

Droning On: Assassins-in-Chief and Their Brood

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What a way to end a war! Apologies all around! We're so damn sorry – or actually, maybe not!

I'm thinking, of course, about CENTCOM commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.'s belated apology for the drone assassination of seven children as the last act, or perhaps final war crime, in this country's 20-year-long Afghan nightmare.

Where to begin (or end, for that matter) when considering that never-ending conflict, which seems – for Americans, anyway – finally to be over? After all these years, don't ask me.

Hey, one thing seems clear to me, though: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley undoubtedly didn't apologize for that last Hellfire missile attack – he, in fact, originally labeled it a “righteous strike” – or the endless civilian deaths caused by American air power, because he's had so many other things on his mind in these years. As a start, he was far too preoccupied calling his Beijing opposite, General Li Zuocheng, to warn him that the president of the United States, one Donald Trump, might have the urge to start a war with China before leaving office.

Actually, had Milley called me instead, I would have assured him that I believed The Donald then incapable of doing anything other than watching Fox News, going bonkers over the election, and possibly launching an attack (nuclear or otherwise) on Joe Biden and the Democrats, no less Congress – remember January 6th! – or even his own vice president, Mike Pence, for certifying the vote. Maybe, in fact, Milley should

have skipped the Chinese entirely and called Republican Representatives Liz Cheney and Anthony Gonzalez to warn them that, sooner or later, the president might go nuclear on them.

Of course, in our increasingly mad, mad world, who really knows anymore?

I do know one thing, however, mostly because I wrote it so long ago and it stuck in my mind (even if in no one else's): ever since the presidency of George W. Bush, who reportedly kept "his own personal scorecard" in a White House desk drawer of drone-killed or to-be-killed "terrorists," every American president has been an *assassin-in-chief*. No question about it, Joe Biden is, too. I don't know why the label never caught on. After all, assassination, once officially an illegal act for a president, is now, by definition, simply part of the job – and the end of the Afghan War will do nothing to stop that.

I first labeled our future presidents that way in 2012, after the *New York Times* reported that Barack Obama was attending "Terror Tuesday" meetings at the White House where names were regularly being added to a "kill list" of people to be droned off this planet. The first such Obama assassination, as Jo Becker and Scott Shane wrote at the time, would, prophetically enough, kill "not only its intended target, but also two neighboring families, and [leave] behind a trail of cluster bombs that subsequently killed more innocents." Sound faintly familiar so many years later when U.S. drones and other aircraft have reportedly knocked off at least 22,000 civilians across the Greater Middle East and Africa?

Killers on the Loose

OMG, apologies all around! There I go, in such an all-American fashion, droning on and on.

Still, it's hard to stop, since it's obvious that presidential drone assassinations will go on and on, too. Just think about the thrill of what, in the wake of Afghanistan, Joe Biden has

started to call “over-the-horizon capabilities” (of the very sort that killed those seven kids in Kabul). In fact, it seems possible that this country’s forever wars of the last two decades will now morph into forever drone wars. That, in turn, means that our 20-year war of terror (which we always claimed was a war *on* terror) will undoubtedly continue into the unknown future. After all, in the last two decades, Washington’s done a remarkable job of preparing the way for such strikes, at least if you’re talking about ensuring that extreme Islamist terror groups would spread ever more widely across ever larger parts of this increasingly shambolic planet.

Here’s the thing, though: if, in 2021, you want to talk about assassins-in-chief who never feel the urge to apologize while putting so many in peril, you don’t have to head over the horizon at all. Take my word for it. You need look no further than former president Donald Trump or, at a state level, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, among others, or simply most Republican politicians these days. Once you refocus on them, you’re no longer talking about drone-killing foreign terrorists (or foreign children), you’re talking about the former president (or governor or senator or congressional representative or state legislator) assassinating American citizens. When it comes to being that kind of assassin, by promoting unmasking, super-spreader events (including unmasked school attendance), and opposition to vaccine mandates, among other things, you’re speaking of the murder of innocents right here in the U.S. of A.

Do you even remember how President Trump, returning from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center after his own case of Covid-19 had been treated, stepped out onto a White House balcony to rip off his mask in front of every camera in town? With 690,000 Americans now dead from the pandemic (and possibly so many more), one thing is clear: the simplest of precautions would have radically cut those numbers.

