

The New York Times makes the “moral case” for drones

David Walsh
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On July 14, the *New York Times* published an article by national security reporter Scott Shane entitled “The Moral Case for Drones.” At first glance, one might have thought that the headline was intended as a Swiftian satire, in the spirit of “A Modest Proposal,” of a particularly gruesome violation of legality by the Obama administration. But no satire was intended. Quite the opposite: the piece seeks to justify the assassination program run out of the Obama White House, which has resulted in hundreds of deaths of civilians in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

Shane first notes that the “lethal operations [of the drones] inside sovereign countries that are not at war with the United States raise contentious legal questions”—only to ignore those questions in the remainder of his article.

On the basis of interviews with “some moral philosophers, political scientists and weapons specialists,” Shane suggests that “armed, unmanned aircraft” may “offer marked moral advantages over almost any other tool of warfare.”

The latest article is a follow-up of sorts to a May 29 report in the *Times* co-authored by Shane, detailing President Barack Obama’s personal and apparently eager participation in drawing up lists of those to be killed in drone and other attacks. The level of state criminality exposed in that piece, although presumably commissioned by the White House itself, has vast legal and moral implications.

The account of the president’s role produced widespread outrage and, within the ranks of Obama supporters, considerable unease.

Responding to that nervousness, Shane’s July 14 article is an effort to legitimize the use of drone strikes, to present criminal, homicidal behavior as a positive good. He is attempting to condition and intimidate public opinion, to morally implicate the broader public in these atrocities.

Shane and the experts he interviews aim to make killing something natural, politically astute and even, all things considered, humane. Shane wants his liberal readers to get over whatever moral qualms they may feel. “This is the way of the world; deal with it!” the article’s cynical tone suggests. No, this is the way Shane and his ilk would like to

make the world.

The *Times* reporter devotes much of his July 14 piece to considering the rates at which various modes of warfare kill civilians. He finds that the highest estimate of collateral deaths associated with drones “compares favorably” (in the words of one his interviewees) with “similar operations and contemporary armed conflict more generally.” Shane and the crowd of apologists for state murder he sounded out inevitably bring to mind the notion of the “banality of evil,” a phrase coined by Hannah Arendt in regard to the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann in 1963.

Shane attempts to comfort his readers by claiming that only one in five of the victims of American drones may be civilians (there is no reason whatsoever to credit this figure), as opposed to the Pakistani army’s rate of 46 percent in its raids on tribal areas or the Israeli military’s “collateral death rate” of 41 percent, and that the CIA war criminals “are improving their performance.”

Someone able to write this bureaucratic-murderous filth, worthy of an Eichmann, is capable of anything.

Shane is not merely a reporter on national security matters, he is, one way or another, a man of the state apparatus. Significantly, he functioned as the Moscow correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun* from 1988 to 1991, during the Stalinist regime’s collapse. He wrote an anti-communist diatribe, *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*, in which he predictably traced the origins of Stalinism to Lenin and the October Revolution. In that book, Shane postured as an enemy of totalitarianism and a defender of a free access to information.

Demonstrating the fraud of the American media and political establishment’s campaign for “democracy” in Eastern Europe and the USSR, the reporter has now become an accomplice in a secret assassination program operated by the US government and a defender of barbaric weaponry used against virtually defenseless populations.

Shane graduated to the *New York Times* in 2004, where he has covered national security. His occasional “exposés” – such as his 2007 report on the Bush administration’s use of

torture – have been in no way motivated by opposition to government policies. Rather, Shane is the sort of “trusted” journalist whose release of information serves high-level state interests: sometimes to move information “unofficially” through the many levels of the intelligence community, and, on other occasions, to manipulate and condition public opinion so that it accepts what it would have normally considered unacceptable.

One of those interviewed in Shane’s July 14 piece on the subject of drone strikes is Bradley J. Strawser, identified as “a former Air Force officer and an assistant professor of philosophy at the Naval Postgraduate School.”

Strawser contends that he had “ethical concerns when I started looking into this [the drones issue].” If so, he has suppressed them with zeal. A search online uncovers his “Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles,” in the *Journal of Military Ethics* (2010) in which Strawser argues, as his title suggests, “that there is an ethical obligation to use UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, i.e., drones].”

Strawser’s bloodthirsty essay takes up the various objections to drone strikes that would occur to any civilized, rational human being and rejects them on the general grounds that “the just warrior [should] be well protected from any possible threat that this enemy might proffer—protection that the UAV affords.” The author is so blind to objective political and social realities that after acknowledging the thoroughly “asymmetrical” character of the US-led wars, he can seriously ask in regard to the use of a drone, “Is it a military strike as part of a fully justified defense against an aggressing, unjustified, destructive enemy force?”

Another expert consulted by Shane for his article was Avery Plaw, “a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts.” Tellingly, Plaw receives an acknowledgment at the end of Strawser’s aforementioned piece in praise of UAVs.

Plaw is also the author of *Targeting Terrorists: A License to Kill?* (2008), which makes the case that such activity is legal and politically justifiable under certain circumstances. Plaw conducts himself like an adviser to governments conducting assassination programs, outlining the conditions under which the latter might be made a little more “morally defensible” and thus politically less of a liability. Not surprisingly, Plaw’s book receives praise from James Forest of the “US Military Academy, USA” and the NATO Legal Gazette.

This is sort of human material with whom Shane associates, individuals in the academic-intelligence-military world who calculate the political and financial costs of inflicting violence and death by various means. All of them

accept as their starting-point the premises of the “war on terror,” the name currently given to the US drive for uncontested global dominance.

Shane’s brief in favor of drone warfare is lying nonsense, from a number of points of view. To suggest that the Obama administration’s current reliance on drones is a permanent feature of US military tactics is absurd. The use of the unmanned aerial vehicles doesn’t preclude other, far bloodier forms—up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. The American military had no compunction about razing the Iraqi city of Fallujah to the ground, involving the deaths of thousands in a few days, and it will have no compunction about such operations in the future.

Drone strikes have been chosen by the Obama administration for a number of reasons, including their capacity to terrorize civilian populations and any potential opposition. Moreover, their employment has been aimed at keeping US public opinion under control, as an obedient media has passed on the claim that only anti-American “militants” and “terrorists” are being targeted for death.

Fewer and fewer people believe anything the US government and its media mouthpieces say. Wide layers of the population know something horrible is going on in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the entire region, even if they don’t yet know what to do about it. The *Times*, the house organ of the Obama White House, is straining every nerve to convince an increasingly skeptical and hostile population about the morality and legitimacy of American imperialism’s dirty operations.



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