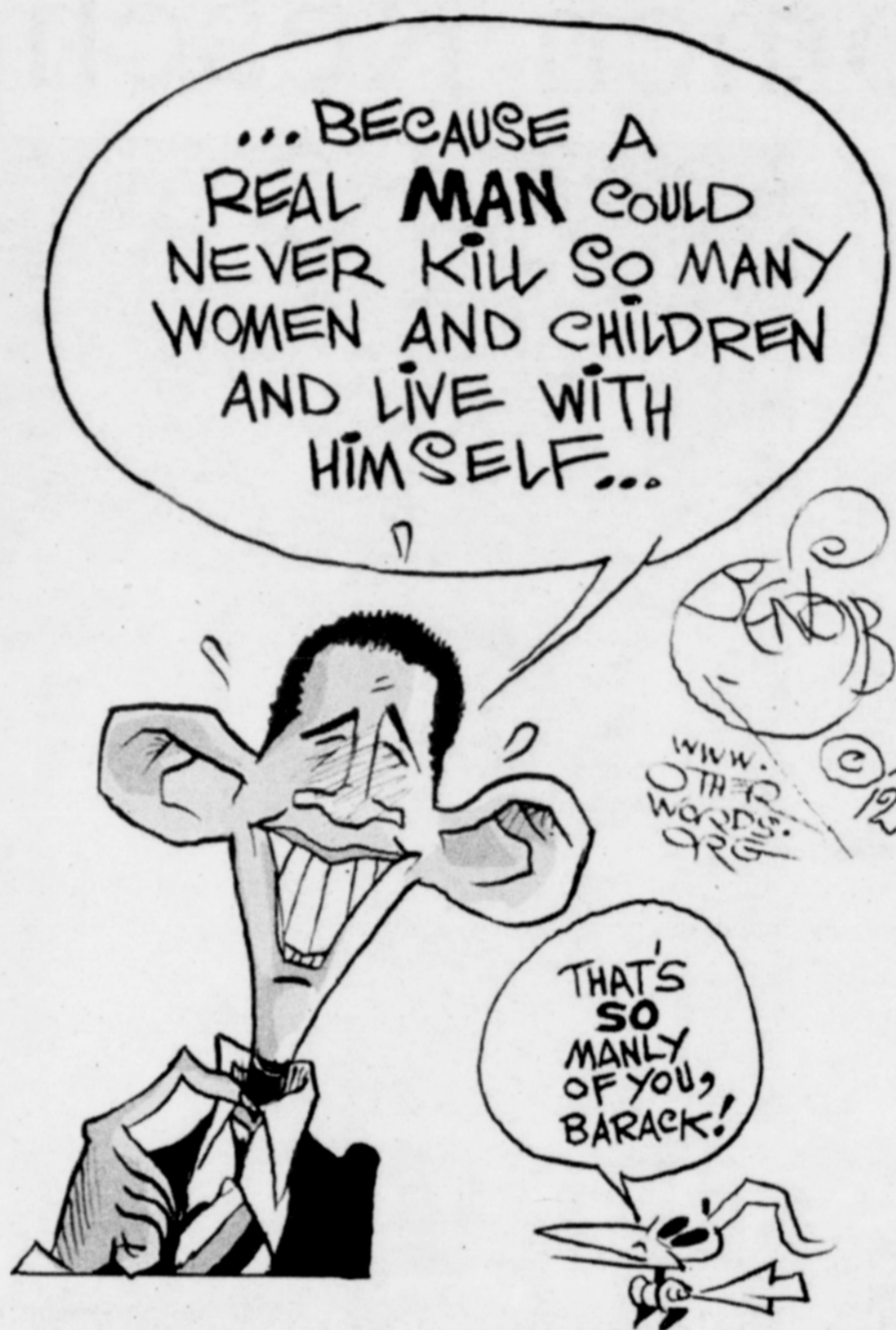


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OPINION



Drone Attacks are Plain Old Murder

A weapon of choice that kills citizens

BY CHRIS TOENSING

Drones are President Barack Obama's weapon of choice in the War on Terror.

Since taking office, he has ordered over 280 drone strikes in Pakistan alone. That's more than eight times as many as George W. Bush authorized and doesn't even count the scores of other unmanned attacks in Somalia and Yemen.

When the mainstream media reports these operations, it claims that almost all the people killed are "militants" — members of al-Qaeda or affiliated radical groups. That's what the Pentagon and the CIA say, anyway. The Pakistani government loudly protests that many of the casualties are civilian. The London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism agrees, estimating in mid-July that as many as 800 of the Pakistani dead have been non-combatants, along with some 50-150 Yemenis and dozens of Somalis.

In late May, The New York Times suggested one reason for the discrepancy in civilian tallies. The

Obama administration basically considers "all military-age males in a strike zone" to be fighters "unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent." The preceding month, the Times revealed that the White House had authorized strikes on people in Pakistan and Yemen "who may be plotting attacks against the United States, but whose identities might not be completely known."

Strip away the conditional verbs and the backwards burden of proof, and it's clear that Washington isn't always sure whom the unmanned aerial vehicles are killing.

In Pakistan, many of the dead may indeed be "militants," but they're conspiring against the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, not the United States. Quietly, the Pakistani government is happy to see them dispatched from the sky. It saves Pakistan's generals the trouble of sending their own troops into the mountains on the Afghan frontier.

In Yemen, the regime is also tricking the Pentagon into attacking participants in a domestic rebellion under the guise of the War on Terror. Somalia has no government to speak of — it's a free-fire zone.

The connection between the drone strikes and the security of

Americans is tenuous. And even if one accepts Pentagon and CIA statements that the dead are indeed anti-American terrorists, why assume that the drones are defeating them?

Obama's former director of national intelligence, Dennis Blair, said the White House conversations on this topic "reminded me of body counts in Vietnam." It is just as likely — and indeed there's reason to believe — that the attacks recruit more militants than they kill.

Meanwhile, some of the drones' victims are undoubtedly civilians. Washington has offered no explanation, for example, for the death of Abdal-Rahman al-Awlaki, 16, whose only crime was to have been the son of a man on Obama's "kill list." The boy, who like his father was a U.S. citizen, wasn't collateral damage. He was killed in a separate strike.

It's remarkable that the younger Awlaki's violent end caused no outcry. By and large, Americans support the drone war — it keeps our troops out of harm's way — and trust the Obama administration to run it responsibly. And so, once again, a dangerous gap is growing between Americans' perceptions of U.S. foreign policy and how that policy is regarded abroad.

To Republicans, dubious deaths by drone are the acceptable cost of a war they wish were wider. To all but a tiny minority of Democrats, they are regrettable mistakes that should not overshadow Obama's successes. To the rest of the world, they look like plain old murder.

Chris Toensing is editor of Middle East Report, published by the Middle East Research and Information Project.



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