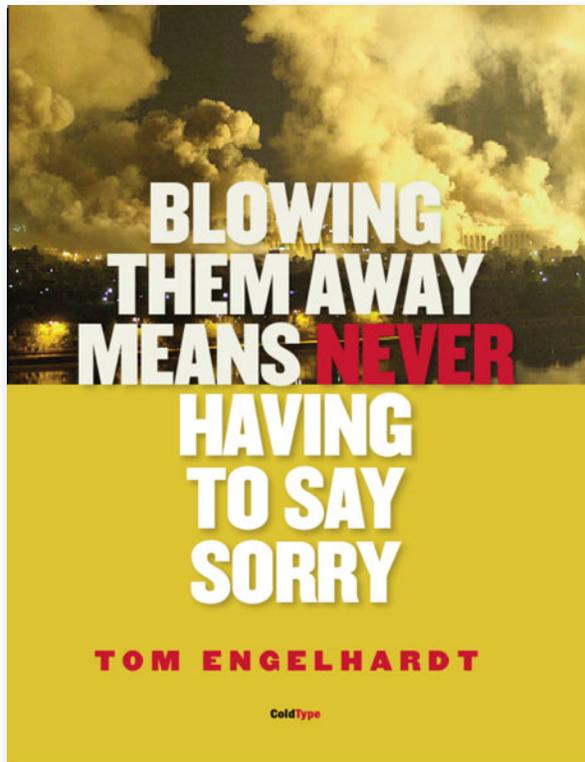




**BLOWING
THEM AWAY
MEANS NEVER**

**HAVING
TO SAY
SORRY**

TOM ENGELHARDT



Tom Engelhardt, who runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com, is the co-founder of the American Empire Project. His book, *The End of Victory Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press), has been thoroughly updated in a newly issued edition that deals with victory culture's crash-and-burn sequel in Iraq.

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MAGINE, for a moment, that you live in a small town somewhere near the Southern California coast. You're going about your daily life, trying to scrape by in hard times, when the missile hits. It might have come from the Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) — its pilot at a base on the outskirts of Tehran — that has had the village in its sights for the last six hours or from the Russian sub stationed just off the coast. In either case, it's devastating.

In Moscow and Tehran, officials announce that, in a joint action, they have launched the missile as part of a carefully coordinated "surgical" operation to take out a "known terrorist," a long-term danger to their national security. A Kremlin spokesman offers the following statement:

"As we have repeatedly said, we will continue to pursue terrorist activities and their operations wherever we may find them. We share common goals with respect to fighting terrorism. We will continue to seek out, identify, capture and, if necessary, kill terrorists where they plan their activities, carry out their operations or seek safe harbor."

A family in a ramshackle house just down the street from you — he's a carpenter; she works at the local Dairy Queen — are killed along with their pets. Their son is seriously wounded, their home blown to smithereens. Neighbors passing by as the missile hits are also wounded.

As it happens, there are no terrorists in the vicinity. Outraged, you organize your neighbors and march angrily in protest through the town, shouting anti-Russian, anti-Iranian slogans. But, of course, there is nothing you can really do. Iran and Russia are far away, their weaponry powerful, your arms nonexistent. The state of California is incapable of protecting you. This is, in fact, at least the fourth time in recent months that a "terrorist" has been declared "taken out" from the air or by a ship-based cruise missile, when only innocent Californians have died.

As news of the "collateral damage" from the botched operation dribbles out, the Russian and Iranian media pay next to no attention. There are no outraged editorials. Official spokesmen see no need to comment further. No one is held responsible and no promises are made in either Tehran or Moscow that similar assassination strikes won't be launched in the near future, based on "actionable intelligence," possibly even on the same town. In fact, the next

day, seeing UAVs once again soaring overhead, you load your pick-up and prepare to flee.

SWATTING FLIES IN SOMALIA

Philip K. Dick meet George W. Bush. When it comes to such a thing happening in the United States, we are, of course, at the wildest frontiers of science fiction. The U.S. is a sovereign nation. We guard our air space and coastal waters jealously. Any country violating them for purposes of aggressive action, no less by launching a missile against an American town, would be committing an act of war and would certainly be treated accordingly.

If, somehow, such an event did occur, it would be denounced in Washington and on editorial pages across the country as a shocking contravention of international legal conventions and a crime of war... unless, of course, we did it in a country where sovereignty has been declared meaningless.

In fact, an almost exact replica of the above fictional incident — at least the fourth of its kind in recent months — did indeed take place at the beginning of March in the embattled failed state of Somalia. (For that country's most recent abysmal collapse, the Bush administration, via an invasion by Ethiopian proxy forces, can take significant credit.) One or two houses in Dobley, a Somali town, were hit, possibly by two submarine-launched Tomahawk Cruise missiles in what a U.S. official termed "a deliberate strike against a suspected bed-down of known terrorists."

