

REPRIEVE



THE TRUTH ABOUT U.S. DRONE STRIKES

OPAQUE TRANSPARENCY

The Obama Administration and Its Opaque
Transparency on Civilians Killed in Drone Strikes

A report by Reprise

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary
2. Introduction
3. The US Government's myths on civilian casualties
4. How anonymous briefings shield the Administration from accountability
5. Independent and alternative assessments of civilian casualties
6. Moving the goalposts: how the Obama Administration manipulates civilian casualty figures
7. To date, the Obama Administration has worked against greater transparency for the drone program
8. Conclusion

1. Executive Summary

In March 2016, the White House announced that it would publish an assessment of the number of people killed by the US Government's covert drone program – a program that targets and kills people in countries where the US is not at war. 15 weeks later, that announcement is now rumoured to be imminent. Yet it is hard to see how numbers alone can ever deliver the oft-promised transparency that is so desperately needed.

As this report demonstrates, every previous (rare) public, on-record statement made by the Obama Administration on the program has been shown to be false or deeply misleading. Moreover, the Administration has repeatedly shifted the goal posts, secretly re-defining who can be targeted and what it means to be a civilian. Therefore, simply announcing numbers without context, or the names of civilian victims, will do nothing but further mislead the public and hinder genuine accountability.

i. Previous false administration statements on drones

Zero civilian casualties

John Brennan, then-Counter Terrorism adviser to President Obama (and now CIA Director) claimed in June 2011 that there had not been a “single collateral death” caused by drones between 2010-2011.¹

We now know that the CIA themselves knew the statement to be false *at the time Brennan made it* – having recorded at least one civilian casualty in April 2011, according to leaked documents. Moreover, an independent investigation of that period by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) found at least 45 civilian casualties, with 15 further strikes where civilian casualties were “likely.” Among those killed were dozens of tribal elders who gathered in March 2011 to resolve a dispute over a chromite mine. Later news reports stated that the CIA had taken the strike “in retaliation” for a dispute with the Pakistani government over a CIA contractor who had shot dead two people in Lahore.

Near certainty that civilians will not be killed

In May 2013 President Obama stated that: “before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured.”² Again, this has been directly

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/asia/12drones.html?_r=0

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>

contradicted by leaked CIA documents, published just a month earlier by McClatchy, which “show[ed] that drone operators weren’t always certain who they were killing despite the administration’s guarantees [...] that civilian casualties have been ‘exceedingly rare.’”³ It is also incompatible with the use of ‘signature strikes,’ which target people based on patterns of behaviour without knowing their identities – according to media reports in 2015, President Obama secretly allowed such strikes to continue in Pakistan, and likely Yemen, *after* announcing tightened standards in 2013.

Near certainty that the terrorist target is present

This was another claim for the program made by the President in his May 2013 speech. Yet Reprieve’s research has found that multiple attempts to kill just 41 individuals have resulted in total fatalities of 1,147 people overall, including 150 children. For example, two unsuccessful strikes targeting just one man, Ayman al Zawahiri, who is still alive, resulted in the deaths of 76 children and 29 adults.⁴

The program is kept on a ‘tight leash’

President Obama claimed in a ‘Google Hangout’ conversation with students in January 2012 that “this thing is kept on a very tight leash.”⁵ However, he has since completely undermined this earlier claim, admitting in April 2016 that “in the first couple of years” of his presidency, the legal, administrative and command structures around the drone program were “under-developed.”⁶ President Obama’s Ambassador to Pakistan in 2011, Cameron Munter, went further, reportedly “complain[ing] bitterly to Washington that the program was out of control.”⁷

The administration wants transparency on drone strikes

President Obama’s only significant move on drones transparency – his publication of the 2013 Policy on the Use of Force in Counterterrorism Operations – has been almost totally undermined by more recent revelations. Crucially, in 2015, it emerged that far from ending the practice of ‘signature strikes,’ the President had in fact signed a secret Executive Order allowing such strikes to continue in Pakistan,

³ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html#storylink=cpy>

⁴ Reprieve’s full report can be found here:
http://www.reprieve.org/uploads/2/6/3/3/26338131/2014_11_24_pub_you_never_die_twice_-_multiple_kills_in_the_us_drone_program.pdf

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/world/middleeast/civilian-deaths-due-to-drones-are-few-obama-says.html>

⁶ President Obama Participates in a Conversation about the Supreme Court and Our Country’s Judicial System. University of Chicago Law School, April 7th 2016:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZMwnMxQzs#t=01h56m15s

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/secretcy-defines-obamas-drone-war/2011/10/28/gIQAPKNR5O_story.html

directly contradicting his public stance. In June 2016 evidence also emerged that signature strikes were on-going in Yemen as well, likely through a similar secret policy.

ii. **What will the next announcement mean?**

What little the Obama Administration has previously said on the record about the drone program has been shown by the facts on the ground, and even the US Government's own internal documents, to be false. Any claim of low numbers of civilian casualties will therefore have to be read against the more rigorous work of organisations such as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), which estimates a low of 492 civilian casualties across Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, and a high of potentially 1138. Amongst these are somewhere between 180 and 227 children.

Indeed, every independent organisation which tracks drone strikes has estimated civilian casualties to be higher than off-record Administration estimates by a factor of anything from four to twenty. The lowest estimate, provided by the Long War Journal, puts the civilian death toll at a minimum of 263 for Yemen and Pakistan, while New America (NA) suggests a low of 373 for Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, with a high of 448 (excluding 'unknowns,' which could take the total up to 797).⁸

But more importantly, it has to be asked what bare numbers will mean if they omit even basic details such as the names of those killed and the areas, even the countries, they live in. Equally, the numbers without the definitions to back up how the Administration is defining its targets is useless, especially given reports the Obama Administration has shifted the goalposts on what counts as a 'civilian' to such an extent that any estimate may be far removed from reality. In US drone operations, reports suggest all "military aged males" and potentially even women and children are considered "enemies killed in action" unless they can "posthumously" and "conclusively" prove their innocence.

iii. **What next for the program?**

When even senior military and intelligence figures are describing the covert drone program as a "failed strategy" (in the words of Obama's former Defense Intelligence Agency chief Michael Flynn⁹), any discussion cannot be limited to just the numbers.

