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“They Had Nothing to Do with al-Qaeda”

Back in May of 2015 I ran a “Quote” of the Week about the United States’ use of unmanned drones in the nation of Yemen. It was based on a study done by the Open Society Foundation. The report said that “The nine case studies documented in this report provide credible evidence that U.S. airstrikes have killed and injured Yemeni civilians.” The report noted that “In 2013, President Obama promised that before any U.S. drone strike, ‘there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured.’”

I said at the time that “This is an important study. I plan to say more about it in a future issue of Nygaard Notes.” It’s been on the back burner since then—nine months!—but I am getting back to it now.

The report was mostly ignored in the U.S. press, although a lengthy article did appear on the inside pages of the April 14th New York Times. The emphasis, however, was on the effectiveness of the drone killings for U.S. policy, with no attempt to assess the human rights or international legal implications, let alone the morality of such a system of remote-control killing. Instead, the Times focused on the responses of U.S. officials and unnamed “advocates of drone strikes,” who give the standard rationalizations. Said the Times, “For years, arms experts have been concerned about the example set by the United States for other countries as armed drones proliferate. Drones have been used to fire missiles by Israel and Britain as well as by the United States, but many other countries are seeking to develop or buy them.”

The headline was “Drone Strikes Said to Set a Dangerous Precedent,” and they certainly do. Surely future drone-killers will be heard to say, “Well, the U.S. does it, so why can’t we?”

But what’s missing from the Times report (and, obviously, it’s *really* missing from the other thousands of U.S. news outlets that ignored the report entirely) is

the invaluable insight that the Open Society offers by doing what the media could—and should—be doing already: Speaking to the victims of U.S. policy.

Here are a few excerpts from the Report that the media ignored: “The testimonies [of Yemenis contained in this Report] paint a picture of desperately poor communities left to fend for themselves amid the devastation caused by U.S. airstrikes. One Yemeni witness said: ‘Our villages are poor—no education, no hospitals, no roads, nor any services. Of all the progress and advances in the modern world, only these deadly missiles reached us.’” Elsewhere in the Report, “Moqbel Abdullah Ali al-Jarraah, a villager from Silat al-Jarraah, where a January 23, 2013 U.S. airstrike hit a civilian house, observed: ‘I believe that America is testing its lethal inventions in our poor villages, because [it] cannot afford to do so at any place where human life has value. Here, we are without value.’”

The Open Society even quoted retired General Stanley McChrystal, who led coalition forces in Afghanistan and was the head of the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command, who “has said that drone strikes create ‘a perception of arrogance... a perception of helpless people in an area being shot at like thunderbolts from the sky by an entity that is acting as though they have omniscience and omnipotence.’” Adds the Open Society: “The testimonies in this report confirm his observations.”

Typical of U.S. officials, McChrystal’s main concern is “perceptions.” The voices of Yemenis offer the humanity missing from such bureaucratic gibberish.

The report underlines that “In incident after incident, the fathers and mothers of individuals killed in drone strikes asked why their children had been killed when they had nothing to do with al-Qaeda or any other militant group.”

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The Drone Papers

As the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (“drones”) grows around the world, journalists and activists continue to try to follow the developments, and to put the brakes on this new warmaking technology. The investigative journalism site *The Intercept* published in October an eight-part series called “The Drone Papers” that adds a great deal to our understanding of this crucial issue, so I want to summarize the report here.

The report is derived from “a cache of secret documents... provided by a whistleblower” somewhere in the world of intelligence. Needless to say, the identity of the whistleblower is not offered in the report. A variety of journalists share authorship, and what follows are excerpts from each of the eight parts of the series. I hope this brief summary will give you an impression of the flavor and scope of this important—and largely ignored—part of U.S. foreign policy.

PART 1 of The Drone Papers is called THE ASSASSINATION COMPLEX, and the opening sentence reads, “Drones are a tool, not a policy. The policy is assassination.” Reporter Jeremy Scahill begins by summarizing the overall series:

“Taken together, the secret documents lead to the conclusion that Washington’s 14-year high-value targeting campaign suffers from an overreliance on signals intelligence, an apparently incalculable civilian toll, and—due to a preference for assassination rather than capture—an inability to extract potentially valuable intelligence from terror suspects. They also highlight the futility of the war in Afghanistan by showing how the U.S. has poured vast resources into killing local insurgents, in the process exacerbating the very threat the U.S. is seeking to confront.”

PART 2, A VISUAL GLOSSARY, offers a list of terms and acronyms that tell a lot about the process of running the drone program. Here are a few terms.

