



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on October 27, 2013

Drone Operators Feeling the Effects of Carrying Out Kill Orders

President Obama reportedly sits in the Oval Office on Tuesdays and adds and subtracts names from his infamous [“kill list.”](#) In consultation with his national security advisers, the president takes names of suspected terrorists and transfers them from flash cards to orders for summary execution.

Of course, the president doesn't have to kill these people himself, and he doesn't have to watch them or anyone else be incinerated in the blast zone of a Hellfire missile. Someone does, however, and some of those charged with piloting the drones and firing the missiles are beginning to suffer psychologically from the awful assignment.



Consider the following harrowing and heartbreaking story of one of these drone operators, [as reported by CNN](#):

Years of aiming missiles at people on the other side of the world left Brandon Bryant a broken man.

In an interview with the magazine *GQ*, Bryant recounts some of the grisly scenes he watched unfold on his monitor as an Air Force drone operator.

In grimly vivid detail, he talks about the first time he killed somebody, in early 2007.

He was sitting in a control station on an Air Force base in Nevada. His three victims were walking on a dirt road in Afghanistan.

After the Hellfire missile fired from the drone struck the three men, Bryant watched the aftermath on his infra-red display.

“The smoke clears, and there's pieces of the two guys around the crater. And there's this guy over here, and he's missing his right leg above his knee,” he says in the article in the November issue of *GQ*.

“He's holding it, and he's rolling around, and the blood is squirting out of his leg, and it's hitting the ground, and it's hot. His blood is hot,” Bryant says. “But when it hits the ground, it starts to cool off; the pool cools fast. It took him a long time to die. I just watched him. I watched him become the same color as the ground he was lying on.”

Bryant is a member of the video-game generation where military combat missions are make-believe, but increasingly vivid and realistic. Perhaps familiarity with this atmosphere inures one for a time from feeling the effect of conducting such deadly operations in the real world. For many, though, the experience eventually chisels through the wall of insensitivity.

What of the images described by Bryant? Is there other evidence of such brutal and blood-curdling



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drone strikes? Yes.

Beyond the headlines, one of the most disturbing and damning accounts of the effect of the Obama administration's drone war on the civilian population of Pakistan — the most frequent target of the attacks — deserves greater publicity.

A report entitled "[Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians From US Drone Practices in Pakistan](#)" was co-authored by the law schools of Stanford and New York Universities. It contains on-the-ground accounts of the myriad ways that President Obama's drone-delivered program of assassination is devastating the lives of ordinary Pakistanis who have no connection to terror other than the fact that they are being constantly terrorized by the U.S. government.

Glen Greenwald, formerly of *The Guardian* (U.K.), artfully describes the situation on the ground in Pakistan:

The people in the areas targeted by Obama's drone campaign are being systematically terrorized. There's just no other word for it. It is a campaign of terror — highly effective terror — regardless of what noble progressive sentiments one wishes to believe reside in the heart of the leader ordering it. And that's precisely why the report, to its great credit, uses that term to describe the Obama policy: the drone campaign "terrorizes men, women, and children."

Twenty-seven pages of the 182-page document are devoted to enumerating the various ways the use of drones in the White House and CIA's targeted killing programs are rattling the already war-ravaged psyches of the civilian population of Pakistan.

For example, in the subsection entitled "Mental Health Impacts of Drone Strikes and the Presence of Drones," the authors relate the story of two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter David Rohde who was kidnapped in November 2008 and held for seven months by the Taliban while covering Afghanistan and Pakistan for the *New York Times* in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northwest Pakistan. Rohde's story as quoted in the drone report: "The drones were terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death."

Describing the experience of living under drones as "hell on earth," Rohde explained that even in the areas where strikes were less frequent, the people living there still feared for their lives.

One of the most horrifying tactics reportedly used by the United States in the prosecution of the death-by-drone program is the so-called "double tap." This is the type of strike described by Bryant in his many reports of his experiences.

The Stanford/NYU report brought this to light and an article in the *Daily Mail* (U.K.) accurately summarized the practice: "A drone fires one missile — and then a second as rescuers try to drag victims from the rubble. One aid agency said they had a six-hour delay before going to the scene." According to the story this insupportable and inhumane tactic is resulting in the death of "49 people for every one known terrorist in Pakistan."

Often, the story is reported, surviving relatives of those killed by the drone assaults are denied the opportunity to bury their dead and perform the ancient rites associated with placing a body in its final resting place. One man severely injured in a drone attack reports that "people are reluctant to go to the funerals of people who have been killed in drone strikes because they are afraid of being targeted."

Page 92 of the document recounts interviews of several Pakistanis who were intentionally targeted by



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the Hellfire missiles fired at funerals. The grief experienced and related by these men is evident, heart-wrenching, and demoralizing.

One man who lost several relatives in a drone strike tells how the dead from that strike were buried: “They held a funeral for everybody, in the same location, one by one. Their bodies were scattered into tiny pieces. They ... couldn’t be identified,” said Massod Afwan.

Is this the sort of behavior that qualifies the area and the attendants to be lit up by a “signature strike” — a strike based not on suspicion of guilt, but of a “pattern of behavior”?

To put it another way, if your uncle, a notorious and despicable mobster, was laid to rest and you attend his funeral, would it be lawful for the FBI to shoot you (and any other members of your family at the gravesite) on the spot for displaying behavior indicative of affiliation with the Mafia or associated forces?

Sadly — and ironically — men and women such as Brandon Bryant are being treated by the president as little more than drones themselves. They are expected to carry out the president’s fatal commands without concern for the fact that eventually they will come to see and do things that their inherent sense of right and wrong will flag as unacceptable.

Photo of drone pilots: AP Images

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