⁸ A more in-depth assessment is provided in chapter 5 of this report. Further information can be found on the organizations' websites: Bureau of Investigative Journalism:

<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/> New America Foundation:

<http://securitydata.newamerica.net/world-drones.html> Long War Journal:

<http://www.longwarjournal.org/site-map>

⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/retired-general-drones-damage-good-150716105352708.html>

International human rights organization Reprieve, which represents a number of civilian victims of covert drone strikes, is calling for a federal independent commission to examine all of the evidence – not just the numbers claimed, but also the definition of who counts as a civilian, the legal framework governing the strikes, and the procedures for investigating mistakes afterwards.

The Administration must also extend the same apology it offered to the families of two western hostages in April 2015 to the potentially hundreds of Yemeni and Pakistani families who have similarly lost loved ones to mistakes in the US drone programme.

Only then can the public come to grips how effective the US drone programme has been, and whether it has made the West safer.

2. Introduction

The way to make government responsible is to hold it accountable. And the way to make government accountable is make it transparent so that the American people can know exactly what decisions are being made, how they're being made, and whether their interests are being well served. – President Obama, January 2009

On March 7, 2016 Lisa Monaco, President Obama's counter-terrorism adviser, announced that the Administration would "in the coming weeks" release "an assessment" of the number of people killed by drone strikes "taken outside of areas of active hostilities."¹⁰

The announcement, hailed by Monaco as evidence of "the President's commitment to transparency" came seven years after President Obama killed his first civilian in a drone strike;¹¹ four years after he casually acknowledged the programme's existence in a Google Hangout chat;¹² three years after he promised to make his lethal targeting "more transparent to the American people and the world" because "in our democracy, no one should just take my word for it that we're doing things the right way";¹³ and two years after a bipartisan report from senior military and intelligence officials warned the "secret war" of lethal drone strikes was "creat[ing] a slippery slope toward continual or widening conflict and instability."¹⁴

During this time, independent estimates suggest the President authorised as many as 643 strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.¹⁵ Senator Lindsay Graham disclosed the strikes had killed some 4,700 people by 2013¹⁶ – people killed not in the heat of battle, but rather people assassinated by the US covertly and in countries with whom the US was not at war. Independent estimates suggest that the total number of civilians killed could be upwards of one thousand.¹⁷

Yet, instead of transparency, the President and his Administration have spent seven years spinning a web of lies through largely anonymous sources, none of whom can be held accountable. From the claim of 'zero civilian casualties' to an unfulfilled

¹⁰ <http://www.cfr.org/homeland-security/lisa-o-monaco-homeland-security-counterterrorism/p37621>

¹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/23/drone-strike-victim-barack-obama#img-1>

¹² <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/obama-confirms-drone-attacks-pakistan-during-google-290218>

¹³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>

¹⁴ <http://www.stimson.org/content/recommendations-and-report-stimson-task-force-us-drone-policy-0>

¹⁵ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

¹⁶ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/510528/us-senator-says-4700-killed-in-drone-strikes-report/>

¹⁷ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

promise that the American people would hear the truth, those statements paint a picture of an Administration that has re-defined the definition of the enemy to pretend that everyone killed was an extremist – and that (at best) has no idea who has been killed.

Last month, President Obama said he has a lot of “anguish” over those same civilian deaths, but that “there is a lot of misinformation” out there about just how many of them there are.¹⁸ He is absolutely right. There is a lot of misinformation and much of it has been spread by his own Administration. The question is: how can we trust the information if and when it is ever published?

As this report sets out, the Administration has spent the past seven years spinning various myths in an attempt to whitewash or justify the deaths of many innocent men, women and children. If and when the much promised numbers materialize – it’s now been 14 weeks and counting – it will be quite simply impossible for the Administration to square it with the various public statements of the past and the independent evidence emerging from these regions.

The inquiry therefore must not stop with the numbers, whatever they may be. In fact, it must only be the beginning – a beginning that sheds light on the lies of the past and one that is followed immediately by an independent inquiry into who, exactly, the US has killed in its covert assassination programme. Only then can we begin to come to grips with the names and faces of innocents who have lost their lives, and a government policy of killing that was based on anything but evidence.

3. The US Government’s myths on civilian casualties

To date, the supposed facts released by the US government concerning the innocent civilians killed in the drone campaign have been internally inconsistent and facially improbable. This reflects the fact that the program has been highly secretive and government statements have appeared to be tailored more for propaganda purposes than for a serious, rational debate about the consequences of the drone wars. An analysis of these statements strongly supports the various calls for openness and candour. It also presents President Obama with a stark choice: if he proposes a truly transparent process, he must learn from, and disavow, the false statements that have characterised his Administration to date.

Myth 1: John Brennan Claims zero civilian casualties in 11 months

“For nearly a year, there hasn’t been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities we’ve been able to develop.”¹⁹
-John Brennan, John Hopkins University, June 29, 2011

¹⁸ <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/275558-obama-outlines-hopes-for-drone-legacy>

¹⁹ <http://www.c-span.org/video/?300266-1/obama-administration-counterterrorism-strategy>

In June 2011 Obama’s chief counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan (who became Director of the CIA in March 2013) told the world that drones had not caused a “single collateral death” between 2010 and 2011 in Pakistan.²⁰ This myth manifested itself in various other dismissals by Administration officials that those killed “weren’t gathering for a bake sale”²¹ and that human rights groups suggesting otherwise were guilty of repeating al Qaeda propaganda.²² Specifically, on August 11, 2011, the New York Times reported that “since May 2010, C.I.A. officers believe, the drones have killed more than 600 militants ... and not a single noncombatant.”²³

Brennan’s claim, backed up by the CIA, was particularly incredible because of the number of strikes the US had taken during this period. Within weeks of Brennan’s claims, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism published a detailed investigation of the 116 CIA ‘secret’ drone strikes that occurred in Pakistan during the same period.

