

THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

Nat Henoff: Obama's targeted killings in Yemen

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2010-02-02 16:24:57



The president, in his State of the Union message, proudly emphasized that in his first year in office, "hundreds of al-Qaida's fighters and affiliates, including many senior leaders, have been captured or killed – far more than in 2008," George W. Bush's last year in office.

Obama, however, did not speak of his personal authorization of certain targeted killing in that body count. That news was revealed by Washington Post reporter Dana Priest in her Jan. 27 front-page story on joint secret operations: "U.S. military teams and intelligence agencies are deeply involved in secret joint operations with Yemeni troops who in

the past six weeks have killed scores of people, among them six of 15 top leaders of a regional al-Qaida affiliate, according to senior administration officials."

These and other such operations, she continued, are "approved by President Obama." Working with Yemeni troops to plan the missions and provide weapons are "several dozen" members of our "Joint Special Operations Command" (Army Rangers, Navy Seals, Green Berets, Delta Forces), "whose main mission is tracking and killing suspected terrorists."

As I reported in my 2004 book, "The War on the Bill of Rights and the Gathering Resistance," such targeted killings were authorized by Bush soon after 9/11 and could have included American citizens believed to be involved in terrorist actions against the United States. As Priest added in her January story: "The Obama administration has adopted the same stance." A senior Obama administration official told her: "If a U.S. citizen joins al-Qaida, it doesn't really change anything from the standpoint of whether we can target them. They are then part of the enemy."

Accordingly, in the current operations in Yemen, there is, Priest adds, "a short list of U.S. citizens specifically targeted for killing or capture by the JSOC (our Joint Special Operations Command), military officials said. The officials, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the operations."

Secrecy of the specifics of the actual planning and killing is, of course, vital; but American citizens should at the very least know what is being done, in general, in our name without any judicial supervision.

Priest was one of the first U.S. reporters to blow the whistle – soon heard around the world – that the Bush administration was torturing terrorism suspects. In our prison at the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, she reported on the front page of the Dec. 26, 2002 Washington Post, "The traditional lines between right and wrong, legal and inhumane, are evolving and blurred." She gave illustrations, which have become commonplace in the torture history of the Bush administration.

In 2006, Priest won the Pulitzer Prize for Beat Reporting for the further breaking news of secret CIA "black site" prisons in various countries; and now she has again demonstrated why the First Amendment is so crucial whenever we have an executive branch that believes it is vital to our national security to ignore due process and the separation of powers.

In the same article on targeted killings in Yemen by the Obama administration, Priest makes the connection between these deadly operations and the fact that, as I have described in previous columns, "Obama has

ordered a dramatic increase in the pace of CIA pilotless drone-launched missile strikes into Pakistan in an effort to kill al-Qaida and Taliban members in the ungoverned tribal areas along the Afghan border." And also using more drones on Afghanistan.

How many Americans know that "there have been more such strikes in the first year of Obama's administration than in the last three years under President George W. Bush"? These drone strikes also often cause unintended innocent civilian deaths, which increasingly infuriates residents of Pakistan and Afghanistan who are not our enemies.

Among our national – and very individual – concerns about jobs and health care, Americans should also be concerned about the following commentary on the Priest story by Glenn Greenwald, a former constitutional lawyer who has become a trenchant reporter and analyst of such Bush and Obama extrajudicial actions as these targeting killings.

In "Presidential Assassinations of U.S. Citizens" (Salon.com and Common Dreams.org, Jan. 27), Greenwald writes: "If U.S. forces are fighting on an actual battlefield, then they ... have the right to kill combatants actively fighting against them, including American citizens. ... (But) the Obama administration – like the Bush administration before it – defines the "battlefield" as the entire world.

"So the president claims the power to order U.S. citizens killed anywhere in the world, while engaged even in the most benign activities carried out far away from any actual battlefield, based solely on his say-so and with no judicial oversight or other checks."

In addition to the corollary death of innocent civilians, these strikes do kill terrorists, don't they? But Greenwald reminds us, it is "the U.S. Government (that) has accused them of being a terrorist."

On what evidence? Remember Donald Rumsfeld assuring us "the worst of the worst" were being held at Guantanamo Bay? But, as Greenwald notes, federal judges reviewing habeas petitions of prisoners there have found, in some cases, "an almost complete lack of evidence to justify the accusations against them."

What does Obama's boasting of his mounting record of targeted killings on his own authorization tell us about our silence on these accelerating strikes and innocent civilian deaths? Anything? At least, under our rules of law, shouldn't Congress be looking into this?

You want to bet it will?

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