“BIRDS” is the insider’s term for drones. An “OBJECTIVE” is a specific person on the list of people to kill. When drone operators hit their target, killing the person they intend to kill, that person is called a “JACKPOT.” Enemies Killed in Action are known as EKIAAs. “Hellfire missiles—the explosives fired from drones—are not always fired at people. In fact, most

drone strikes are aimed at phones... When a night raid or drone strike successfully neutralizes a target’s phone, operators call that a ‘TOUCHDOWN.’” “‘BASEBALL CARDS’ (BBCs) are the military’s method for visualizing information—they are used to display data, map relationships between people, and identify an individual’s so-called pattern of life.” A “BLINK” happens when a drone has to move and there isn’t another aircraft available to continue watching a target.

PART 3, THE KILL CHAIN (subtitled “The Lethal Bureaucracy Behind Obama’s Drone War”) is the answer to the question: “How are non-battlefield assassinations authorized?” The Intercept says that “The documents we have are not comprehensive, but they suggest a linear chain—all the way up to the president of the United States.”

According to Scahill, the Obama administration has said that “the U.S. would only conduct a lethal strike outside of an ‘area of active hostilities’ if a target represents a ‘continuing, imminent threat to U.S. persons...’” In *The Kill Chain* ProPublica journalist Cora Currier writes that “Secret military documents obtained by The Intercept ... offer an unusual glimpse into the decision-making process behind the drone strikes and other operations of the largely covert war, outlining the selection and vetting of targets through the ranks of the military and the White House, culminating in the president’s approval of a 60-day window for lethal action.”

The Kill Chain quotes Hina Shamsi, director of the ACLU’s National Security Project, who says that this 60-day window for striking shows that the administration has a very broad interpretation of “a continuing, imminent threat,” adding that “If you have approval over a monthslong period, that sends the signal of a presumption that someone is always targetable, regardless of whether they are actually participating in hostilities.”

PART 4 is called FIND, FIX, FINISH. This phrase (taken from Army Techniques Publication 3-60, May 2015), simply means to “find” the assassination target, “fix” their location precisely enough to target them, and “finish” them off by killing them. In the wake of the U.S. aggressions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has been developing plans to execute various “shadow wars” in places like Yemen and Somalia. In order to →→→

→→ carry out these plans, “a new global architecture of assassination was called for, and that meant navigating an increasingly tense turf war between the CIA and the Pentagon over these activities.”

The Intercept quotes Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, who says that “The drone campaign right now really is only about killing. When you hear the phrase ‘capture/kill,’ capture is actually a misnomer. In the drone strategy that we have, ‘capture’ is a lower case ‘c.’ We don’t capture people anymore. Our entire Middle East policy seems to be based on firing drones. That’s what this administration decided to do in its counterterrorism campaign. 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.”

The racism driving all this is hardly new, but the evolving *tactics* of Empire are somewhat new. For useful context here, I refer you to my earlier writings on “The New American Way of War,” in Nygaard Notes #501 (Trumpeting The New American Way of War), #511 (The New American Way of War in the Media) and #538 (The New American Way of War).

PART 5: MANHUNTING IN THE HINDU KUSH

Speaking of the New American Way of War, the next part of The Intercept series refers to a “potential model for the future of American warfare.” It says: “From 2011 to 2013, the most elite forces in the U.S. military, supported by the CIA and other elements of the intelligence community, set out to destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda forces that remained hidden among the soaring peaks and plunging valleys of the Hindu Kush, along Afghanistan’s northeastern border with Pakistan. Dubbed *Operation Haymaker*, the campaign has been described as a potential model for the future of American warfare: special operations units, partnered with embedded intelligence elements running a network of informants, pinpointing members of violent organizations, then drawing up plans to eliminate those targets from the battlefield, either by capturing or killing them.”

(And here we must harken back to the words of General Flynn: “The drone campaign right now really is only about killing. We don’t capture people anymore.”)

The Intercept then underlines the point: “Despite the rise

in civilian casualties and the well-documented failure of drone strikes to achieve the military’s broader objectives, there is every indication that unmanned airstrikes will play an increasing role in U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan, as they have in war zones across the world.”

PART 6, FIRING BLIND, tells us that “One of the most glaring problems identified in [a study by a Pentagon Task Force on Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] was the U.S. military’s inability to carry out full-time surveillance of its targets in the Horn of Africa and Yemen. Behind this problem lies the ‘tyranny of distance’—a reference to the great lengths that aircraft must fly to their targets from the main U.S. air base in Djibouti, the small East African nation that borders Somalia and sits just across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen.”

Uh oh. The “tyranny of distance” likely means that the U.S. is looking to establish more bases in the region. But, where? See below: “Target Africa.”