Analysing just ten strikes, TBIJ identified at least 45 civilian casualties:²⁴

Ten Deadly Strikes	
Date	Summary
September 8 2010	Four children killed alongside six militants
October 18 2010	Ten-year-old killed by shrapnel when next-door house bombed
November 26 2010	Engineering student killed when car destroyed
December 6 2010	Two shopkeepers reported killed
December 17 2010	Two civilians killed along with 32 alleged militants
March 11 2011	Five civilians killed as they attempt to rescue militant victims of previous strike
March 17 2011	At least 19 civilians, including local police, killed in attack on tribal meeting
April 22 2011	Twelve-year-old boy killed along with five suspected militants
May 6 2011	Six civilians killed when restaurant accidentally hit in strike
June 15 2011	Four civilian members of a family killed when their car destroyed

²⁰ *Obama Administration Counterterrorism Strategy*, (29 June 2011), available at: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?300266-1/obama-administration-counterterrorism-strategy>

²¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/asia/18pakistan.html?_r=0

²² <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>

²³ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/asia/12drones.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

²⁴ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Ten-Deadly-Strikes-Summary-Table.jpg>

Among these were six children, all of whom TBIJ named. TBIJ also identified an additional fifteen of the strikes where, with less precision, they suggested that “66 or more additional civilians may have died.”²⁵

One of the most infamous strikes in the history of the CIA drone programme fell within Brennan’s timeframe of “zero civilian casualties” – a drone strike on a tribal ‘jirga’ or meeting on March 17, 2011. That day 41 tribal elders lost their lives. They had gathered in broad daylight and with the full consent and knowledge of the Pakistani

“[P]eaceful citizens including elders of the area [were] carelessly and callously targeted with complete disregard to human life.”

–Pakistan General Kayani, March 2011

government to resolve a local dispute over a chromite mine. As they worked towards agreement, a US drone launched four missiles at them, killing almost everyone present. While TBIJ originally confirmed only 19 of the victims as civilians, multiple investigations by news outlets and human rights organisations, along with Stanford Law School and New York University, suggest that all 41 were civilians.

Troubling evidence quickly emerged that the CIA took the strike “in retaliation” for the Pakistanis detaining a CIA contractor named Raymond Davis.²⁶ Davis shot two people in the city of Lahore. It also emerged that the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, tasked with approving strikes in the region, tried unsuccessfully to stop the CIA station chief from going forward. Upon leaving his post, Munter said he hadn’t “realize[d] his main job was to kill people.”²⁷

Despite the overwhelming evidence coming from every corner – including the US government itself – that the jirga strike alone had killed a large number of civilians, Brennan nonetheless repeated his claim in August 2011, telling the *New York Times* that it had “not found credible evidence of collateral deaths” during 2010-2011.²⁸

Myth 2: CIA records, contradicting Brennan, claim just one civilian casualty during four years of operations

Brennan’s “zero casualty” claim was directly proven false in April 2013 – a month after Brennan took over as CIA Director - by the Agency’s own leaked internal

²⁵ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/07/18/washingtons-untrue-claims-no-civilian-deaths-in-pakistan-drone-strikes/>

²⁶ <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/ap-exclusive-timing-us-drone-strike-questioned>

²⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

²⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/asia/12drones.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1

documents. This showed that two months prior to Brennan's statement, the CIA had confirmed one civilian death in a strike:²⁹

“...the [CIA] reports estimated there was a single civilian casualty, an individual killed in an April 22, 2011, strike in North Waziristan...”³⁰

This CIA claim of just one civilian death was itself hard to believe, given there were as many as 237 strikes during this period, according to TBIJ.³¹ Nevertheless, neither Brennan nor President Obama has ever retracted, corrected or explained his contemporaneous assurance of zero civilian deaths.

Myth 3: Feinstein claims “single digit” civilian casualties during Brennan’s confirmation hearing, contradicting Brennan’s “zero” claim

During Brennan’s confirmation hearing for CIA Director in February 2013, Senator Diane Feinstein, Democratic Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee began the proceedings by stating that the number of civilian casualties by US drone strikes each year had “typically been in the single digits.”³² John Brennan made no move to correct her, despite the statement directly contradicting the claim he’d made just eight months earlier that there had been “zero” over the period of a year.

Equally disturbing was the degree to which the claim conflicted with three different independent monitoring organisations: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, New America, and the Long War Journal. At the time of Brennan’s confirmation hearing, TBIJ’s data showed that the US had carried out up to 424 strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, killing at least 556 civilians and at most 1,128.³³ New America said its data suggested there had been civilian casualty figures in the “double digits” for every year since 2004 other than 2012.³⁴ Finally, even the Long War Journal – consistently more conservative in its casualty estimates – found that since 2006 there had only been two years – 2007 and 2012 – when the civilian death toll from air strikes had been in the single digits.³⁵

²⁹ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2013/04/11/secret-us-documents-show-brennans-no-civilian-drone-deaths-claim-was-false/>

³⁰ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html#storylink=cpy>

³¹ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

³² *Remarks by the President at the National Defense University*, White House Speeches and Remarks, (23 May 2013), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>

³³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/07/drones-obama-single-digit-civilian-deaths>

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/07/drones-obama-single-digit-civilian-deaths>

³⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/07/drones-obama-single-digit-civilian-deaths>

4. How anonymous briefings shield the Administration from accountability

Throughout President Obama's tenure in office, anonymous briefings have been used as a tool to promote the Administration's narrative while shielding it from accountability. Nowhere has this been more true than in the covert drone programme. Since 2009, our research shows there have been no fewer than 16 anonymous briefings about the "numbers" of civilian casualties. These multiple, often "senior" officials, have given conflicting and differing accounts as to just who – and how many – people have been killed. They have included "exceedingly rare," "single digits" and "a handful of deaths".

