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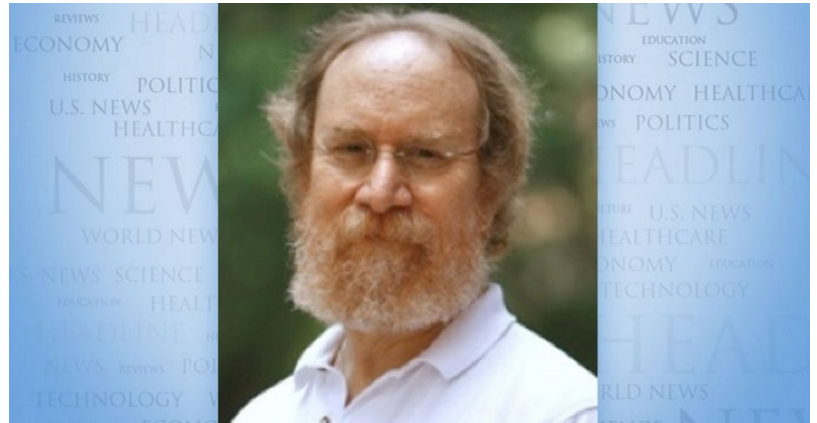Written by **Sheldon Richman** on October 19, 2012

America's Drone Terrorism

In the United States, the dominant narrative about the use of drones in Pakistan is of a surgically precise and effective tool that makes the U.S. safer by enabling "targeted killing" of terrorists, with minimal downsides or collateral impacts.

This narrative is false.

Those are the understated opening words of a disturbing, though unsurprising, nine-month study of the Obama administration's official, yet unacknowledged, remote-controlled bombing campaign in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan, near Afghanistan. The report, "Living Under Drones," is a joint effort by the New York University School of Law's Global Justice Clinic and Stanford Law School's International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic.

The NYU/Stanford report goes beyond reporting estimates of the civilian casualties inflicted by the deadly and illegal U.S. campaign. It also documents the hell the Pakistanis endure under President Barack Obama's policy, which includes a "kill list" from which he personally selects targets. That hell shouldn't be hard to imagine. Picture yourself living in an area routinely visited from the air by pilotless aircraft carrying Hellfire missiles. This policy is hardly calculated to win friends for the United States.

Defenders of the U.S. campaign say that militants in Pakistan threaten American troops in Afghanistan as well as Pakistani civilians. Of course, there is an easy way to protect American troops: bring them home. The 11-year-long Afghan war holds no benefits whatever for the security of the American people. On the contrary, it endangers Americans by creating hostility and promoting recruitment for anti-American groups.

The official U.S. line is that America's invasion of Afghanistan was intended to eradicate al-Qaeda and the Taliban, who harbored them. Yet the practical effect of the invasion and related policies, including the invasion of Iraq and the bombing in Yemen and Somalia, has been to facilitate the spread of al-Qaeda and like-minded groups.

U.S. policy is a textbook case of precisely how to magnify the very threat that supposedly motivated the policy. The Obama administration now warns of threats from Libya — where the U.S. consulate was attacked and the ambassador killed — and Syria. Thanks to U.S. policy, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan spawned al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

If that's success, what would failure look like?

Regarding Pakistani civilians, the report states,

> While civilian casualties are rarely acknowledged by the U.S. government, there is significant evidence that U.S. drone strikes have injured and killed civilians.... It is difficult to obtain data on strike casualties because of U.S. efforts to shield the drone program from democratic accountability, compounded by the obstacles to independent investigation of strikes in North Waziristan. The best currently available public aggregate data on drone strikes are provided by *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* (*TBIJ*), an independent journalist organization. *TBIJ* reports that from June 2004 through mid-September 2012, available data indicate that drone strikes killed 2,562–3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom 474–881 were civilians, including 176 children. *TBIJ* reports that these strikes also injured an additional 1,228–1,362 individuals.

The Obama administration denies that it has killed civilians, but bear in mind that it considers any male of military age a "militant." This is not to be taken seriously.

The report goes on,

> U.S. drone strike policies cause considerable and under-accounted-for harm to the daily lives of ordinary civilians, beyond death and physical injury. Drones hover twenty-four hours a day over communities in northwest Pakistan, striking homes, vehicles, and public spaces without warning. Their presence terrorizes men, women, and children, giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities. Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment, and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves.

It's even worse than it sounds:

> The U.S. practice of striking one area multiple times, and evidence that it has killed rescuers, makes both community members and humanitarian workers afraid or unwilling to assist injured victims. Some community members shy away from gathering in groups.

How can Americans tolerate this murder and trauma committed in their name? But don't expect a discussion of this in Monday night's foreign-policy debate. Mitt Romney endorses America's drone terrorism.

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