PART 7: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF OBJECTIVE PECKHAM. The “Peckham” here refers to “Objective Peckham,” which was the Pentagon’s code name for Bilal el-Berjawi. Here’s what The Intercept says about him:

“A small and stocky British-Lebanese citizen with a head of thick dark hair, Berjawi had grown up much like any other young boy in the United Kingdom’s capital city, attending school during the day and playing soccer with friends in his free time. But by his early 20s he was leading no ordinary life. He was suspected of having cultivated ties with senior al Qaeda militants in East Africa, his British citizenship was abruptly revoked, and he was placed on a U.S. kill list. In January 2012, Berjawi met his sudden end, about 10 miles northwest of Mogadishu, when a missile crashed into his white car and blasted it beyond recognition.”

The story of Berjawi is lengthy, and the Intercept notes that it’s just one story of many: “There have reportedly been at least 10 British citizens killed in drone attacks as part of a covert campaign that, between 2008 and 2015, has gradually expanded from Pakistan to Somalia and now to Syria.”

PART 8: TARGET AFRICA. “Eradicating blank spaces on the maps of the ‘dark continent’ was an obsession of Western powers during the 19th-century ↗↗↗

→→ scramble for Africa. Today, a new scramble is underway to eradicate a different set of blank spots. The U.S. military has, since 9/11, engaged in a largely covert effort to extend its footprint across the continent with a network of mostly small and mostly low-profile camps. Some serve as staging areas for quick-reaction forces or bare-boned outposts where special ops teams can advise local proxies; some can accommodate large cargo planes, others only small surveillance aircraft. All have one mission in common: to eradicate what the military calls the ‘tyranny of distance.’ These facilities allow U.S. forces to surveil and operate on larger and larger swaths of the continent—and, increasingly, to strike targets with drones and manned aircraft.”

Officially, the U.S. government says it has only a single US military base on the African continent. And that base is Camp Lemonnier, in the tiny (about the size of New Hampshire) nation of Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. “The base,” says The Intercept, “is a lynchpin for U.S. military action in Africa...” In 2012 Gen. Carter Ham, then the commander of Africom [the U.S. Africa Command], said that Camp Lemonnier “is an essential regional power projection base that enables the operations of multiple combatant commands.”

The Intercept explains that “The camp—which also supports U.S. Central Command (Centcom)—has seen the number of personnel stationed there jump around 450 percent since 2002. The base has expanded from 88 acres to nearly 600 acres and has seen more than \$600 million already allocated or awarded for projects such as aircraft parking aprons, taxiways, and a major special operations compound. In addition, \$1.2 billion in construction and improvements has already been planned for the future.

“As it grew, Camp Lemonnier became one of the most critical bases not only for America’s drone assassination campaign in Somalia and Yemen but also for U.S. military operations across the region. The camp is so crucial to long-term military plans that last year the U.S. inked a deal securing its lease until 2044, agreeing to hand over \$70 million per year in rent—about double what it previously paid to the government of Djibouti.”

As Scahill reminds us, drones are but a tool in service to the policy of transnational assassination. It must be stopped, and the following article offers a few starting points if you are inclined to add your voice to the chorus of anti-drone resistance. ◆

Drones: What to Do

Those of you who reside in the Twin Cities may wish to attend an event next Tuesday, February 23rd, called “Facts & Truth: U.S. Drone Programs.” Sponsored by the Ground All Drones Committee of Women Against Military Madness, the event aims “To develop knowledge, individuals need data and factual information. Many people also need the heartfelt ‘truth’ revealed in stories and poems.” So, in addition a talk on “The Drone Papers” by local activist Jay Kvale, the Committee will have Sarah Hayes, local poet and Red Bird Chapbooks editor, present her original poems of drone warfare and desolation. “Opportunities for positive actions, too,” they say. Call WAMM for details at 612-827-5364. Or visit their website: <http://groundalldrone.blogspot.com/>

While it seems like 2013 was a sort of peak time for anti-drone activism, there’s still quite a few groups you could check out and/or support.

The No Drones Network website has a state-by-state listing of anti-drone groups, and lots of other good stuff <http://nodronesnetwork.blogspot.com/>

Veterans for Peace has a working group on drones. www.veteransforpeace.org/our-work/join-working-group/drones-robots-and-future-weapons-working-group/

The Fellowship of Reconciliation has an anti-drone resource page: <http://forusa.org/content/resources-for-anti-drone-campaigns> ◆

A Long Way to the Moon

In his State of the Union speech on January 13th, President Obama promised to launch a “new moonshot” to find a cure for cancer. For you youngsters out there, he was referencing a famous initiative launched by an earlier President, John F. Kennedy, who was speaking to a joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961 when he said that “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth.” And, of course, that moonshot was accomplished on July 20 1969. “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Now, 55 years later, Mr. Obama told the nation that “Last year, Vice President Biden said that with a new moonshot, America can cure cancer. Last month, he worked with this Congress to give scientists at the National Institutes of Health the strongest resources that they’ve had in over a decade. So tonight, I’m announcing a new national effort to get it done. And... I’m putting Joe [Biden] in charge of Mission Control. For the loved ones we’ve all lost, for the families that we can still save, let’s make America the country that cures cancer once and for all.”

