



Interfaith leaders drone about airstrikes, and media let them

By Jim Davis

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Military drones got bombarded by a squadron of religious leaders, and the controversy got dutiful coverage. But it's only a controversy, you know, if people disagree.

On that count, I give a B+ to coverage of the recent Interfaith Conference on Drone Warfare at Princeton University. The media quote the conferees but acknowledge that not everyone sides with them. Who and why, though, isn't always spelled out.

A gold star to the Religion News Service for [crisp, wire-style reporting](#), packing facts and balance in less than 500 words. Here are the first two paragraphs:

For the Obama administration and the Bush administration before it, drone strikes kill terrorists before terrorists can kill innocents, and the strikes keep American soldiers out of harm's way.

But for a group of faith leaders, drones are a crude tool of death that make killing as easy as shooting a video game villain, and they put innocents in harm's way.

The story has a wealth of details, including the "150 ministers, priests, imams, rabbis and other faith leaders" at the conference. It notes that many of them also met at Princeton in 2006 to denounce American torture against suspects. And it has some stark quotes like one from the Rev. Richard Killmer, project director: "Drones have become a weapon of first resort and not last resort. It has made it a lot easier to go to war."

RNS also uses the time-honored method of bulleted paragraphs to highlight what the conferees want:

- * Disclosing the details of past strikes: who was hit, why, the criteria for choosing targets.
- * Repealing the federal law that has provided the legal justification for the drone program.
- * Pushing the Obama administration to press for a global ban on drone strikes.

I especially liked how RNS noted the address by a researcher from the libertarian Cato Institute. He disagrees with the call for a ban on drone strikes but agrees that their use is getting "too casual."

The lengthiest story (600+ words) ran in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which oddly doesn't mention the conference until the eighth paragraph. The first seven are filled with anti-drone quotes by two of the speakers – both of them law professors. Did the *Inquirer* fear that readers would dismiss it as a mere religion story?

And of the "legal" quotes also sound squishy. Mary Ellen O'Connell of Notre Dame says using drones amounts to "extrajudicial" killings. Well, gee, what does she call war itself? If the *Inquirer* reporter asked her that, the answer didn't get in print.

The newspaper does quote minister types, including a nun, a Unitarian Universalist minister and Killmer. And as with RNS, the *Inquirer* mentions the 150 conferees and the connection with the 2006 conference against torture. Besides Christians, Jews and Muslims, the paper names several Christian bodies represented there – Quaker, Methodist, Presbyterian – but stumbles in calling Catholics a denomination. The *Inquirer* also doesn't try to identify branches of other faiths, like Reform Jews or Shia Muslims.

One surprise: Coverage of the conference by Voice of America, which is [funded by the U.S. government](#). Another surprise: It was carried on [BigNewsNetwork](#), an aggregator based in the United Arab Emirates. Third surprise: The story is pretty decent, with quotes, details, background and balance.

I liked VOA's way of framing the debate: "Proponents say drone warfare keeps U.S. troops out of harm's way, while minimizing civilian casualties. Human rights groups say civilian casualties are hard to count because of the secrecy of a program partly run by the CIA."

VOA also allows this crossfire:

Earlier this week, Obama indicated they will continue in Yemen, despite the leadership crisis there.

"Because the alternative," the president said, "would be massive U.S. deployments in perpetuity, which would create its own blowback and cause probably more problems than it would potentially solve."

Rev. Susan Thistlethwaite, former president of the Chicago Theological Seminary, called Obama's reasoning "bogus."

"Drones allow you to use violence in situations where you would never send in boots on the ground," she said. "So that it actually expands the theater of war. And you could make a case now that drones make the whole world a battlefield."

VOA also digs out a 2014 survey showing that 56 of Americans support air strikes, while another 18 percent aren't sure. But the article also reports the theologians warning about the

proliferation of drones – and it notes recent misuses, such as civilian drones hovering near the White House and over a French nuclear plant.

But I choked over a quote by one conferee: "If drones existed at the time of Adolf Hitler, I personally would probably have been in favor of using one to try to stop the Nazis. But in the real world today, we don't have that kind of situation."

Leaving aside the fact that Hitler's V1 rockets were much like drones or cruise missiles, how can he say the situation isn't similar today? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ISIS terrorists, surely qualifies as a modern Hitler. And Obama did use a drone to [take out Anwar al-Awlaki](#) of Al-Qaida. Apparently no one at the conference, including VOA, challenged that statement or asked for clarification.

But I'm still missing something in all three stories: a vigorous critique from a conservative religious standpoint. Without that, it looks like the Princeton conference speaks for all religious people.

It's not like conservative voices have been silent on this. Even back in mid-2013, Mark Tooley of the Institute for Religion and Democracy [criticized anti-drone protests](#).

Tooley accuses the "religious left" – and yes, there is such a thing – of naivete and of ignoring their own teachings about fallen human nature.

Naturally, these religious activists are interested in the "root causes of conflicts," which they surmise can be addressed by "restorative justice practices, and effective economic development programs." Their suggestion has merit if Islamist terrorists have legitimate grievances that can be redressed by rational recompense. But what if their mollification entails accommodation to Islamist rule and practice, including the suppression of civil liberties, which the activists profess to champion, and the suppression of non-Islamists, which would include groups like these liberal Protestants?

He also says the leaders of his their true motives, of opposition to any use of force or warfare. And he tackles the complaint that drone strikes would spark ill will in the combat zones:

But so too would conventional bombing, military abductions, or even apprehension by domestic law enforcement, if even possible, at the behest of the U.S. Is there any way to neutralize terrorists without inflaming their "community"? And doesn't the absence of decisive action against them only further enhance their prestige within their "community" while communicating that Americans may be targeted with impunity?

Bingo, Mark. In stressing consequences of using drones, the thinkers forget or ignore the consequences of *not* using them. And if they weren't willing to hear acknowledge other viewpoints, perhaps the media should have looked them up.

It's only a controversy, you know, if ... Oh, you know the rest.