And if you don't mind my droning on yet more about that crew of assassins (and you might throw in, among others, West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin who, in 2020, made \$491,949 from his stock holdings in the West Virginia coal brokerage firm he founded years ago), what about all the politicians who have promoted the heating of this planet to what could someday be the boiling point? After all, if you happen to be on the West Coast, where the fire season no longer seems to end and "heat domes" are a new reality, or in large parts of the country still experiencing a megadrought of the sort never seen before in U.S. history, you'd have to say that we're already living in the Pyrocene Age. And I'm not even referring to the recent U.N. report suggesting that, if things don't change quickly enough, the temperature of this planet might rise 2.7 degrees Celsius (4.86 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of this century. That would, of course, produce an all-too-literal hell on Earth (and mind you, such scientific predictions about climate change have often proven underestimates).

The U.S. left Afghanistan in a scene so chaotic that it captured media attention for days, but don't for a moment imagine that such a sense of chaos was left behind at Kabul airport. After all, it's clear enough that we now live in a world and a country in increasing disarray.

Of the two great imperial powers of the last century, the USSR and the U.S., one is long gone and the other in growing disrepair, not just abroad but at home as well. This country seems to be heading, however slowly, for the exit (even as its president continues to proclaim that "America is back!"). And don't count on a "rising China" to solve this planet's problems either. It is, after all, by far the greatest greenhouse gas emitter of our moment and guaranteed to suffer its own version of chaos in the years to come.

Downhill All the Way?

I mean, I'm 77 years old (and feeling older all the time) and

yet, in the worst sense possible, I'm living in a new world as a pandemic rages across America and climate change continues to show off its all-too-visibly grim wonders. Just go to the *New York Times* website any day of the week and look at its global map of Covid-19 "hotspots." What you'll find is that the country our leaders have long loved to hail as the most extraordinary, indispensable, and powerful on the planet is now eternally an extreme pandemic "hot spot." How extraordinary when you consider its wealth, its access to vaccines and masks, and its theoretical ability to organize itself! But give some credit where it's due. America's assassins have been remarkably hard at work not just in Afghanistan or Iraq or Somalia, but right here at home.

In those distant lands, we eternally used Hellfire missiles to kill women and children. But when you fight such wars forever and a day abroad, it turns out that their spirit comes home in a hellfire-ish sort of way. And indeed, those forever wars certainly did come home with Donald Trump, whose accession to the White House would have been unimaginable without them. The result: the U.S. is not only an eternal global hotspot for Covid-19 (more than 2,000 deaths a day recently), but increasingly a madhouse of assassins of every sort, including Republican politicians determined to take out the American democratic system as we knew it, voting law by voting law, state by Republican-controlled state. And that madness, while connected to Trump, QAnon, the anti-vaxxers, and the like, is also deeply connected to how this country decided to respond to the tragedy of 9/11 – by launching those wars that America's generals and the military-industrial complex fought so disastrously but oh-so-profitably all these years.

By now, this country is almost unimaginable without its drone assassins and the conflicts that have gone with them, especially the one that began it all in Afghanistan. In the wake of that war (though don't hold your breath for the next time an American drone takes after some terrorist there and

once again kills a bunch of innocents), the Biden administration has moved on to far more peaceful activities. I'm thinking, for instance, of the way it's guaranteed the Australians nuclear submarines and the U.S. military, with a mere 750 military bases around the planet, will, in return, get a couple of more such bases in that distant land.

Hey, the French were pissed (for all the wrong reasons) and even withdrew their ambassador from Washington, feeling that Joe Biden and crew had no right to screw up their own arms deals with Australia. The Chinese were disturbed for most of the right reasons (and undoubtedly a few wrong ones as well), as they thought about yet another set of undetectable nuclear subs in the waters off the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait.

So it goes, as officials in Washington seem incapable of not having war of one sort or another, hot or cold, on the brain. And keep in mind that I haven't even begun to describe our deathly new reality, not in a country where the Delta strain of Covid-19 has run wild, especially in states headed by gubernatorial assassins. Meanwhile, too much of the rest of the world remains an unvaccinated hothouse for potentially new strains of a pandemic that may be with us, if you don't mind such a mixed metaphor, until hell freezes over.

But you know all this! You've long sensed it. You're living it! Who isn't?

Still, since I'm at it, let me just quote myself (the very definition of droning on) from that article I wrote a decade ago on the president as assassin-in-chief:

"But – though it's increasingly heretical to say this – the perils facing Americans, including relatively modest dangers from terrorism, aren't the worst things on our planet. Electing an assassin-in-chief, no matter who you vote for, is worse. Pretending that the Church of St. Drone offers any

kind of reasonable or even practical solutions on this planet of ours, is worse yet. And even worse, once such a process begins, it's bound to be downhill all the way."

In 2012, the phrase "over the horizon" hadn't yet become presidential, but "downhill all the way" seems like a reasonable enough substitute. And how sad it is, since other, better futures are genuinely imaginable. Just mask up and give it some thought.

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