That’s inspiring language, but the actual initiative falls far short of anything that might be called a moonshot.

The Associated Press reported on February 1st that “President Obama will ask Congress for \$755 million for cancer research in his upcoming budget, the White House said Monday, bringing the total price tag for Vice President Joe Biden’s cancer ‘moon shot’ to \$1 billion.” Now, \$1 billion is a lot of money, no argument there. But reporting that number without context falls into the category of Really Big Number Reporting. That is, the meaning of a Really Big Number is lost when the number is bigger than most of us will encounter in our lifetimes and is not accompanied by some context.

To start with, how does this \$1 billion compare to the actual “moonshot” spending? That is, how much did it cost for the U.S. to put a man on the moon in the 1960s? The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or NASA, reported to Congress in 1975 that the final direct cost of the Apollo program came to \$25.4 billion in 1973 dollars. In 2015 dollars that would be about \$136 billion. (Who knows what may have been the indirect costs?) In other words, the Obama moonshot so far

comes to about 7/10 of one percent of the Kennedy moonshot. And it’s a much bigger project, with much larger significance for human well-being.

For perspective, the Times quoted Dr. Peter Adamson, the chairman of the Children’s Oncology Group, who noted that “we’re not going to the moon on \$1 billion.” The Times also cited Dr. Francis S. Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, who “welcomed the new money to fight cancer, though it represents a small increase for an agency with a 2016 budget of \$32 billion.” The Times was thus justified when it said of the moonshot that “in the costly world of biological research, such a sum [\$1 billion] may be better described as a cancer slingshot” than a moonshot.

Still, considering that the NIH budget actually declined, in real terms, by more than 10 percent in the first six years of the Obama presidency (2009-2014), then Adamson is correct when he says “The good news is that the budget is no longer being cut.”

Then consider this: Cancer journalist Ralph Moss tells us that “In the US today, cancer is said to inflict an economic cost of around \$895 billion annually. Cancer is also a major source of lost life and productivity and of course an incalculable ‘cost’ in misery, heartache and loss. In 2008, Americans lost 83 million years of healthy life because of cancer, according to the American Institute of Cancer Research.”

When we consider that the costs of not placing a human on the moon were arguably zero, then we begin to get a picture of very odd spending priorities, do we not?

So, in 1961 the nation “committed itself” to a space mission and spent over \$100 billion in pursuit of solving a scientific puzzle. Was humanity any better off for having done it? Perhaps, but the “new moonshot” of pursuing a cure for cancer would, if successful, have immense benefits for all of humanity, without a doubt. In light of that, the Obama commitment appears paltry, indeed.

What has changed in 55 years? Activists would do well to analyze what it is in the U.S. political dynamic that generates support for a man on the moon far in excess of support for the saving of millions of lives. We could have a real “moonshot” if we wanted one. Do we? ♦

Greetings,

I've been on vacation, so it's been a while since our last issue of Nygaard Notes. So, what have I been doing. I've been looking at birds, which I do on every vacation. But I've also been thinking and reading about philosophy and epistemology.

The dictionary tells me that epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. I'll be writing about these studies before long. Some of it will be my opinion. But I hope much of it will be justified beliefs, and thus will be ideas that will be useful to you as you try to direct your energies toward making a positive difference in the world.

Positive, always positive,

Nygaard

“Quote” of the Week: “Over 1 Million Face Loss of Food Aid”

Almost unreported in the mass media in this country was a major story produced by the Associated Press on January 30th. The headline read, “Over 1 Million Face Loss of Food Aid Over Work Requirements.” This should have been on the nation's front pages. The following three sentences make up this week's “Quote”:

“More than 1 million low-income residents in 21 states could soon lose their government food stamps if they fail to meet work requirements that began kicking in this month. Recent experience in other states indicates that most of those affected will probably not meet the work requirements and will be cut off from food stamps. The work-for-food requirements were first enacted under the 1996 welfare reform law signed by President Bill Clinton and sponsored by then-Rep. John Kasich, who is now Ohio's governor and a Republican candidate for president.”

Yemen *from page 1*

Another misconception reported by the Times, tells us that the Open Society study “was released on Monday at a time when Yemen has been engulfed in violence and American drone strikes have been slowed or halted.” A quick look at the website of The Bureau of Investigative Journalism tells us that this is not true, with U.S. drone strikes continuing up to the present. At least four strikes have been reported in the first 6 weeks of 2016, with the latest being just this week, February 15th.

And so the drone war—a small but murderous part of “The New American Way of War—goes on. The full scope and mentality of that war is summarized in the accompanying article, *The Drone Papers*, which appears on page 2. ♦

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