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MINNPOST

Troubling questions about Obama's drone warfare

By Nick Hayes | 12/03/12



REUTERS/U.S. Air Force/Lt. Col. Leslie Pratt

Undated handout image courtesy of the U.S. Air Force showing a MQ-1 Predator unmanned aircraft.

My last post argued that, in the wake of his election victory and on the eve of his second term,

President Obama stands at what could be his “Truman moment” as a “post war” president. More than a decade of war consumed the two terms of the Bush administration and Obama’s first term. He now faces an historic opportunity to articulate the doctrine and design the framework for an imperfect but lasting peace.

The post stirred up quite of reaction of a number of you. Some readers trashed my interpretation of the past and the present. One reader remembered that long, long ago, I was an aspiring poet and pacifist.

Several readers took me to task for not mentioning Obama’s third war. He has withdrawn from one conventional war in Iraq and promised to complete the withdrawal from the second -- the war in Afghanistan -- by the end of 2014. He is not relenting from a third, highly unconventional war: U.S. drone warfare against suspected terrorist targets in the Middle East and South Asia.

The drone warfare campaign threatens to cost the president much of his political capital abroad. Last



week, the **PEW Global Attitudes Project** released a report with mixed news for Obama. The good news confirmed that world public opinion cheered Obama's victory over Mitt Romney in the election. The bad news lay in the increasing and widespread disapproval of his foreign policy in general, and especially his use of drone attacks.

World criticism

Criticism of Obama's drone warfare campaign stands at 80 percent in Egypt, Turkey and Jordan; 75 percent in Spain and Japan; 63 percent in France, and 59 percent in Germany. His personal popularity gives Obama

valuable political capital abroad that he should spend wisely to build support for his diplomatic initiatives, especially in the Middle East, and not waste it to vindicate drone warfare that generates more enemies than it kills.

Our recent presidential campaign largely ignored a serious discussion by Obama or Romney on foreign policy. Drone warfare was a point of agreement between them. In the third and final presidential debate, Romney replied to CBS News' Bob Schieffer's question about drone warfare as if he was cheering for Obama. "I support that entirely," Romney replied when asked about the president's increased use of drone attacks.

Romney was realistically acknowledging that public opinion polls indicate that 62 percent those polled in the United States (including 74 percent of Republicans) approve of drone warfare.

Romney's enthusiasm for Obama's drone warfare left many on the left scrambling to put some distance between Obama and Romney on the issue. Blogging live during the debate on The Dish, **Andrew Sullivan drew the line** between Obama and Romney by asking: "You think Romney would be as scrupulous in drone warfare as Obama?" A bad choice of an adjective, "scrupulous" is a poor characterization for the dramatic increase in drone attacks on Obama's watch.

Writing in The New York Times last week, **Scott Shane reported** that the possibility of a Romney victory had prompted the Obama administration in the weeks preceding the election to hasten its efforts to develop clear and strict guidelines for drone warfare.

In 2002, the Bush administration implemented the first targeted killing by an unmanned drone. Under the first Obama administration, drone deployments expanded to over 300 strikes conducted and 2,500 killed. The casualties include four U.S. citizens.

Within the Obama administration, the policy has pitted the Defense Department and CIA, advocating for wider leeway, against the Justice Department and State Department, arguing for restraint. The

American Civil Liberties Union has filed lawsuits. Next year, the U.N. may start an investigation.

Key issues

Our policy on drone warfare stands or falls on the answers to three questions. The first – the question of legality -- was asked and answered a decade ago without any public discussion. Bush established the legal precedent that Obama inherited. The United States, the administrations argue, is at war with terrorists and has the legal right to defend itself by striking at Al Qaeda and its allies wherever they are found.

We now face a second question. There are hints that the public may be invited to this discussion. As implied by Shane's reporting, White House sources are discussing the issue with The New York Times. Obama has discretely raised the issue in interviews on CNN and "The Daily Show."

Eric Schwartz, dean of the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota and longtime veteran of the State Department, has given the second question considerable thought. Last Friday, I had the pleasure of joining Schwartz for a discussion of foreign policy on **MPR's "Friday Roundtable."**

The second question involves, according to Schwartz, how "extensive" is the use of drone strikes, are the drone strikes "sufficiently discriminate" and is the United States "targeting carefully enough" to assure against the killing of innocent civilians?

Unfortunately, the third question is not when we will bring an end to drone warfare. Obama's third war built the architecture of unmanned, remote drone attacks without judicial or legislative oversight, expanded its use beyond Afghanistan to Pakistan and Yemen, and presided over the expansion of drones into the arsenals of Britain, France, Israel and Iran. In the United States, we (or at least 62 percent of us) have approved. The "war on terrorism" may be coming to an end, but drone warfare is expanding.

The third question, therefore, is: Will drone warfare be the long-term legacy of the "war on terrorism"?

World War II left us the legacy of the "A-bomb" and the inevitability of a nuclear arms race. The "war on terrorism" has left us a mode of war exercised without legal safeguards, transparency, accountability or legislative oversight. What is more, the technology of drone warfare is far easier for other countries to obtain than the resources to build nuclear weapons.

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