In the same timeframe, roughly 2010-2011, anonymous officials simultaneously claimed "zero" and "60". Whichever way you crunch the claims, the only consistency among the bunch is that they grossly underestimate the number of civilian deaths relative to even the most conservative of the three organisations tracking the numbers – the Long War Journal – by a factor of two to three times. As noted in the chart below, however, the Long War Journal does not publish a strike by strike account of their numbers. It is therefore difficult to get reliable figures that correspond to the times or to compare why their numbers differ so drastically from those of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and New America. Both of the latter suggest that while the administration was (anonymously) claiming at most 60 civilian casualties, the true toll was in the hundreds, potentially as much as 12 times the number the government was spinning.

The difference between the government's numbers and independent monitoring bodies was so egregious that in August 2011, again precisely when John Brennan was claiming zero casualties, a "senior U.S. official" suggested that there had been only 50 civilians killed over nine years:

According to the senior U.S. official, an estimated 2,000 militants and 50 civilians have been killed in strikes since 2001.³⁶

Notably, at this time, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, after a preliminary, on-the-ground investigation, "found CIA covert drone strikes [in Pakistan] since 2004 killed at least 2,292 people. Of those killed in the strikes, the group said it had credible reports of at least 385 civilians, including 160 children."³⁷ While this did not reflect all the civilian casualties, TBIJ believed it reflected the lowest plausible estimate.

³⁶ <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/08/12/us-disputes-report-alleging-high-death-toll-from-drone-strikes/>

³⁷ <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/08/12/us-disputes-report-alleging-high-death-toll-from-drone-strikes/>

	US gov't claim by anonymous official	TBIJ	New America ³⁸	Long War Journal ³⁹
2008-2009	"Just over 20" ⁴⁰	Min - 139 Max - 363	Min – 88 Max - 268	74
Jan 2009 – April 2010	"only about 20" ⁴¹ since Obama took office ⁴²	Min – 138 Max - 269	Min – 57 Max - 195	43 ⁴³ / 57 ⁴⁴
Jan 2009 – April 2010	"just over 20" ⁴⁵	Min – 138 Max - 269	Min – 57 Max - 207	43 / 57
2008 – May 2010	"fewer than 30" ⁴⁶ "no more than 30" ⁴⁷	Min – 305 Max - 603	Min – 88 Max – 289	93
2008 - June 2010	"fewer than 50" ⁴⁸	Min- 207 Max- 475	Min – 94 Max- 297	93

³⁸ Max number includes those listed by NAF as unknowns and therefore possible civilians.

³⁹ Both TBIJ and NA publish a strike by streak breakdown of casualties. The LWJ does not and therefore exact time comparisons were difficult. These are best estimates based upon the data we were able to find on their website.

⁴⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/04/world/asia/04drones.html>

⁴¹ Since Obama took office in January 2009

⁴² <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303450704575159864237752180>;

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/25/AR2010042503114_2.html?sid=ST2010042503646

⁴³ This only covers 2009 as LWJ doesn't include a month/month breakdown

⁴⁴ Total for 2009 & 2010

⁴⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/25/AR2010042503114_2.html?sid=ST2010042503646

⁴⁶ <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/05/world/la-fg-drone-targets-20100506>

⁴⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-drones-idUSTRE64H5SL20100518>

⁴⁸ <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/03/world/la-fg-cia-drones-20100603/2>

2008 – January 2011	“roughly 30 since mid 2008” ⁴⁹ “total of 30 civilians” ⁵⁰ “at most a few dozen” ⁵¹	Min - 248 Max -580	Min – 102 Max - 331	74
2008 – June 2011	“under 40” ⁵²	Min - 290 Max - 704	Min - 154 Max - 402	N/A
May 2010 – June 2011	“zero civilian casualties” ⁵³	Min - 94 Max - 270	Min - 69 Max - 107	N/A
2001 - Aug 2011	“50 [in Pakistan]” ⁵⁴	Min –399 Max – 877	Min – 250 Max - 528	N/A
2008 - 2011	“only 60” [in Pakistan] ⁵⁵	Min – 300 Max – 732	Min – 159 Max - 418	118
2011	“handful” of deaths [in Pakistan] ⁵⁶	Min - 52 Max - 152	Min – 57 Max – 87	30
2004 - April 2012	“exceedingly rare” John Brennan ⁵⁷	Min – 408 Max - 894	Min – 303 Max - 554	N/A
Jan 2009 – May 2012	“single digits” ⁵⁸	Min - 254 Max - 622	Min – 123 Max - 349	122

⁴⁹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-01-31/u-s-said-to-reduce-civilian-deaths-after-increasing-cia-pakistan-strikes>

⁵⁰ <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/22/world/la-fg-drone-strikes-20110222/2>

⁵¹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704662604576257273696136418>

⁵² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-usa-drones-idUSTRE75T69120110630>

⁵³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/asia/12drones.html>

⁵⁴ <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/08/12/us-disputes-report-alleging-high-death-toll-from-drone-strikes/>

⁵⁵ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204621904577013982672973836>

⁵⁶ <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2011/nov/07/world/la-fg-cia-drones-20111108>

⁵⁷ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-efficacy-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy>

⁵⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

5. Independent & alternative assessments of civilian casualties

The figures proposed by the US government have been inconsistent, improbable and without even a minimal effort to provide evidentiary proof. In contrast, other bodies have provided figures for civilian deaths that are based on empirical research – even if some of the research is more careful and comprehensive than others.

i. The ‘Long War Journal’ estimates at least 263 civilian deaths

The lowest number reported by an independent body comes from the Long War Journal (LWJ), which estimates that at least 263 civilians have been killed. This number is several times larger than the highest estimate adopted by the Obama Administration. However, there are compelling reasons to conclude that the LWJ provides a significant underestimate.

