

# Obama's role in the selection of drone missile targets

Bill Van Auken  
1 June 2012

“We are not ruled by murderers, but only—by their friends,” Rudyard Kipling wrote a century ago. That the poet's stinging aphorism has become hopelessly outdated is made clear by a *New York Times* article detailing the assassination program being run out of the Obama White House.

The lengthy May 29 article in the *Times* establishes that personally plotting killings and selecting victims occupies a great deal of President Barack Obama's time. The process has been organized as a weekly routine, with Obama heading so-called “Terror Tuesday” meetings of military and intelligence officials. Each week they assemble in the White House situation room to study mug shots and biographies of those on the “kill list”, some of them minors and, in one case, “a girl who looked even younger than her 17 years.”

In the end, Obama selects most of the victims. He “signs off on every strike in Yemen and Somalia and also on the more complex and risky strikes in Pakistan—about a third of the total,” according to the *Times*.

Thus, when one sees or hears news accounts of “suspected militants” being slain in a drone missile strike—or the less frequent follow-up stories revealing that the “militants” were in fact unarmed men, women and children—it can be assumed that Obama personally ordered the killings.

The article is not an exposé. It appears to have been commissioned by the administration itself as part of his re-election campaign's attempt to run Obama as the unflinching commander-in-chief in the “war on terror,” touting the supposed success of his assassination program and outflanking the Republicans from the right.

The authors note that the article is based upon

interviews with “three dozen of his [Obama's] current and former advisers,” who were clearly authorized and encouraged to talk about the president's immersion in state murders.

Nonetheless, the portrayal of Obama and the state assassination apparatus he heads is chilling. The article testifies to the degenerate state of American “democracy” and the utter political demoralization of its ruling strata. Even though in its tone it imbibes much of the political cynicism of the administration, its exposure of state criminality will ultimately have far-reaching implications.

Among the specific episodes cited by the *Times* is the first strike ordered by Obama in Yemen on December 17, 2009. A cruise missile struck a remote village, killing dozens, including 14 women and 21 children, fueling hatred for the US that continues to this day. The *Times* refers to this remote-control massacre as a “sloppy strike.”

Another is what the *Times* describes as the “problematic” case of Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, who was targeted in August 2009 because “Pakistan wanted him dead” and the US relied on Pakistani government complicity to carry out its drone strikes. Mehsud represented no “imminent threat to the United States,” the supposed criterion for choosing victims from the “kill list.” The administration fudged this criterion by pretending that he posed a threat to US personnel in Pakistan. In reality, the great majority of those targeted are selected for assassination for the “crime” of resisting US occupation of or intervention in their homeland.

The other problematic aspect of the target was that Mehsud was with his family when the strike was ordered. Obama brushed aside concerns over killing innocents, telling the CIA to “take the shot,” confident

that he would face no protest from Pakistani officials. Killed in the attack were Mehsud, his wife, father-in-law, mother-in-law, an uncle and eight others.

Obama deals with civilian casualties by refusing to count them. “Mr. Obama,” the *Times* reports, “embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in.” It simply defined any military age male killed in a strike zone as a combatant unless there existed explicit evidence to the contrary.

The *Times* describes Obama as “a realist who, unlike some of his fervent supporters, was never carried away by his own rhetoric. Instead, he was already putting his lawyerly mind to carving out the maximum amount of maneuvering room to fight terrorism as he saw fit.”

This leads to what the *Times* refers to as “the ultimate test” of Obama’s “principles,” the case of Anwar al-Awlaki, the New Mexico-born Muslim preacher and US citizen who was targeted and killed in a drone strike in Yemen last September.

The proposal to assassinate Awlaki posed Obama with an “urgent question,” the *Times* states. “Could he order the targeted killing of an American citizen, in a country with which the United States was not at war, in secret and without the benefit of a trial?”

The Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel provided the President with a memo justifying such an attack on the grounds that, as the *Times* reports, “...while the Fifth Amendment’s guarantee of due process applied, it could be satisfied by internal deliberations in the executive branch.” Envisioned in this ruling is Obama’s “kill list” committee as a fourth branch of the US government. It is entirely consistent with the “Führer principle” of Nazi Germany, in which the leader’s decisions constituted supreme law.

Obama’s response? “This one is easy,” the former constitutional law professor is quoted as saying, while aides told the *Times* he evinced no qualms about killing the cleric.

There is clearly an element of personal psychology in Obama’s evolution. If he personally directs state killings, it is in part because he enjoys it. The *Times* reports: “Asked what surprised him most about Mr. Obama, Mr. [Thomas] Donilon, the national security adviser, answered immediately: ‘He’s a president who is quite comfortable with the use of force on behalf of the United States.’”

The secret of Obama’s “principles” is that he has none. A political chameleon without independent ideas, democratic convictions or moral scruples, Obama’s personality is that of a bureaucratic state functionary. He identifies himself with the military and intelligence apparatus that he officially “commands,” always under the watchful eye of his counterterrorism advisor, the former CIA official John Brennan.

More important than what the state killing program says about Obama personally, however, is what it exposes about the ruling political establishment as a whole. It testifies to the wholesale repudiation of core constitutional principles at the highest levels and a real political and moral breakdown of the entire US government.

If the assassination of an American citizen is “easy”, of what crimes are this president and his administration not capable? Clearly, the institutionalization of kill lists, targeting committees and fascistic justifications for state murder have profound implications at home as well as abroad.

The swinish Democratic Party liberals together with their supporters among the myriad pseudo-left “protest” organizations will, perhaps with a bit of handwringing, still back the re-election of this president based on the politically fraudulent and intellectually debased argument that Obama represents the “lesser evil.” There is nothing surprising about this. They will go along with anything.

But there are countless millions of people in the United States who are sickened by the news that the man who occupies the White House is personally involved in the selection of victims for an unconstitutional and utterly criminal program of extra-judicial killings. It will not be long before this opposition—deeply rooted in democratic traditions that are still venerated by the American working class—emerges into the open.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**