by former CIA director Leon Panetta. This despite a decade of worldwide moral outrage over its overwhelming civilian casualties, violations of international law,

disregard for national sovereignty, dismissal of due process, and continuing secrecy. The Obama administration recently announced that the drone killing program will in fact be increased by 50 % in the coming two years.

Now government documents leaked to the Intercept show conclusively that the US drone program kills thousands of innocents on bad intelligence and careless targeting while being falsely portrayed as a program of impeccable planning and precision execution. The recently leaked "Drone Papers" reveal the extent of willful ineptitude in US drone operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, which rely on systematically faulty intelligence and astonishing inaccuracies in identifying targets. These revelations only further confirm what many of us already knew about the appalling failure, relentless deception and criminal lethality of the US drone program.

But it's even worse. Careless execution and public distortion are one thing. If the US were in fact relying on a proven military technology and strategy to defeat terrorists and "keep America safe," despite setbacks and innocent lives lost, there are those who could justify the cost.

But what is perhaps most insidious of all is the fact that many studies long available to military planners have shown decisively that the use of weaponized drones in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts is both ineffective and counterproductive. Even more, the historical record and recent research shows quite clearly that the "decapitation" strategy driving such drone use – the assassination of high value targets – has itself been both unsuccessful and counterproductive in defeating insurgent or terrorist organizations.

So the drone warriors have known all along it wouldn't work: that killer drones and kill lists would slaughter thousands of civilians but never defeat terrorists. They've known this conclusively from decades of military experience and volumes of research studies. Yet they continue to do it anyway, ever more expansively, ever more mindlessly. Why? Because they can (and because they have no Plan B).

***

Weaponized drones were in fact first proposed by the US military in 2000, prior to 9/11, as a means to both target and kill, with the same aircraft, the Number One high value target, Osama Bin Laden. For this purpose, Predator surveillance drones were fitted with Hellfire missiles still available from the Gulf War. The name "Hellfire," an acronym for "heliborne-launched fire-and-forget missile," was originally designed as an "anti-tank guided missile (AGM)," somehow now redeployed for remote precision killing of individuals, or, as one Air Force article called it, "warhead to forehead."

These weaponized drones have been used ever since, as the weapon of choice in US operations all over the Middle East and North Africa. Now, given all the moral and legal controversy surrounding their use, some have begun to question if these weaponized drones have even been effective in defeating terrorists. As Los Angeles Times columnist Doyle McManus asked recently, "Are we winning the drone war?"

It's hard to know since, as a recent Stimson Center Task Force on US Drone Policy report explains, "after more than 10 years of use, the U.S. drone program remains so shrouded in secrecy that we do not have enough information to make an educated assessment of its effectiveness … Without a clear understanding of the drone program's strategy, goals, and metric(s) used for evaluation, … experts … cannot make informed assessments regarding the

program's efficacy."

The Stimson Report observed that "on May 23, 2013, President Obama delivered a major speech at the National Defense University in which … he pledged to continue the difficult task of ensuring that the use of lethal UAVs is .. strategically sound.' The Report's authors recommend that the US government conduct a thoroughgoing evaluation of the impact of UAV strikes on terrorist organizations, with regard to capabilities, threats currently posed, morale and recruiting, as well as their impact on public opinion, litigation, and defense policy." Nothing is expected to be forthcoming any time soon.

President Obama did provide a metric of drone effectiveness in a major speech in 2014: "Our actions should meet a simple test: We must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield." Though hardly a robust definition of victory, even by this measure, given the growing numbers of new recruits in Al Qaeda, ISIS and other groups, it would appear that the US strategy has been decidedly ineffective. But since there are no clear numbers from the Obama administration of enemies killed and new recruits created, this metric of effectiveness is decidedly unhelpful.

Historical precedent and longstanding military doctrine, though, offer insight into the potential effectiveness of Obama's drone war. What follows is a brief sampling of conclusions drawn by research scholars, both within and without the military, who have examined the historical record and the military evidence. These scholars all agree that drone strikes are useless to defeat counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, but they all concede as well that the US military will continue into the future to rely on them anyway, as "the only game in town."

