



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 24, 2013

Heckler Spars With Obama Over Drones, Guantanamo

President Obama had some [competition](#) Thursday when he addressed an audience at the National Defense University in Washington on the administration's approach to fighting terrorism. He was interrupted a number of times by a heckler in the back of the room, and he paused at various points in his speech to respond to her.



As Obama spoke about the detention center for captured terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the woman shouted a comment about prisoners on a hunger strike over years of imprisonment without trial at the U.S. Naval base and demanded to know what the president is going to do about it.

"Excuse me, President Obama, you are the commander in chief," she yelled.

"Why don't you sit down, and I'll tell you exactly what I'm going to do," Obama said.

The heckler sounded even more determined to get answers when Obama was discussing administration policy regarding drone strikes that have sparked protests here and in Pakistan and other Middle East countries, where the targeting of suspected terrorists has resulted in the killing of innocent non-combatants. At one point, the president said an attack by one of the unmanned bombers is authorized only when there is "near certainty" that no civilians would be killed or injured.

That appears to contradict the admission in a letter to congressional leaders from Attorney General Eric Holder Wednesday that four U.S. citizens have been killed in drone attacks, only one of whom was a target. The targeted citizen was militant Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who Holder said had been actively involved in plotting terrorist attacks against the United States. Awlaki was killed by a drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011. The three other American citizens killed, including Awlaki's son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, were not targets, Holder said. The younger Awlaki, age 16, was killed in a drone strike, also in Yemen, two weeks after his father's death.

"How about Abdulrahman al-Awlaki?" the heckler shouted. "Why was he killed?"

The woman, Medea Benjamin (shown being removed from auditorium), was removed from the event. She later said it was military police officers, along with FBI and Secret Service officials who shoved her out of the room and questioned her. Benjamin, co-founder of the antiwar group Code Pink, was described by the *New York Times* as a familiar face on Capitol Hill, "where she has repeatedly interrupted proceedings." A statement later issued by National Defense University officials said Benjamin "was given access via the list of media attendees expected." She told the *Times* she had been invited to the event by someone at the university who agrees with her objections to the military policies she was protesting.

"People around the world are tired of nice words from President Obama, and they want some concrete



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action,” Benjamin stated. “Some say it’s rude to interrupt the president, but it’s rude to kill innocent people with drones.”

Security around the president and the venues where he speaks is usually tight and thorough enough to prevent protesters from being seen or heard at a presidential event. On the rare occasion when a speech is interrupted, the usual practice is to try to ignore the heckler until he or she is removed. On this occasion, Obama replied more than once to Benjamin’s interruptions.

“Now, this is part of free speech, is you being able to speak, but also you listening and me being able to speak,” Obama said at one point. “All right? Thank you.” The president even offered a brief tribute to Benjamin as she was being forced out of the room, while shouting: “I love my country and I love the rule of law!”

“The voice of that woman is worth paying attention to,” Obama said. “Obviously I do not agree with much of what she said, and obviously she wasn’t listening to me in much of what I said. But these are tough issues, and the suggestion that we can gloss over them is wrong.”

In an interview with [Huffington Post](#), Benjamin was asked if she was going to keep trying to confront the president with her questions and protests if she thought she would be able to get into other similar events.

“Yes, I’m going to keep trying and I’ll probably get in,” she replied.

Photo of Medea Benjamin being removed from auditorium: AP Images



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