The missiles were evidently meant for Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an al-Qaeda suspect in the bloody bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. He was, however, not in Dobley, despite the "actionable intelligence" on hand. Accounts of the dead and wounded in the town vary. One report claimed only wounded Somalis (and two dead cows); most spoke of anywhere from four to ten dead civilians. Local district Commissioner Ali Nur Ali Dherre told CNN that three women and three children had been killed and another 20 people wounded; while a "U.S. military official said the United States is still collecting post-strike information and is not yet able to confirm any casualties. He described [the] strike as 'very deliberate' and said forces tried to use caution to avoid hitting civilians."

For the dead Somalis, not surprisingly, we have no names. In stories like this, the dead are regularly nobodies and, though the townspeople of Dobley did indeed march angrily in protest yelling anti-American slogans, just about no one noticed.

In our world, only the normal smattering of small news reports dealt with this modest sidebar in the President's Global War on Terror (GWOT). On the GWOT scorecard — if you remember, for a long time George Bush kept "his own personal scorecard" of top terror suspects in a desk drawer in the Oval Office, crossing off al-Qaeda figures as U.S. forces took them

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down — this operation hardly registered. One terrorist missed, and not for the first time, possibly a few dead peasants in some god-forsaken land. Please, move on...

In a recent Pentagon briefing for reporters featuring Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Michael Mullen, who had just returned from a trip to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, 4,500 words of back-and-forth were interrupted by this question from a reporter:

"Secretary Gates, the strike on Somalia two days ago — did the missiles that were fired — did they strike their target? And was the target Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan? Do you have a report back from the field? And Admiral Mullen, what message did you give to President Musharraf, and why did you meet with him?"

Gates responded to the Somali part of the question in eight words: "You know we don't talk about military operations." He might have added: ...unless they're successful.

That was evidently all that the incident and its minor "collateral damage" deserved in such a global war. So Gates and Mullen moved on immediately. So many matters more important than a single "decapitation" strike that didn't succeed to consider.

THE DECAPITATION STRIKE AS GLOBAL POLICY

Minor as that Somali mis-strike might seem, this is not, in fact, a small matter. Think of that strike and the many like it around the world over these last years as reflections of George Bush's post-9/11 update of globalization. After all, the most basic principle of his Global War on Terror has been the erasure of global boundaries and whatever international agreements about war-making might go with them.

Across the Islamic world, in particular, boundaries simply no longer matter. In fact, in such regions no aspect of sovereignty can now constrain a U.S. president from acting as he pleases in pursuit of whatever he may personally define as American interests.

"Assassinations by air" are, writes David Case in *Mother Jones* magazine, "a relatively new tactic in warfare." By the beginning of 2006, however, U.S. Predator drones "bearing Hellfire missiles — the preferred weapon in decapitation [strikes] — had already hit 'terrorist suspects overseas' at least 19 times since 9/11." Such strikes and other similar operations by air, land, and sea have been a crucial follow-on to the Bush administration's proclamations, immediately after 9/11, that there would be no "safe havens" for terrorists on the planet, nor safety for those countries which housed them, inadvertently or otherwise. Within days of the destruction of the World Trade Center towers, Bush administration officials were already identifying up to 60 countries-cum-targets.

This aspect of the Bush Doctrine, of what the President likes to call staying "on the offen-

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sive," when mixed with a couple of decades of "advances" in air warfare, including the development of sophisticated, missile-armed drones, "smart bombs," "precision-guided munitions," and the like, has resulted in a lethal globalizing brew of assassination and destruction. It recognizes neither boundaries, nor sovereignty across much of the planet. With all its "actionable" possibilities, it will surely be with us long after George W. Bush has left office.

Of course, those few nameless dead or wounded Somali civilians — swatted like so many flies and forgotten as quickly as flies would be — don't faintly match up against the "dozens" of Iraqi civilian deaths that, according to Human Rights Watch, were caused by 50 decapitation strikes launched against the top officials of Saddam Hussein's regime back in March 2003. (Not a single official was harmed.) Nor do they quite make it into the company of the "Afghan elders" being taken to President Hamid Karzai's inauguration back in 2001, who were mistaken "for a Taliban group" and bombed, with 20 killed; nor the 30 or more guests at an Afghan wedding party back in 2002 blown away by 2,000-pound bombs after celebratory gunfire was evidently mistaken for an attack (no apologies offered); nor that wedding party in the Western desert of Iraq near the Syrian border wiped out in 2004 with 42 deaths, including 27 in one extended family, 14 children in all. They were, of course, taken for terrorists. (As U.S. Major General James Mathis put the matter in offering an explanation: "How many people go to the middle of the desert... to hold a wedding 80 miles from the nearest civilization?") And these are just a few prominent cases, not including the civilians killed in periodic Predator and other strikes in Pakistani border areas, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere about whom no fuss is ever made — not here, anyway.

After all, there's always going to be "collateral damage" when you keep your eye — and your 2,000-pound bomb or Hellfire missile — focused on the prize.

