

Fuzzy new words for drone killings

By Gene Healy - 11/1/2012

‘Political language,’ George Orwell wrote in 1946, “is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.” When government action can be defended only by arguments “too brutal for most people to face,” governments brutalize the language, resorting to “euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.”

The Bush administration introduced any number of such fuzzwords to the political lexicon: “regime change,” “enhanced interrogation” and “self-injurious behavior incidents” (Pentagon jargon for suicide attempts by Gitmo prisoners.)

And who can forget the Obama national security team’s insistence last year that pounding Libya with Tomahawk missiles and Predator drone strikes wasn’t “war,” but rather, “kinetic military action?”

The Obama team has lately added a new term to the doublespeak lexicon, “the disposition matrix.” This soporific word-cloud replaces the admirably frank “kill or capture list.”

Killing or capturing terrorists with the means and the intent to kill Americans is eminently defensible, but a Washington Post investigative report published last week raises questions about whether bureaucratic “mission creep” has cut the program loose from its original justification. “Obama has institutionalized the highly classified practice of targeted killing,” the Post’s Greg Miller writes, “transforming ad-hoc elements into a counterterrorism infrastructure capable of sustaining a seemingly permanent war.”

“Living Under Drones,” a recent report from researchers at Stanford and New York University law schools, notes that as the death toll from drone warfare over Pakistan approaches 3,000, “the number of ‘high-level’ targets killed as a percentage of total casualties is extremely low — estimated at just 2 percent.”

That assessment has been echoed by former top national security officials. Dennis Blair, Obama’s director of national intelligence until he was fired in 2010, has commented that during his tenure, the emphasis on drone strikes “reminded me of body counts in Vietnam.” Another former Obama counterterror official told Esquire: “It’s not at all clear that we’d be sending our people into Yemen to

capture the people we're targeting. But it's not at all clear that we'd be targeting them if the technology wasn't so advanced. What's happening is that we're using the technology to target people we never would have bothered to capture."

"Collateral damage" estimates from drone warfare in Pakistan range as high as 881 civilians and 176 children, according to the Stanford/NYU report, and "evidence suggests that U.S. strikes have facilitated recruitment" to terrorist groups.

You have to wonder if this is a smart long-term policy in an unstable country with nuclear weapons.

Time magazine's Joe Klein provoked outrage recently when he defended our drone program by insisting that the "bottom line" is "whose 4-year-old gets killed? What we're doing is limiting the possibility that 4-year-olds here will get killed by indiscriminate acts of terror." That language is stark, but unlike terms such as "collateral damage" and "disposition matrix," it's clarifying. And there's good reason to doubt Klein's assessment.

In the third presidential debate, Mitt Romney insisted that we "can't kill our way out of this problem." He was right; unfortunately, both he and his opponent appear determined to keep trying.

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