James A. Russell, a researcher at the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, concludes in his article *"*The False Promise of Aerial Policing," that "the idea of aerial policing is dangerous and deeply flawed, yet mysteriously it has become a panacea for states seeking to apply force in the modern era…. Aerial policing is an intellectual and strategic house of cards built on shaky foundations … [it] represents the triumph of tactics over strategy, turning fundamental truths about the nature of war on their head."

Aerial policing grew out of theories of airpower that the airplane had revolutionized war by making it unnecessary for armies to clash on the ground and destroy one another. Instead, they argued, an opponent's armies, his means of waging war, and even his will to fight could be destroyed from the air via strategic bombardment. The conduct of this strike war, they argued, reduced operations and warfare to an engineering problem of identifying and striking targets.

World War II was the great laboratory to try out these ideas, as the United States and Britain sought to pound Germany into submission via strategic bombing. The lessons of the war for strategic bombardment, however, went unlearned. The allied bombers missed most of what they were aiming at, did not end Germany's means to wage war, and did not convince the German people to give up the fight.

The mythology of the airpower advocates endured through the Vietnam War, despite another failure of airpower to achieve strategic effect. More recently, America's special forces set about creating an insurgent targeting methodology that had its roots in the engineering approach employed by the airpower advocates. The targeting methodology was eagerly seized upon by airpower enthusiasts to assassinate suspected terrorists around the world with America's new generation of robots in the sky.

America's strategic retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan after 15 years is a monument to the failure of … clever tactics championed by counterinsurgency advocates and their precise targeting methods. Yet America's response to this strategic failure has been to double down, showering more money and responsibility on the Special Forces and similar organizations that achieved no positive strategic effect in battle over the last 15 years.

James Igoe Walsh, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, wrote a comprehensive article entitled, "The Effectiveness of Drone Strikes in Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism Campaigns.

He concludes that "… drones are at most, weak substitutes for traditional counterinsurgency operations. While drones have the capability to punish and deter insurgent organizations, they do not alone contribute to the establishment of effective state authority in direct and meaningful ways, which … requires large numbers of ground forces and civilians to provide services to, and gain intelligence from, the local population."

The groups targeted by drones operate in areas where the United States and the [local] national government cannot or will not engage "on the ground" in large numbers. Drones are most useful in precisely such areas, since they allow the United States to project force when it and the national government have few other options

But the absence of boots on the ground makes it more difficult to gather human intelligence on the activities of militant groups that can be used to target drone strikes. Ungoverned spaces also can allow armed groups to proliferate and form complex and short-lived alliances that are difficult for outsiders to understand, increasing the challenge of targeting only militants who oppose the United States. Drones, then, are most useful for counterterrorism in precisely those settings where the challenges of counterterrorism are the greatest, and the ability to collect intelligence is the weakest. This means that the bar for the successful use of drones to counter terrorism is set quite high.… The evidence from the most sustained campaign to rely on drone strikes to deter and punish insurgent organizations in Pakistan suggests this technology has limited capacity to achieve these objectives. Despite these limitations, drone technology seems very likely to spread both within the U.S. Armed Forces, the armed forces of other countries, and even insurgent organizations.

Philosopher and historian Gregoire Chamayou, in his book A Theory of the Drone, cites a 2009 op-ed by David Kilcullen, influential US military advisor on counterinsurgency, which called for a moratorium on drone strikes in Pakistan. Kilcullen viewed them as dangerously counterproductive, driving the population into the arms of extremists. Kilcullen drew direct parallels between the current drone program and the infamous failures of earlier French and British aerial bombardment campaigns in Algeria and Pakistan. He also opposed the technological fetishism of drone use, which "displays every characteristic of a tactic – or, more accurately, a piece of technology, – substituting for a strategy."

Gregoire notes that "air force strategists are well aware of the objections that [counterinsurgency] theorists never fail to raise, …that what is being presented as a new strategy has already been tried out, with remarkably disastrous results." He cites in military doctrine the "truism that COIN [counterinsurgency] is about boots on the ground and that airpower is counterproductive."

