

The New York Times defends drone murder

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The *New York Times* published a front-page article in its Sunday edition, “How a U.S. Citizen Came to Be in America’s Cross Hairs,” giving an extensive account of the Obama administration’s decision to assassinate Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen.

Whatever its intentions, the article exposes both the criminality of the operation and the contempt with which the liberal establishment—including the *Times*—views fundamental democratic rights.

The *Times* describes the “legal, intelligence and military challenges” and the “complex tangle of potential obstacles” faced by the Obama administration as it sought to kill al-Awlaki. In fact, what emerges is a picture of a process whereby top administration officials selected al-Awlaki for assassination, likely because he was a US citizen—establishing a precedent for the most far-reaching abrogation of the US Constitution. Legal justifications were concocted and tailored to this decision.

In its 4,000-word account, the *Times* does not provide a shred of evidence to justify the killing. Mainly it gives a description of various statements by the Islamic preacher. The newspaper cites one FBI official who said that by 2008, al-Awlaki “was cropping up as a radicalizer,” in other words, someone who communicates radical ideas to others—an extremely broad category, but one that evidently singled him out for assassination.

Al-Awlaki commented favorably on Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the Army psychiatrist who killed 13 soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas in November 2009. However, as the *Times* article notes in a disappointed tone, “As chilling as the message was, it was still speech protected by the First Amendment.”

Al-Awlaki was finally placed on the Obama “kill list” after the attempted bombing of a Northwest Airlines jet bound for Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009. The story of the failed bomber, Umar Farouk

Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian, is a strange one. Despite being on watch lists, Abdulmutallab was able to board a plane with a one-way ticket purchased with cash. After he was arrested in December, he apparently spent a month without speaking, before allegedly stating that he had been sent by al-Awlaki.

The *Times* quotes Dennis C. Blair, then-director of national intelligence: “It was Abdulmutallab’s testimony that really sealed it in my mind that this guy was dangerous and that we needed to go after him.”

Actually, there was no “testimony.” Abdulmutallab’s court appearances have been brief, and he has not taken the stand. Nothing he has told federal officials has been made public, and we have only the say-so of Blair that he identified al-Awlaki. But Blair so informed Obama, Obama gave the order to kill, and the CIA carried it out.

Much of the *Times*’ article is based on an account of legal memoranda drawn up by Obama administration officials, in particular David Barron and Martin Lederman. The pair was tasked with deciding “whether deliberately killing Mr. Awlaki, despite his citizenship, would be lawful...” In fact, their task was to develop the legal arguments for a decision that had been made—much as lawyers in the Bush administration concocted pseudo-legal justifications for torture.

Here the *Times* article descends into Orwellian language. In one passage, it states that the Constitution “generally requires judicial process before the government may kill an American.” In fact, American citizens’ constitutional rights are inalienable rights, not optional extras which the US government should “generally” respect, but that it can violate whenever it feels the need to do so.

The very fact that the *Times* adopts such a position reflects the fact that broad sections of the American ruling class would not object to extra-constitutional, police-state rule—the preparations for which are well

advanced.

In an indication of the unprincipled fashion in which legal questions were approached, the *Times* notes that Barron and Lederman drafted one memo, but they later decided, after reading a “legal blog,” that it had to be amended to refer to a 1997 law that bars Americans from killing Americans overseas. New arguments were therefore fashioned to do an end run around this law and justify the murder of al-Awlaki.

The article concludes by noting that the same missile strike killed another US citizen, Samir Khan, who was travelling with al-Awlaki. Two weeks later, another drone missile incinerated 12 people in another part of Yemen, including al-Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, along with a dozen others. “It was a tragic error,” the *Times* concludes, “and, for the Obama administration, a public relations disaster, further muddying the moral clarity of the previous strike on his father...”

The “moral clarity” of murder—this is language that would not be out of place in a newspaper of record in any fascist or military dictatorship. Indeed, there is a distinct resemblance between the arguments made by the Bush and Obama administrations, and those peddled by the apologists for Latin American military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s.

This article comes as the legal structure of police-state rule in the United States emerges fully into public view. Last week, the Obama administration, in the form of a letter from Attorney General Eric Holder, for the first time explicitly argued that it has the right to assassinate US citizens within the United States under “extraordinary circumstances.” The US Senate then approved the nomination of John Brennan, the mastermind of the administration’s drone assassination program, to head the CIA.

The way in which the media and political establishment have greeted these developments—including in particular the “left” defenders of Obama—are a grave warning to the working class. First under Bush and then under Obama, the ruling elite has utilized the attacks of September 11 to justify torture, assassination, kidnapping, indefinite detention without trial, state spying on every person and every form of communication, state censorship.

As the battlefield expands, so will the number and character of the targets. The more the crisis of American and world capitalism intensifies, and the

more widespread the popular opposition to the ruling elite’s program of austerity and war, the more the US ruling elite will direct the methods it is developing against all social and political opposition.



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