In addition to relying solely on press reporting – which the LWJ itself recognizes means that “the exact numbers for casualties are difficult to know”⁵⁹ - the LWJ only provides estimates for Pakistan and Yemen. It also does not publish a strike by strike database – unlike New America and TBIJ – which would allow others to assess how it reached its estimates.

Despite these limitations, the LWJ suggests that in Pakistan “[s]ince 2006, there have been 2,797 leaders and operatives from Taliban, Al Qaeda, and allied extremist groups killed and 158 civilians are estimated to have been killed.”⁶⁰ In Yemen, the LWJ suggests that there have been at least 105 civilians killed since 2002.⁶¹ This provides a total estimate, excluding Somalia, of at least 263 civilian deaths.

ii. New America estimates 448 civilian deaths

Think tank New America (NA, formerly the New America Foundation) maintains a database on drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. The data suffers from some of the same limitations as the LWJ and TBIJ as it “was collected from credible news reports and is presented here with the relevant sources.” Unlike Long War Journal, however, it makes its database public and lists casualties by strike.

To date, NA has recorded 403 drone strikes in Pakistan, with an estimated 255-315 civilians killed. It records a further 178-278 as “unknowns”, and thus possible additional civilian casualties.⁶²

In both Yemen and Somalia, NA records not only drone strikes, but also other air strikes and raids, i.e. cruise missiles. It does not, however, disaggregate this data by

⁵⁹ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes>

⁶⁰ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/pakistan-strikes>

⁶¹ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/yemen-strikes>

⁶² <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/pakistan-analysis.html>

type of strike and thus it is impossible to determinate an exact number of civilian casualties from just drones. Nevertheless, NA has recorded 157 strikes – both drone and air – in Yemen, with 87-93 civilians killed and a 33-53 “unknowns”.⁶³ In Somalia, NA has recorded 36 Somali strikes and raids, with 28-40 civilians killed and 0-19 “unknowns”.⁶⁴

In total, NA roughly estimates that at least 373 civilians overall have been killed in US drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, but that number may be as many as 448 and, taking account of “unknowns”, could swell to 797.

	Strike numbers	Low Civ	High Civ	Low Unknown	High Unknown
Pakistan	403	255	315	176	278
Yemen	157	87	93	33	52
Somalia	36	31	40	0	19

iii. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism suggests as many as 1,138 civilian deaths in covert drone strikes, including up to 227 children

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) relies not just on media reporting, but also independent reporting by NGOs and its own on the ground investigators.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, media reporting plays an important role in its calculations and TBIJ itself acknowledges that full disclosure by the governments involved – including the US, the UK and the target countries – is vital if true transparency is to be achieved.

In Pakistan, TBIJ estimates that, of 424 identified strikes, the range of identified civilian victims runs from 424 to a potential high of 966. Among these have been at least 172 confirmed children, though that number might be 35 higher. These figures mask two facts – first, according to TBIJ, since 2004, “at least 1,765 victims remain nameless.”⁶⁶ And second, those injured might run as high as 1,744 – many of whom suffered life threatening injuries which, in some confirmed cases, later resulted in an early demise.

In Yemen, the picture is somewhat more complex as it has not always been possible for TBIJ to differentiate between US drone strikes and attacks by either the US or Saudi manned aircraft. There have been an estimated low of 124 drone strikes, but

⁶³ <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/yemen-analysis.html>

⁶⁴ <http://securitydata.newamerica.net/drones/somalia-analysis.html>

⁶⁵ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2011/08/10/pakistan-drone-strikes-the-methodology2/>

⁶⁶ “Every strike or event covered in our datasets contains active links to all news reports, statements, documents and press releases which we have used as our sources. We also incorporate images and video clips relating to specific events. The Bureau’s dataset is active: both the timelines and casualty counts change according to our best present understanding. New information on a particular strike or action can emerge months or even years after an event.”

<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2016/02/03/naming-the-dead-only-10-of-scores-killed-by-us-drones-in-pakistan-last-year-have-been-identified>

this number may be as high as 249. At least 65 civilians have been killed in drone strikes, including eight children, but these numbers could be as high as 162 and 18 respectively.⁶⁷

In Somalia, TBIJ records 27-31 drone strikes with 3-10 civilian deaths, including perhaps two children.⁶⁸

In all, then, TBIJ sets the minimum number of civilian deaths at 492 for Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, but with a very real possibility that the number could be at least 1,138, including 180-227 children. This again omits a similar number of injured people.

	Strike numbers	Low Civ	High Civ	Low Children	High Children
Pakistan	424	424	966	172	207
Yemen (confirmed drone)	124-144	65	101	8	9
Yemen (possible drone)	88-105	26	61	6	9
Somalia	27-31	3	10	0	2

iv. The Pakistan Government's estimates

While it cannot be considered an independent monitoring body along the lines of those mentioned above, it is worth noting that the Pakistan Government has produced its own estimates of civilian casualties.

