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Opinion

Few batting eyes at Obama's deadly drone policy

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By NAT HENTOFF

News of our pilotless killer drones hurling more Hellfire missiles abroad has largely vanished from our press, despite President Obama's fixation on this questionable aspect of our war on terrorism.

An impressive exception to the media inattention is investigative reporter Adam Entous of Reuters.

He reports that, contrary to the administration's claim that only high-level terrorists researched are targeted, "the CIA has killed around 12 times more low-level fighters than mid-to-high-level al-Qaida and Taliban leaders since the drone strikes intensified in the summer of 2008."

Another of his sources, who was involved in our robotic warfare and has since left the service, told him that the CIA's targeting of low-level foot soldiers worries him because "it degrades the notion we're going after serious threats to the United States."

The increasing reliance on pilotless drones operated from afar is a slippery slope that can do serious injury to our standing in the world, not only among our allies but also by becoming a boon to terrorism recruiters.

On Scott Simon's always-illuminating Weekend Edition program on National Public Radio, Mary Ellen O'Connell, a research professor at the University of Notre Dame, said, "I am not at all against the use of technology that protects our soldiers. ... But I do think a lot about not only the legal but the moral ramifications of the drone, the ability to kill from thousands of miles away, not just a mile or two away. And what is that doing to us as a nation?"

She wonders whether we are "really thinking through our leadership obligations. ...

"Are we really setting the legal and moral norms that should be governing their use only in situations of real necessity?"

Also troubled, as Reuters' Entous reported, are certain American military officers who are very much aware that the most murderous of the drone planes are run by the CIA.

Entous quotes a former U.S. intelligence officer as saying, "This is a proud military, and many hate the drone program because it is a constant reminder that they're not in control."

But, Entous adds, other American intelligence officers "proudly tout the drone campaign as the most precise and possibly humane targeted killing program in the history of warfare."

Interviewed by Entous, Jeffrey Addicott, a former legal adviser to Army Special Operations Forces, asks, "Are we creating more enemies than we're killing or capturing by our activities? Unfortunately, I think the answer is yes. These families have 10 sons each. You kill one son and you create nine more enemies. You're not winning over the population."

Last year, another vigilant reporter, Walter Pincus of the Washington Post, described how enamored of the drones President Obama already was. Pincus reported (Aug. 11, 2009): "The Air Force will train more pilots to fly unmanned aerial systems from ground operations centers (thousands of miles away) than pilots to fly fighter or bomber aircraft."

Nation magazine reported (June 24) that thanks to newly awarded federal contracts, the Wisconsin National Guard is planning to build an \$8 million base for unmanned drones. Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri is to be a drone base control. Rapid City's nearby Ellsworth Force Base also has won a drone contract.

"In none of these places," added Nation, "was there much of anything but joy at the news."

—*Syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.*

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