



Will liberals hold Obama accountable for civil liberties violations?

By: Shikha Dalmi – May 23, 2013

President Obama is dealing with revelations about the Justice Department's spying on journalists and other scandals by changing the subject.

In a major national security address Thursday, he announced the phaseout of the Guantanamo prison facility and the CIA's oversight of the drone program. But these are cosmetic changes that can't conceal his record on the war on terrorism, which is arguably even more Draconian than President George W. Bush's.

The question is whether liberals will protect their principles or their man.

The administration finally admitted this week that it has been using its weapon of choice -- drone strikes -- not just to kill foreign terrorists on the president's kill list, but Americans as well. As atonement, the president pledged to transfer oversight of the drone program from the CIA to the Pentagon.

But the problem with the program is not who runs it but what it does.

The theory behind transferring the program is that lawmakers will be able to offer more effective oversight given that congressional defense committees have more power to extract information from the Pentagon than intelligence committees from the CIA, explains Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman, a defense expert.

But the ingeniousness of the drone program is that even if Congress can provide more oversight, it will have little incentive to actually do so.

Why?

Invasion of foreign countries -- like Bush's misadventure in Iraq -- risk American blood and treasure and therefore invite domestic scrutiny. Not so with the drone program that has made the war on terror virtually costless to Americans; drones, after all, are cheap and unmanned.

This has enabled the administration to expand vastly both the size and scope of the program without raising an eyebrow outside of civil libertarian circles.

It has escalated drone strikes against alleged militants along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. According to the liberal AlterNet, the Bush administration conducted 52 drone strikes in this region, killing 438 people, including 182 civilians.

This administration ordered 300 strikes in just its first term, killing 2,152 people, including 260 civilians. The constant buzzing in the sky traumatizes the local population and violates Pakistani sovereignty, which has caused America's popularity in Pakistan to plummet from 36 percent under Bush to 24 percent under Nobel Peace Prize-winner Obama.

But the administration hasn't just expanded the number of drone strikes but also their geographical footprint. Its battlefield now extends to Somalia and Yemen. In Yemen, the president has used what are called "signature strikes" against anyone who "signs up" for al Qaeda -- and not because they threaten America but its ally, the Yemeni government.

In other words, Obama's drones have become a tool for protecting a corrupt monarchy against those trying to topple it. Talk about mission creep! The president is promising to end such strikes but what are such promises worth when no one is holding him accountable?

Equally meaningless is Obama's belated move to close the Guantanamo facility. Bush needed a place to warehouse "enemy combatants" captured in the battlefield. But Obama can close it because drone strikes take no prisoners. Strikes under Obama have killed four times more people than Bush imprisoned in Guantanamo.

Cato's Friedman maintains that the president's efforts to move the drone program and phase out Gitmo might actually make matters worse by creating an impression that the worst excesses of the war on terrorism are over.

But to make that a reality, Friedman notes, Congress will have to take back its blanket authorization of military force to the executive and require him to obtain permission before every strike -- drone or otherwise. That won't happen on its own.

If former Vice President Dick Cheney had authored the drone program, liberals would demand his indictment as a war criminal. But Obama has made it the defining feature of his war on terrorism and they remain silent.

When Bush departed from bedrock conservative principles and started spending like a drunken sailor, he triggered a revolt that ultimately culminated in the Tea Party movement. It remains to be seen if liberals will hold Obama similarly accountable.

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