In 2014, leaked documents from the Pakistan government detailed over 300 drone strikes in Pakistan territory – a large number, but still only some three quarters of the total. Nevertheless, based on their official documents, the Pakistan authorities have estimated the number of civilian casualties up to March 2013 at between 400 and 600.⁶⁹

According to UN Special Rapporteur Ben Emmerson, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry told him in 2013 that it had recorded at least 330 drone strikes in the Federally

⁶⁷ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs>

⁶⁸ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs>

⁶⁹ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/01/29/leaked-official-document-records-330-drone-strikes-in-pakistan/>

Administered Tribal Areas since 2004, with at least 400 civilians – and possibly 600 – among 2,200 drone casualties.⁷⁰

6. Moving the goalposts: how the Obama Administration manipulates civilian casualty figures

From the range and inconsistency of the official statements that have been released, it may seem that the Obama Administration has simply made its statistics up on the fly. To some extent, perhaps this is true. But in other ways the Administration has indulged in patently unacceptable “presumptions” both when targeting people with Hellfire missiles, and when pretending that almost everyone who died was an EKIA (“Enemy Killed in Action”).

i. Every Military-Aged Male is an ‘Enemy Combatant’

In May 2012, when a senior Administration official anonymously briefed the *New York Times* with the “single digits” story,⁷¹ the *Times* also made a startling revelation: It explained that the Administration had re-defined “civilian” to *exclude* all military-aged males in a strike zone. Basically, all males between the ages of 18 and 80 were now considered “militants” unless there was “explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.”⁷² After leaving his post and returning home, US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, said: “My feeling is one man’s combatant is another man’s—well, a chump who went to a meeting.”⁷³

It therefore was not surprising that Brennan was claiming civilian deaths were “exceedingly rare”⁷⁴ and President Obama was claiming that the drone programme had “not caused a huge number of civilian casualties.”⁷⁵ In effect, the Administration had made it all but impossible for any males to be counted as civilians.

A whistleblower told the *New York Times* that it was “guilt by association” that has led to “deceptive” estimates of civilian casualties.⁷⁶ The official said: “It bothers me when they say there were seven guys, so they must all be militants. They count the corpses and they’re not really sure who they are.”

⁷⁰ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-drones-idUSBRE99H16Z20131018>

⁷¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=0

⁷² http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=0

⁷³ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/11/20/a-former-ambassador-to-pakistan-speaks-out.html>

⁷⁴ *Drone strikes kill, maim and traumatize too many civilians, U.S. study says*, CNN (26 September 2012), available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/25/world/asia/pakistan-us-drone-strikes>

⁷⁵ *President Obama Hangs Out with America*, (30 January 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/01/30/president-obama-hangs-out-america>

⁷⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=5&ref=todayspaper&pagewanted=all

ii. Every Victim is an “Enemy Killed In Action” unless he or she can Establish Post-Mortem Innocence

The subterfuge did not end with military aged males, referred to as MAMs by the US. Instead, an intelligence source who leaked documents to *The Intercept* in October 2015 suggested that even women and children might be included as EKIA (a euphemism that stands for “Enemy Killed In Action”) unless conclusively proven subsequently to be innocent:

“In the complex world of remote killing in remote locations, labelling the dead as ‘enemies’ until proven otherwise is commonplace, said an intelligence community source with experience working on high-value targeting missions in Afghanistan...

“If there is no evidence that proves a person killed in a strike was either not a MAM, or was a MAM but not an unlawful enemy combatant, then there is no question,” [the intelligence source] said. “They label them EKIA.”

... [T]he source conceded there could be scenarios in which women and children killed in an airstrike are labelled as EKIA...⁷⁷

Whether it is described as Orwellian or Kafkaesque, the profound absurdity of this rule is obvious: the person killed is dead. He or she is from a desperately poor, frequently remote, area. The family has no way to prove innocence, much less “conclusive” innocence, and it is not clear what their motive would be to do so, since the US has steadfastly refused to pay compensation to anyone killed outside areas of active hostilities.

iii. There is anything but “near-certainty” that the person killed is an enemy when you concededly don’t know who it is you’re killing

On April 30, 2012, Brennan in a major counterterrorism speech insisted: “We only authorize a particular operation against a specific individual if we have a high degree of confidence that the individual being targeted is indeed the terrorist we are pursuing.”⁷⁸

Yet, a month later, in May 2012, senior Administration officials anonymously briefing the *The New York Times* directly contradicted Brennan’s claim, stating the intelligence upon which strikes were being conducted no longer required the CIA even to know the name of who was being targeted. Instead, Obama had approved “signature” strikes or strikes based upon patterns of “suspicious” behaviour. The

⁷⁷ <https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/manhunting-in-the-hindu-kush/>

⁷⁸ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-efficacy-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy>

standards for such strikes were so lax, that the State Department complained directly to the White House. One senior official reported: “The joke was that when the C.I.A. sees ‘three guys doing jumping jacks,’ the agency think it is a terrorist training camp.”⁷⁹

In May 2013 President Obama once again stressed that the programme was precise and targeted, stating during a speech at the National Defence University: “[B]efore any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured -- the highest standard we can set.”⁸⁰ He subsequently set out the “near-certainty” test in a White House factsheet titled, “*U.S. Policy Standards and Procedures for the Use of Force in Counterterrorism Operations Outside the U.S. and Areas of Active Hostilities*.”⁸¹

Before the ink had even dried on the paper, however, people pointed out how disingenuous such a “policy” was, so long as the US was still carrying out one of its most controversial practices – that of “signature strikes”, the same “signature strikes” the State Department complained to the White House were “too lax”. General Michael Hayden, former CIA Director, explained just how lax those standards were when he declared to an audience at John Hopkins University: “We kill people based upon metadata.”⁸² As one drone whistle-blower explained: “People get hung up that there’s a targeted list of people. It’s really like we’re targeting a cell phone. We’re not going after people – we’re going after their phones, in the hopes that the person on the other end of that missile is the bad guy.”⁸³

In 2011, former CIA officials told the *Washington Post* how infrequently they recognized the names of those killed.⁸⁴ Later that year, a former senior U.S. intelligence official who was urging the CIA to reconsider the programme told the *Los Angeles Times* that the CIA at times “struggled” to come up with names to fill their Kill List.⁸⁵

