



Care About Children Killed In Drone Strikes

By: NAT HENTOFF – January 3rd, 2012

After Barack Obama joined the rest of us in mourning the slaughter of innocent children in Newtown, Conn., Sanford Berman, a Minnesota civil liberties activist, wrote me: "Obama's tears for the dead Connecticut kids made me sick. What about weeping over the 400 or more children he killed with drone strikes?"

Indeed, our president has shown no palpable concern over those deaths, but a number of U.S. personnel -- not only the CIA agents engaged in drone killings -- are deeply troubled.

Peggy Noonan reports that David E. Sanger, in his book "Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power," discovered that "some of those who operate the unmanned bombers are getting upset. They track victims for days. They watch them play with their children." Then what happens: "It freaks you out" ("Who Benefits From the 'Avalanche of Leaks'?" Wall Street Journal, June 15).

For another example, I introduce you to Conor Friedersdorf and his account of "The Guilty Conscience of a Drone Pilot Who Killed a Child" (theatlantic.com, Dec. 19).

The subtitle: "May his story remind us that U.S. strikes have reportedly killed many times more kids than died in Newtown -- and that we can do better."

The story Friedersdorf highlights in the Atlantic first appeared in Germany's Der Spiegel about an Air Force officer (not CIA) who "lamented the fact that he sometimes had to kill 'good daddies'" ... (and) "even attended their funerals" from far away.

And dig this, President Obama: "as a consequence of the job, he collapsed with stress-induced exhaustion and developed PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)." Yet these drones, "Hellfire missiles," are President Obama's favorite extra-judicial weapons against suspected terrorists.

Getting back to the Air Force officer, Brandon Bryant, with the guilty conscience. Friedersdorf's story quotes extensively from Der Spiegel's article, which recalls that, when Bryant got the order to fire, "he pressed a button with his left hand and marked the roof (of a shed) with a laser. The pilot sitting next to him pressed the trigger on a joystick, causing the drone to launch a Hellfire missile. There were 16 seconds left until impact ...

"With seven seconds left to go, there was no one to be seen on the ground. Bryant could still have diverted the missile at that point. Then it was down to three seconds ...

"Suddenly a child walked around the corner, he says. Second zero was the moment in

which Bryant's digital world collided with the real one in a village between Baghlan and Mazar-e-Sharif. Bryant saw a flash on the screen: the explosion. Parts of the building collapsed. The child had disappeared.

"Bryant had a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Did we just kill a kid?' he asked the man sitting next to him.

"Yeah. I guess that was a kid,' the pilot replied.

"Was that a kid?' they wrote into a chat window on the monitor.

"Then someone they didn't know answered, someone sitting in a military command center somewhere in the world who had observed their attack. 'No. That was a dog,' the person wrote.

"They reviewed the scene on video. A dog on two legs?"

Friedersdorf adds: "The United States kills a lot of 'dogs on two legs.' The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported last August that in Pakistan's tribal areas alone, there are at least 168 credible reports of children being killed in drone strikes." As for those in other countries, he adds, that's "officially secret."

He writes: "Presidents Bush and Obama have actively prevented human-rights observers from accessing full casualty data from programs that remain officially secret, so there is no way to know the total number of children American strikes have killed in the numerous countries in which they've been conducted, but if we arbitrarily presume that 'just' 84 children have died -- half the bureau's estimate from one country -- the death toll would still be more than quadruple the number of children killed in Newtown, Conn."

Are you proud, as an American, to know this?

For days we kept learning more and more about those horrifying deaths in Newtown, but the kids smashed to bits by our Hellfire missiles in other countries never make the front pages -- and very few of our inside pages.

After reading about Obama's silence in "The Guilty Conscience of a Drone Pilot Who Killed a Child," does the conscience of those of us who re-elected Obama ache?

As Friedersdorf writes, Obama has never spoken of these deaths as he did about the ones in Newtown, when he said: "If there's even one step we can take to save another child or another parent ... then surely we have an obligation to try. ... Are we really prepared to say that dead children are the price of our freedom?"

Do you mean, Mr. President, only the dead children of Newtown? These targeted killings continue in our name, under the ultimate authority of our president -- as the huge majority of We The People stays mute.

These killings are loathsome evidence of how far America has fallen off the cliff of who we say we are.

Is this the legacy with which we endow our children and grandchildren? We have seen, as we should, many photographs of the children who were blown apart in Newtown. But we are prevented from even knowing the names of the children broken into pieces by our drones.

Well, at least one of these killers fell into post-traumatic stress disorder. But our chief assassin spent the Christmas holidays delightedly swimming in Hawaii.