



Center for a Stateless Society

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How Politics Empowers Remorseless Killers

Nathan Goodman

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According to a [recent interview](#) with White House advisor Ben Rhodes, President Barack Obama “has not had a second thought about drones.”

Yet the president’s drone strikes have [more often](#) killed civilians than intended targets. Drones have struck [weddings](#), [funerals](#), and [rescuers](#). One drone strike even killed a 16-year old American citizen, [Abdulrahman al-Awlaki](#).

How can a man have no second thoughts when his orders kill numerous civilians, blow up weddings and funerals, and even kill one of his own citizens? It seems bizarre, almost sociopathic.

This is a persistent problem with those who make decisions about war. Their decisions lead to mass death, yet they seem unmoved.

Hillary Clinton, for example, played a decisive role in pushing the U.S. intervention in Libya. The intervention empowered rebels who tortured prisoners and [lynched black Africans](#). Moreover, it plunged the country into chaos and civil war from which it has yet to emerge. Yet after all this, Clinton called the [intervention](#) “smart power at its best.” As [Christopher Preble](#) of the Cato Institute put it, “If this is ‘smart power at its best’ ... I would hate to see it at its worst.”

When your decisions lead to mass death and destruction, an apology would seem to be in order. At the very least, one should have second thoughts.

As economist [Bryan Caplan](#) points out, “the [reasonable hawkish mood](#) is sorrow – and constant yearning for a peaceful path.” It’s one thing to conclude that killing innocents is necessary. But recognizing the costs of your actions should be a heavy burden.

Instead, hawks often flippantly joke and gloat about murdering foreigners. Ted Cruz’s comments about making sand glow come to mind.

Similarly, back in 2010, Barack Obama quipped, “The Jonas Brothers are here ... Sasha and Malia are huge fans. But boys, don’t get any ideas. I have two words for you, ‘predator drones.’ You will never see it coming.”

To the politicians who decide who will live and who will die, state violence is a big joke. That’s true whether they’re a president like Barack Obama or a presidential candidate like Ted Cruz.

They kill without remorse, they gloat about their disastrous interventions, and they joke on national television about the violence they either have inflicted or would like to inflict upon innocents abroad.

If a private citizen killed like this and talked this way about their violence, they would be seen as very dangerous indeed. They would be ostracized at least, and more likely would find themselves incarcerated for the rest of their life.

But the incentives in politics are different. Our political system gives leaders strong incentives to kill innocents abroad. Bragging about your hawkish policies helps you look tough in an election. Killing while you’re in office helps assure the public that you’re doing something to keep them safe. And once you’ve responded to those incentives, rationalizing your killing spree is a much easier way to sleep at night than seriously considering the lives you’ve taken. Better to sleep soundly and look tough to your constituents than bother with second thoughts.

Our political system empowers people to kill. And it encourages them to do so rashly, thoughtlessly, and without remorse. The state is a system that enables remorseless killers.