It hasn’t just been anonymous officials. Cameron Munter, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, “complained bitterly to Washington that the programme was out of control” in 2011.⁸⁶ In 2012 an official was asked how easy targeted killings by drones had become. In response, he flicked his hand back over and over, stating: “It’s really is like swatting flies. We can do it forever easily and you feel nothing. But how often do you really think about killing a fly?”⁸⁷ Former CIA analyst and Obama counterterrorism

⁷⁹ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?_r=0

⁸⁰ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>

⁸¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/fact-sheet-us-policy-standards-and-procedures-use-force-counterterrorism>

⁸² <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/05/10/we-kill-people-based-metadata/>

⁸³ <https://theintercept.com/2014/02/10/the-nsas-secret-role/>

⁸⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/increased-us-drone-strikes-in-pakistan-killing-few-high-ranking-militants/2011/02/20/ABdO3YQ_story.html

⁸⁵ <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/23/world/la-fg-pakistan-cia-drone-20111224/2>

⁸⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/secretcy-defines-obamas-drone-war/2011/10/28/gIQAPKNR5O_story.html

⁸⁷ <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2012/10/24/institutionalizing-americas-targeted-killing-program/>

adviser Bruce Riedel equated the strikes to “mowing the lawn”: “The minute you stop mowing, the grass is going to grow back.”⁸⁸

Nowhere was the complete lack of certainty this created more evident than in the CIA’s own internal records. Leaked to McClatchy News in April 2013, the records showed that “drone operators weren’t always certain who they were killing despite the administration’s guarantees . . . that civilian casualties have been ‘exceedingly rare.’”⁸⁹ The CIA was killing people “who were only suspected, associated with, or who probably belonged to militant groups”, as well as many they couldn’t even associate with a specific group. In the CIA’s own internal assessments, these individuals were labelled simply as “foreign fighters” or “other militants”.⁹⁰

In other words, the principle of “near certainty” was, and remains, a myth. The fact that it was a rule honoured in the breach is another reason why the Administration’s casualty figures were a fantasy, and the pledge of transparency was illusory.

iv. Even when the US thinks it knows who it is killing, it turns out it doesn’t

In November 2013 Reprieve examined the accuracy of the so-called “Kill List”, reportedly comprised of high value targets the US is actively trying to assassinate.⁹¹ Examining publicly available information, we found that 41 of these men appear to have ‘died’ not just once, not just twice, but again and again. In fact, reports suggest that on average each was reported dead by Pakistani, Yemeni and US intelligence sources more than three times before the US actually succeeded in killing the person and in at least seven cases, they never succeeded at all.

In total, according to the best numbers available, attempts to kill these 41 men resulted in the deaths of 1,147 other people, including over 150 children. For example, in targeting Ayman al Zawahiri, the CIA killed 76 children and 29 adults in the course of two strikes. Yet, al Zawahiri is infamously still alive. In another case, it took the US six attempts to kill Qari Hussain, a commander not of al-Qaeda but rather the Tehrike-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a Pakistani group. In those six strikes, 128 other people were killed, including 13 children.

This isn’t surprising. A former senior U.S. military official familiar with drone operations told the *Washington Post* in April 2012 that the CIA “killed most of their ‘list people’ [in Pakistan] when they didn’t know they were there.”⁹² Former CIA officer Bruce Riedel, who was a close advisor to Obama on his Pakistan strategy, said “You can only see so much from 20,000 feet” and as a result, “you can’t be

⁸⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/plan-for-hunting-terrorists-signals-us-intends-to-keep-adding-names-to-kill-lists/2012/10/23/4789b2ae-18b3-11e2-a55c-39408f6e6a4b_print.html

⁸⁹ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html#storylink=cpy>

⁹⁰ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html>

⁹¹ http://www.reprieve.org/uploads/2/6/3/3/26338131/2014_11_24_pub_you_never_die_twice_-_multiple_kills_in_the_us_drone_program.pdf

⁹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-seeks-new-authority-to-expand-yemen-drone-campaign/2012/04/18/gIQAsaumRT_story.html

100% about the hard target you're trying to kill." Reidel noted that Al Qaeda leaders believed killed in drone attacks have later turned up alive.⁹³

Leaked CIA documents confirm just how unsure the CIA is about who it has killed.⁹⁴ Badruddin Haqqani – the purported second in command of the Haqqani Network in Pakistan – was targeted no fewer than three times at a cost of 53 other lives, including 9 children. During the second US strike on Badruddin on February 18, 2010, the US hit a car leaving a funeral that Badruddin reportedly was scheduled to attend. The individual in the car was someone the CIA had picked out of the crowd, based purely upon the number of people who greeted him, the fact that people appeared to be show him deference, and his overseeing of a private viewing of the body. For the CIA, this identification met “the highest standards possible” and so they took the shot, only to find out later that it wasn't Badruddin at all. It was his 20 year old brother, a student who friends say wasn't involved in terrorism. The strike also killed at least one and possibly five other individuals, all of whom remain unknown. Despite the mistake, the CIA's records show they recorded Mohammad not as a civilian, but rather as an “active” member of the Haqqani network.⁹⁵ At least one of the five others potentially killed was also included, but his identity not listed.

Ali al-Qawli, a 34 year old primary school teacher in Yemen similarly lost his life, to a “near-certainty” standard that existed only in name. In January 2013 Ali and his 20 year old cousin, Salim, agreed to give two men a ride. Salim was a university student who worked part-time as a taxi driver to help support his family. Unbeknownst to either Ali or Salim, one of the two men who paid for a ride that day was Rabae Lahib, an alleged bodyguard to a senior member of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Lahib had been targeted on at least one previous occasion (7 November 2012) before the strike that day which killed him. The Yemeni Ministry of Interior subsequently cleared Ali and Salim of any wrongdoing or connection to Lahib, but to this day the U.S. has refused to do the same. Mohammad al Qawli, Ali's brother, has no idea whether Ali will be included among President Obama's numbers. What he does know is that the “near-certainty” test is nothing more than a fiction. If it were true, Ali would still be alive today.