Gregoire observes,"Dronized manhunting represents the triumph… of antiterrorism over

counterinsurgency. According to this logic, the total body count and a list of hunting trophies take the place of a strategic evaluation of the political effects of armed violence. Successes become statistics." Never mind that drone strikes multiply new enemies. The strategic plan of drone counterinsurgency now seems to be that an armada of killer drones is capable of eliminating new recruits as fast as they are created: "as soon as a head grows back, cut it off," in a pattern of ongoing eradication. This assessment coincides with the Stimson report conclusion that "the availability of lethal UAVs has fueled a 'whack-a-mole' approach to counterterrorism."

The whistleblower source for the Drone Papers concludes: "The military is easily capable of adapting to change, but they don't like to stop anything they feel is making their lives easier, or is to their benefit. And this certainly is, in their eyes, a very quick, clean way of doing things. It's a very slick, efficient way to conduct the war, without having to have the massive ground invasion mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. … but at this point, they have become so addicted to this machine, to this way of doing business, that it seems like it's going to become harder and harder to pull them away from it the longer they're allowed to continue operating in this way."

***

In addition to research on drone killings, some scholars have been researching the strategy underpinning US drone strikes, namely, the "decapitation" strategy (our own manner of beheading the enemy). This strategy assumes that the assassination of leaders and other key players – so-called "high value targets" (HVTs) – within an enemy insurgent or terrorist group will eventually defeat the group itself.

Scholars, though, come to the opposite conclusion.

RAND researcher Patrick B. Johnston, in his article "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," notes:

"Regardless of whether a government's adversary is a state, a terrorist organization, or a guerrilla insurgency, the scholarly opinion has been that high-value targeting is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. … The data also show conclusively that killing or capturing insurgent leaders is usually not a silver bullet, since governments were only around 25% more likely to defeat insurgencies following the successful removal of top insurgent leaders.

In his review of the relevant literature, "The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns Against Insurgents and Terrorists," Matt Frankel of the Brookings Institution, concludes:

"The final implication for the United States is that it is vital that any HVT campaign take place as part of a larger strategy, not merely as an end to itself. Remote strikes and targeted raids need to be combined with broader operations, both military and non-military, to achieve maximum effectiveness.

The United States will face an uphill battle in utilizing HVT campaigns successfully, since it will always be operating as a third-party force. If the goals of the host government and the third-party force are divergent, there is little chance for success.

It is clear that as long as Al Qaeda remains a global force, U.S.-sponsored HVT operations will continue. But if the United States continues to conduct HVT operations in a vacuum, …it will

continue to be doomed to failure."

Professor of International Affairs Jenna Jordan, concludes in her article "Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes"

"The targeting of terrorist leaders affiliated with al-Qaida has been the cornerstone of U.S. counterterrorism policy since 2001. ..Targeting al-Qaida is not likely to result in organizational decline or long-term degradation [since] its bureaucratic organization and communal support have allowed it to withstand frequent attacks on its leadership."

However, she cautions, "Regardless of the effectiveness and potential for adverse consequences of its decapitation strategy, the United States is likely to continue targeting al-Qaida leaders because U.S. policymakers view the killing of high-level targets as successes in themselves."

Conclusion

The publication this year of the Drone Papers reveals that the Obama administration, the US military, and the CIA have been lying all along about the drone assassination program, its targets and its civilian casualties. These documents also expose the obscene disregard for human lives pervading the entire operation, as the drone warriors pursue their technological dreams. "Throughout human history," the Stimson Report reminds us, "the ability to project force across significant distances has been a much sought-after military capability… and since the dawn of mechanization, militaries have sought to replace people with machines." In this context, drones are the unholy grail. The Drone Papers reveal that in its pursuit these Dr Strangeloves have been well aware of the horrific human costs of their enterprise and that they couldn't care less.

What I've tried to show here is something more: that these military miscreants have also known all along that their drone technology and targeting strategy are militarily bankrupt. They could not but be aware from military history and doctrine that these approaches have absolutely no possibility of defeating terrorist groups or keeping America safe. They must know that in fact the opposite is true, that their nefarious enterprise only further endangers us all. And yet they will continue ever more brazenly their Reaper madness, the scholars here all agree, until we find some way to stop them.