



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on May 3, 2012

Obama Administration Tries To Justify Proliferating Drone Strikes

White House senior counterterrorism adviser John Brennan has [tried to justify](#) proliferating drone strikes in Islamic countries this week as a legitimate reaction to the threat posed by the September 11 attacks more than a decade ago. “These targeted strikes are legal,” Brennan [said](#) in an April 30 speech at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, citing Obama Justice Department legal opinions. “As a matter of international law, the United States is in an armed conflict with al Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated forces, in response to the 9/11 attacks, and we may also use force consistent with our inherent right of national self-defense.”



Brennan was also brought to task for claiming that the drone strikes had yet to kill innocent people by ABC’s George Stephanopoulos on the *This Week* [program](#) April 29, and forced to back off:

Stephanopoulos: And do you stand by the statement you have made in the past that, as effective as they have been, they have not killed a single civilian? That seems hard to believe.

John Brennan: Well, what I said was that over a period of time before my public remarks that we had no information about a single civilian, a noncombatant being killed. Unfortunately, in war, there are casualties, including among the civilian population. We’ve done everything possible in Afghanistan and other areas to reduce any risk to that civilian population.

The Obama administration, which drastically expanded the Bush-era drone strike campaign, has actually done very little to reduce risks to the civilian population. According to a November 4, 2011 report by the *Wall Street Journal*, the bulk of drone strikes are conducted — incredibly — against targets where CIA officials don’t even know the name of the people being bombed. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the CIA engages in two types of drone strikes, “signature” strikes and “personality” strikes. After interviewing top intelligence officials, the *Journal* [described](#) the “signature” strike, one of two types used by the CIA, and the most controversial within the administration. Signature strikes target groups of men believed to be militants associated with terrorist groups, but whose identities aren’t always known. The bulk of CIA’s drone strikes are signature strikes.” Of total deaths from drone strikes, the *Wall Street Journal* [suggested](#) “the campaign has killed more than 1,500 suspected militants on Pakistani soil since Mr. Obama took office in 2009, according to government officials.” Of course, this doesn’t count drone strikes in Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq and other troubled countries where the U.S. is known to have engaged in drone strikes.

But even among the “personality strikes” defined by the CIA, there are a number of innocents who have been killed. The CIA has [imprisoned many innocent people](#) during the war on terror, so it shouldn’t be a



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surprise to find that the people the CIA has targeted are occasionally innocent.

“In this armed conflict,” Brennan claimed in his [speech](#) justifying the Obama policy, “individuals who are part of al-Qaida or its associated forces are legitimate military targets. We have the authority to target them with lethal force, just as we target enemy leaders in past conflicts, such as Germans and Japanese commanders during World War II.” Indeed, Japanese Admiral Yamamoto’s personal airplane was targeted by U.S. Forces during World War II, and Yamamoto was [killed](#) in the strike.

But the reality in the terror war is that strikes are not being made against uniformed members of a military opposition. Rather, they are being made against irregular soldiers, or in the case of U.S. citizen [Anwar al-Awlaki](#), citizens who are not soldiers at all. Al-Awlaki was only accused of egging on terrorists with internet videos. Also killed in the same drone strike was American citizen of Pakistani origin [Samir Khan](#), who edited a magazine accused of inciting jihad against Americans. Is targeting a top admiral in uniform the same as killing a civilian with prohibited political opinions?

And what of the death of Awlaki’s 16-year-old Colorado-born son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, in a [separate drone strike](#) six weeks later? Also killed with Abdulrahman al-Awlaki in the same drone strike the boy’s 17-year-old cousin of Yemeni descent. The Obama administration’s drone strikes are clearly targeting (or at least taking out) children, though administration sources originally [lied to the press anonymously](#) about Abdulrahman’s age (claiming that was in his 20s before the *Washington Post* published his [birth certificate](#)).

“To kill a teenager is just unbelievable, really, and they claim that he is an al-Qaeda militant. It’s nonsense,” the boy’s grandfather Nasser al-Awlaki [told](#) the *Washington Post* after his grandson’s October 2011 killing. “They want to justify his killing, that’s all.” While the Obama administration may claim that allowing the father Anwar al-Awlaki his free speech to incite terrorism against the U.S. could actually create a genuine threat against the U.S., it’s clearly a minor public relations problem compared with targeting children in drone strikes.

And there’s clearly a huge gulf between taking out the top uniformed Japanese admiral in an airstrike against a clearly marked military plane and using a drone strike to murder two children. But Brennan took it one step further, claiming in his [speech](#) before the Woodrow Wilson Center that these “targeted strikes conform to the principle of necessity, the requirement that the target have definite military value.” What military value does a 16-year-old boy have?

Brennan claimed in his April 30 [speech](#) that “when considering lethal force we ask ourselves whether the individual poses a significant threat to U.S. interests. This is absolutely critical, and it goes to the very essence of why we take this kind of exceptional action. We do not engage in legal action in order to eliminate every single member of al-Qaida in the world.” But if the Abdulrahman al-Awlaki drone strike reveals anything, it reveals that the availability of drone strikes makes pulling the trigger much easier for policy makers. It makes it far too easy to kill a fellow American citizen without trial far and — thus far — politically risk free.

Photo: John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, speaks in Washington: AP Images



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