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Collateral damage 'acceptable' when terrorists targeted

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WASHINGTON - In August of last year, Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud was spending a humid night on the roof of his father-in-law's house in South Waziristan. As he relaxed while his wife massaged his legs to ease the painful symptoms of diabetes, a launch order was given for a missile aboard a U.S. drone flying high above in the Afghani sky.

In a matter of seconds, the house was reduced to little more than a smoking pile of rubble.

Mehsud was killed. So were his wife and bodyguards.

"That's an acceptable price for taking out a senior leader in the Taliban," says David Rittgers, a former Special Forces operator who has served three tours in Afghanistan.

"I think if we had a chance to kill Adolph Hitler with a drone and Ava Braun was going to be a part of the collateral damage, I think that would be viewed as acceptable," Rittgers adds. "There's a strong parallel between that and Baitullah Mehsud."

Al-Qaida has admitted losing two key members in the last three months, suffering significant damage to its ability to plan and launch terror attacks. Saleh al-Somali, senior external operations planner, and Abdullah Said, chief of internal operations, were both allegedly killed in separate U.S. drone strikes.

Collateral damage has historically been a major concern for U.S. officials. It remains a prickly issue today.

While eliminating more than a dozen top al-Qaida linked terror targets since 2004, hundreds of civilians have died in the process.

"While the CIA does not comment on allegations of Predator operations, the tactics and tools we use in the fight against al-Qaida and its violent allies are not only lawful, they are exceptionally precise and effective," says CIA spokesman Paul Gimigliano.

"Press reports suggesting that hundreds of Pakistani civilians have somehow been killed as a result of supposed U.S. activities are -- to state what should be obvious under any circumstances -- flat-out false."

A recent report by the [New America Foundation](#) suggests that approximately 1,200 people were killed in more than 100 missile strikes dating back to 2004. The report suggests that one of every three casualties were civilians.

Critics question whether they were bystanders or terrorists whose activities were not known to the public.

Rittgers, also a legal policy analyst at the Cato Institute, says setting up a strike means deciding if the target warrants a strike.

"First, we have to see if there is a clear military objective," Rittgers says. "Is this someone who has a military leadership position in a terrorist organization?"

Once U.S. officials determine a strike will be made on a "High Value Target," Rittgers says the next challenge is "making the strike at a time when we're going to minimize any collateral damage."

What if a wife or other close family members, who may have nothing to do with the terrorist's activities are going to be killed?

"That's acceptable," says Rittgers.

A horizontal banner for American Public University. On the left is the APU logo, which consists of a stylized torch with a flame above the letters 'APU'. To the right of the logo, the text 'American Public University' is written in a large, white, serif font. Below this, the tagline 'Respected. Affordable. Online.' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font, followed by the website address 'studyatAPU.com' in an even smaller font. On the right side of the banner is a photograph of a man and a woman smiling. The man is wearing a suit and glasses, and the woman is wearing a yellow top. The background of the banner is a solid blue color.

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