THE "RIGHT" TO KILL CIVILIANS

Remember back in the 1990s, when the glories of an economically borderless world were being limned? Just after September 11, 2001, the Bush administration proudly declared us to be in a far darker world without borders (except, of course, when it came to our own). In this new world, whether we knew it or not, whether we cared or not, we granted our highest officials — specifically our military and intelligence services — the full powers of prosecutor, defense counsel, judge, jury, and executioner, as well as the right to report on such events only to the extent, and as, they wished. This was the sort of power that monotheistic religions normally granted to an all-powerful god, that kingdoms generally left to absolute rulers, and that dictators have always tried to take for themselves (though just, of course, in the domains under their control).

Our domain, it seems, is now much of the globe, when it comes to the bloody work of

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assassinating individuals via bombs or missiles that, however precise, surgical, and smart, are weapons meant to kill en masse and largely without discrimination.

There are still limits of sorts on such actions. These put bluntly — though no one is likely to say this — are the limits imposed, in part, by racism, by gradations, however unspoken, in the global value given to a human life.

The Bush administration has, so far, only been willing to carry out "decapitation" strikes in countries where human life is, by implication, of less or little value. It has yet to carry one out in London or Hamburg or Tokyo or Moscow or the Chinese countryside, even though "terrorist suspects" abound everywhere, even (as with the anthrax attacks of 2001) in our own country. On the other hand, given the impetus of this kind of globalization, who knows when such a strike might come. After all, the CIA has already carried out clearly illegal, sovereignty-violating "extraordinary rendition" operations (kidnappings of terror suspects) on the streets of European cities.

In this country, we still theoretically venerate the sovereign self ("the individual") and that self's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Despite George Bush's "Freedom Agenda," however, the sovereignty, not to say the life, liberty, and happiness of other peoples, individually or collectively, have not really been much on our minds these last years. Our freedom of action, our safety, has been the only freedom, the only "security," to which we have attached much global value. And don't for a second think that, when the "actionable intelligence" comes in to John McCain's, Hillary Clinton's, or Barack Obama's Oval Office, those Predators won't be soaring or those cruise missiles leaving subs lurking off some coast — and that innocent civilians elsewhere won't continue to die.

In places like Somalia, we deliver death, and every now and then an American bomb or missile actually obliterates a terrorist suspect. Then we celebrate. The rest of time, it's hardly even news. When the deeper principle behind such global strikes is mentioned in our papers, in some passing paragraph, it's done — as in a recent Washington Post article about a Predator strike, piloted from Nevada, that killed a suspected "senior al-Qaeda commander" in Pakistan — in this polite way: "Independent actions by U.S. military forces on another country's sovereign territory are always controversial..." (Imagine the language that the Washington Post would use, if that had been a Pakistani drone strike in Utah.)

This version of globalization is already so much the norm of our world that few here even blink an eye when it's reported, or consider it even slightly strange. It's already an American right. In the meantime, other people, who obviously don't rise to the level of our humanity, regularly die.

And here's the thing: In our world, there is a chasm that can never be breached between, say, a Sunni extremist clothed in a suicide vest who walks into a market in Baghdad with the

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barbaric intent of killing as many Shiite civilians as possible, and an air or missile attack, done in the name of American "security" and aimed at a "known terrorist," that just happens to — repeatedly — kill innocent civilians. And yet, what if you know before you launch your attack, as American planners certainly must, that the odds are innocents (and probably no one else) will die?

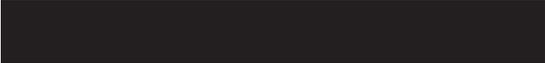
Not so long ago in the United States, presidentially sanctioned assassinations abroad were illegal. But that was then, this is so now. Nonetheless, it's a fact that the "right" to missile, bomb, shell, "decapitate," or assassinate those we declare to be our enemies, without regard to borders or sovereignty, is based on nothing more than the power to do it. This is simply the "right" of force (and of technology). If the tables were turned, any American would recognize such acts for the barbarism they represent.

And yet, late last week, like clockwork, the Associated Press brought us the latest notice: "In Afghanistan, a spokesman for the American-led coalition said troops had used 'precision-guided munitions' to strike a compound about a mile inside Pakistan..." This operation was, as they all are, said to be based on "reliable intelligence"; in this case, "senior" Taliban commanders were said to be in residence.

As it happened, according to the Pakistani military and the AP reporter who made it to Tangrai, a village of about forty houses, the residence hit was that of "Noor Khan, a grocer who said the house was his family home." The AP reporter added that "only one of its four walls was standing amid a tangle of mud bricks, bedding and cooking pots." And Noor Khan, who was quoted saying, "We are innocent, we have nothing to do with such things," claimed that six of his relatives, four women and two boys, had been killed. (The Pakistani military, on investigating, reported that two women and two children had died.)

This was but the latest minor decapitation strike, and — we can be sure of this — not the last. Philip K. Dick move over. We're already in your future.

Note: *Let me strongly recommend David Case's article, "The U.S. Military's Assassination Problem," in the March/April issue of Mother Jones magazine, quoted in the above piece. A well researched, thoughtful, and rare discussion of what we know about the Bush administration's global assassination campaign from the air, it is an accomplishment. I have relied on it in writing this essay.*



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