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Opinion

Predator adds to history of secret killings

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By Nat Hentoff

EXCEPTIONALLY alert investigative reporter Ari Shapiro said in October that many national security experts he interviewed agree “it has become so hard for the U.S. to detain people that in many instances, the U.S. government is killing them instead.”

The CIA’s secret Predator drone attacks on suspected terrorists in Pakistan are doing just that.

Jane Mayer in The New Yorker wrote: “The embrace of the Predator program has occurred with remarkably little public discussion.

“It represents a radically new and geographically unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force. And, because of the CIA program’s secrecy, there is no visible system of accountability, despite the fact that the agency has killed many civilians inside a politically fragile, nuclear-armed country with which the U.S. is not at war.”

I have an essential correction for her powerfully valuable article. These secret, U.S. targeted killings are not new. If history classes ever resume, it’s important — since global terrorism has no discernible end — for students to know and debate whether extra-judicial killings accompanying deaths of innocent civilians is at odds with America’s values and laws.

In 1977, an executive order by President Gerald Ford commanded that “no employee” of the federal government “shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination.” President Jimmy Carter expanded the Ford order to include all assassinations. President Ronald Reagan ordered “no person employed by or acting on behalf of” the United States shall engage in assassination.

Then, based on a classified legal memorandum that gave President Bill Clinton authority to sidestep the three previous presidential bans on targeted assassinations, President George W. Bush issued a “Memorandum of Notification” on Sept. 17, 2001, as reported by Bob Woodward.

This authorized the CIA to operate freely in Afghanistan with paramilitary teams and to go after al-Qaida “on a worldwide scale, using lethal covert action to keep the role of the United States hidden,” Woodward found.

President Barack Obama, as he has continued other Bush-Cheney legacies, is permitting the CIA to operate freely with its dread pilotless drones in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

With regard to Afghanistan, the Associated Press reported that “although the U.N. says most civilian casualties have been at the hands of militants” — why doesn’t the AP say it like it is: terrorists? — “deaths of men, women and children in NATO airstrikes have raised tensions between (Hamid) Karzai’s government and the U.S.-led coalition.”

Again, say it plain that the U.S. is very much involved in the NATO airstrikes — in addition to drone planes — that murder children, women and men who are not even suspected to be “militants.”

Just as Mayer’s article generated little follow-up in the press, neither has the Washington Post’s Craig Whitlock’s revelations on Obama-authorized extra-judicial killings of dealers in opium in Afghanistan.

Without any system of accountability in courts or Congress, “The U.S. military,” Whitlock writes, “and NATO officials have authorized their forces to kill or capture individuals on the list, which was drafted within the past year as part of NATO’s new strategy to combat drug operations that finance the Taliban.”

What’s wrong with that — aside from our Constitution’s separation of powers? Whitlock emphasizes there is “fierce opposition from Afghan officials, who say it could undermine their fragile justice system and trigger a backlash against foreign troops.”

The Afghan families of those inadvertently killed in implementing this hit list are deeply angry at this lethal operation.

Afghanistan’s deputy foreign minister for counter-narcotics operations, Gen. Mohammad Daud Daud, said he’s grateful for NATO-U.S. help “in destroying drug labs and stashes of opium.” But about those killings, he adds, the names on the hit list are not told to Afghan officials.

Said Daud: “They should respect our law, our constitution and our legal codes. We have a commitment to arrest these people on our own.” Note: Arrest, not kill instantly.

But, these allies of Afghanistan don’t respect their own laws and legal codes.

On Sept. 12, 2001, Bush assured the world: “We will not allow this enemy to win the war by changing our way of life or restricting our freedoms.”

Haven’t we changed our Constitution? Don’t you know there’s a war on?

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