7. To date, the Obama Administration has worked against greater transparency for the drone program.

Since finally acknowledging the drone programme existed in 2012, President Obama has repeatedly promised publicly to shed more light on the programme. Yet, instead of light, we've had secret executive orders, along with repeated denials in court that the

“This is the most transparent administration in history.”

– President Obama, Google Plus “Fireside” Hangout in January 2012.

⁹³ <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/22/world/la-fg-drone-strikes-20110222>

⁹⁴ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html>

⁹⁵ <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24747826.html>

programme existed despite public proclamations. Quite simply, we have had the most opaque “transparency” imaginable.

i. A Secret Executive Order exempts the two countries that account for 95% of all strikes from the May 2013 standards

Despite the President’s claims, “signature strikes” did not end with the introduction of the “near-certainty” and “imminence” tests in May 2013.⁹⁶ Quite the contrary. The *Wall Street Journal* in late April 2015 reported that President Obama had secretly approved a classified addendum exempting Pakistan from the new standard. This exemption allowed for “signature strikes” to continue, in effect nullifying even the pretence of the “near certainty” requirement. The idea that the most secretive player in the Drone wars (the CIA) should be governed by the least rigorous rules when killing people in a country where we are not at war is simply irrational.

We now know, then, that for two years the Administration repeatedly claimed publicly to have the strictest standards in place for drone strikes, yet the CIA was allowed to secretly operate under loosened standards in Pakistan – a country that accounts for almost three-quarters of all strikes.

The revelations, however, did not stop with Pakistan. The US claimed it had killed a senior al Qaeda leader in Yemen in September 2015. However, he had not been the target of the strike. In direct contradiction to the May 2013 directive, it had been a “signature strike”. While the man had been targeted at least two previous times, the intelligence had been wrong - they did kill 38 unknown people, including one child, but not their target.⁹⁷ They finally killed him by chance, when targeting more unknown people who seemed to fit the profile of enemies.

When the *Washington Post* broke the story of the Yemen strike, the Administration was still claiming the stricter rules outlined in May 2013 were in place. Either the Administration was lying or, as in Pakistan, President Obama had signed a classified addendum exempting Yemen as well. Either way, the end result was to render the “near-certainty” test yet another fantasy – together, Yemen and Pakistan account for almost 95% of all drone strikes outside areas of active hostilities.

ii. Repeated Promises, No Delivery

President Obama’s years in office have been littered with promises to shed light upon the extra judicial killings by drone strikes.⁹⁸ In an attempt to calm growing

⁹⁶ In his May 2013 speech, President Obama said: “America does not take strikes to punish individuals; we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people, and when there are no other governments capable of effectively addressing the threat. And before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured -- the highest standard we can set.” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>

⁹⁷ http://www.reprive.org/uploads/2/6/3/3/26338131/2014_11_24_pub_you_never_die_twice_-_multiple_kills_in_the_us_drone_program.pdf

⁹⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/9871954/Barack-Obama-promises-more-transparency-on-drones.html> see also <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/12/state-of-the->

international concern around the Administration's drone policies,⁹⁹ Obama vowed reinforced transparency with regard to counter-terrorism operations in general, and drones in particular.¹⁰⁰ In 2013, he promised clear guidelines, oversight and accountability" for covert drone strikes.¹⁰¹

But reality has been very different from the promises. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been fighting a legal battle against the CIA for the five years now – trying to obtain summary data, which would include the identity of targets, the number of deaths, as well as dates and other relevant information relating to drone strikes. The administration has done everything in its power to avoid having to disclose any information relating to its drones programme. In February 2015, the CIA argued that drone strikes were an "intelligence activity"¹⁰² so as to withhold the drone strike figures under the cover of national security.

It is thus hard to take seriously the claim that the Administration "wants to make available to the public as much information as possible about U.S. counterterrorism operations and the use of force overseas."¹⁰³ When the media and NGOs seek to fill the information black hole, Administration officials suggest that they are merely repeating the propaganda of the enemy.

[union-drones_n_2626160.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html?_r=0) and http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/transcript-of-obamas-speech-on-drone-policy.html?_r=0

⁹⁹ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/01/06/a-changing-drone-campaign-us-covert-actions-in-2013/>

¹⁰⁰ <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2013/06/04/enhancing-the-obama-administrations-drone-strikes-transparency/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2013/05/23/obama-frames-covert-drone-war-as-necessary-evil/>

¹⁰² <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/17/drone-strike-intelligence-aclu-cia-killings>

¹⁰³ <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/258733-obama-aims-to-lift-veil-on-drone-strikes>

8. Conclusion

For seven years now, President Obama has been telling the world to trust him. Time and again, though, he and his Administration have shown why they have earned no trust. Rather than reflect “the most transparent government in history”, the Administration has obscured the truth of the covert drone programme – the deaths of hundreds of innocent men, women and children, creating a more dangerous world.

Much like President George W. Bush’s resort to torture, President Obama first denied this programme existed and now insists that his assassination programme works. But, like his predecessor, he has not been willing to back up that claim with information and evidence – perhaps because the facts will reveal that the programme betrays the very values of which America is most proud.

President Obama must immediately constitute an independent commission to examine all of the evidence – not just the numbers, but the definitions of who counts as a civilian, the rules of engagement for taking such strikes, and the procedures for investigating mistakes afterwards. The results of that investigation must then be made public, along with the long requested legal rationale for such a programme.

Only then can we begin to come to grips with our post-9/11 history - one that began with torture and rendition to a system of detention without trial, and has now bled into a global assassination programme. Only then can we begin the long overdue debate about whether this is an ethical, legal and effective way to counter extremism, or whether it simply exacerbates the problems that we face.