

The Washington Post and the killings in Yemen: "Liberal" press extols CIA's Murder Inc.

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The CIA assassination of six men in Yemen, carried out November 3, has drawn widespread praise from the US news media. The strike, by a missile fired from an unmanned Predator drone, was hailed by most media outlets as “payback” for anti-American terrorism. Among the most significant comments was a November 6 editorial published by the *Washington Post*, responding to criticism of the attack in the Arab world and elsewhere.

“Bush administration officials described the missile strike on a car carrying six Al Qaeda operatives in Yemen on Sunday as a battlefield operation in the war on terrorism, even though it occurred far from Afghanistan and in a country where no conventional military conflict is under way,” the editorial began. “Other observers called it a targeted assassination, or even an extrajudicial killing—terms usually reserved for violations of human rights or international law. Such condemnation is not justified.”

With this bald declaration, the *Post* forfeits any lingering claim to uphold basic democratic and human rights, and casts its lot wholly and completely with the exponents of imperialist war and neocolonial conquest in the Bush administration. It is a devastating self-indictment that underscores the degradation of American liberalism.

Why is condemnation of the CIA's assassination of six men unwarranted? The *Post* asserts that those killed were not “political or criminal figures, but trained combatants of an organization that has declared war against the United States.”

The newspaper does not attempt to buttress its case by citing international treaties or human rights agreements that make it acceptable for one country to covertly enter the territory of another and kill its citizens when no state of war exists between them. Of course, no such documents exist.

On the contrary, there are clear and internationally recognized statutes that make the CIA's action a war crime. If Washington launched the attack without Yemen's permission—the Yemeni regime has remained silent on this question—then it is an unauthorized use of force and a gross violation of Yemeni sovereignty. If the government of Yemen collaborated in the operation, then both governments are guilty of a summary

execution, precisely the kind of extrajudicial killings that are barred by human rights conventions.

The *Post* does not bother to provide any facts to substantiate its position. It merely cites unnamed US government sources speaking after the CIA has already acted as judge, jury and executioner. World public opinion is expected to accept on face value the US claim that those killed were guilty as charged.

Only one of the dead men—Qaed Sinan Harithi—has been identified. US sources claim he is “suspected” of involvement in the 2000 attack on the US destroyer Cole, which claimed the lives of 17 American sailors.

According to media reports, one of those killed was an American citizen. Thus the American government, with the support of the supposedly liberal press, claims the right to assassinate its own citizens. All it has to do is brand a targeted victim as a terrorist.

How does the public know these men deserved to die? The executioner says so. The same method applied domestically would eliminate any need for courts, judges, juries, prosecutors and defense lawyers. Police could merely identify “suspected” criminals and send out death squads to eliminate them.

The words chosen by the *Post* editorialists are significant. Because the six were “combatants,” it was not a crime to kill them. “Enemy combatant” is the term of art devised by the Bush administration's Justice Department to define those US citizens who are deemed terrorists based on the unchallengeable say-so of the president. Once so designated, they are denied the right to hearings, trials or legal counsel. They can be held incommunicado indefinitely without a shred of evidence presented against them.

The same political interests and dictatorial methods that have ripped up democratic rights at home have led, on the world arena, to the CIA's open return to the methods of Murder Incorporated.

The Bush administration made no attempt to hide its responsibility for the assassinations. On the eve of the midterm elections, White House officials boasted that the action was carried out under an edict issued by Bush last year loosening restrictions on CIA participation in assassinations. Clearly, the

administration felt that news of the bloodletting would “energize” the Republican Party’s right-wing base.

The professed job of the media, however, is to remain skeptical and demand evidence, rather than act as cheerleaders for government killings and covert operations. The *Post*—like the media as a whole—has abandoned that role, acting more and more as a semi-official propaganda arm of US imperialism.

For a quarter of a century, the stated policy of the US government was to ban the participation of its intelligence agency in such killings. A presidential order barring the practice followed the revelations in 1975 of CIA plots to assassinate foreign leaders, from Cuba’s Fidel Castro to Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba and Chile’s president, Salvador Allende.

The reason for the official ban on CIA assassinations was self-interest. More astute members of the US establishment recognized that assassination was an act of terrorism that discredited Washington throughout the world. At the same time, they knew that carrying out such actions only legitimized terrorist actions against the US itself.

The *Post* glosses over such concerns, insisting that the attack on the alleged Al Qaeda members in Yemen is unique. It argues that the presence of the men in Yemen made any attempt to capture them impossible.

Yet this was not the first time that the CIA has used missile-armed drones to deadly effect, and it certainly will not be the last. The new policy of assassination is far more wide-ranging than the *Post* cares to admit.

In Afghanistan, similar devices were used in unsuccessful assassination attempts against the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Afghan prime minister and head of the Islamic fundamentalist Hezb-e-Islami. Neither of the two have been directly implicated in September 11 or any other act of terrorism against the US. In fact, both men had in the past carried out extensive dealings with Washington. In both cases, the only ones killed were innocent bystanders.

In another incident, the US reported that it had tracked down a group of “terrorists” and killed them with a Hellfire missile fired from one of the CIA drones. It later emerged, however, that those who died were impoverished Afghan villagers, killed while trying to eke out a living by collecting scrap metal.

In addition to the CIA, the Pentagon has its own fleet of missile-carrying drones, and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has made it known that he intends to carry out his own death squad operations.

The chief concern of the *Post*’s editorialists is that other nations might use the US action to justify their own assassinations: “If the United States can fire a missile at an Al Qaeda leader in Yemen, some ask, shouldn’t Israel aim one at Yasser Arafat in Ramallah, or Russia target exiled Chechen leaders in Turkey and Azerbaijan?” The newspaper gently chides the Bush administration for failing to spell out the “fundamental” differences between when Washington kills and

when anyone else does. It makes no attempt to accomplish this feat on its own.

In point of fact, the attack in Yemen underscores American support for “targeted” assassinations carried out by the Israeli regime, which has murdered scores of Palestinian leaders, together with family members and civilians caught in the missile blasts. As for the Russians, the US gave its tacit support to the recent operation in Moscow in which defenseless and drugged hostage takers were systematically executed by special forces troops.

The *Post*’s sophistry cannot conceal a basic fact: it agrees that Washington has the right to do whatever it pleases anywhere in the world. International law is something that applies only to lesser countries, not the world’s “sole super power.”

Enthusiastically calling the killings in Yemen a “clean shot,” the *Post* concludes, “The success of Sunday’s operation, which seems to have eliminated one senior Al Qaeda figure and avoided innocent casualties, is therefore cheering.”

Thus, the editors of one of the most influential newspapers in the country adopt not only the outlook, but also the language of the hit-man. This type of journalistic vomit is the expression of a deluded ruling elite that has embarked on a policy of international criminality—one that holds grave dangers for the people of the US and the entire globe.

The policy of state assassinations carries with it an immense potential for catastrophe. Israeli use of the same methods against Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza provoked a wave of suicide bombings that have claimed hundreds of lives. Will the result of the US Hellfire attacks be any different?

The CIA’s drones allow the agency’s assassins to kill from hundreds of miles away with the stroke of a computer key and without fear of retribution. Those most likely to pay the price for this reckless and criminal policy, however, will be innocent American civilians. They will be the ones targeted by enraged and misguided people who will be recruited for terrorist attacks, carried out in the name of avenging Washington’s acts of murder.



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