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POLICY ESSAY

TARGETED KILLINGS IN THE WAR ON TERROR

Morality, Efficacy, and Targeted Assassination as a Policy Tool

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There should be no debate that Jennifer Carson's article (2017, this issue) has deep policy significance. The decision to engage in warfare is maybe the most consequential that a U.S. president makes. Regardless of whether we as scholars believe that a "war on terror" is a good or a bad policy decision or even a good or a bad name to use for the broader effort is inconsequential. Like all wars, the essence is elimination of an enemy and eventual desistance of hostilities. The war on terror has taken many forms, but one of the most controversial is the policy of targeted assassinations. As Carson notes, knowing whether these actions lead to deterring future terrorist attacks or backlash that produces more attacks is critical to knowing whether we should continue or eliminate the policy.

Framing the Issue

Table 1 offers a breakdown of how to think about this policy from an efficacy and a moral standpoint. This, I hope, will simply make an untested assumption explicit. That is, there are two dimensions over which we could make the decision to use targeted killings as a society. First, we could decide to use targeted killings based on moral reasoning. Without taking a stand on efficacy necessarily, President Obama in remarks to the National Defense University suggested that these killings would be used in a utilitarian way (minimizing costs while maximizing benefits):

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

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killed or injured—the highest standard we can set. (Remarks by the President at the National Defense University, 2013: para. 36)

There are other moral principles the president or we as a society could take, a more Kantian (there are universalist values that we should uphold) or a Rawlsian (does this action seem just when deliberating behind a “veil of ignorance?”). That is, if we were people affected by these strikes, would we view these as just? This essay is not meant to be a thorough or exhaustive list of moral reasoning. The purpose of this illustration is to suggest there are complicated moral (and legal) aspects to these choices. Although it is difficult to determine with certainty whether an action is moral or immoral, it is clear that an action that is immoral would be less preferred to an immoral one when all else is equal (top row vs. bottom row in Table 1).

The other relevant dimension in Table 1 is whether the act is effective or not effective (left or right column in Table 1). This, more so than the moral issue, should in principle be less uncertain. On October 16, 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense under President Bush, wrote a now-infamous memo where he asked essentially the same question that Carson’s (2017) article deals with:

Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us? (Rumsfeld, 2003: para. 7)

What Rumsfeld’s memo makes clear in plain language is the deterrence and backlash mechanisms explored in Carson’s (2017) article and other work cited there by her. What is useful to consider from the policy side is how the interaction of morality and efficacy would or should influence our policy choices. The cell that should be the most obvious is where an action is immoral and ineffective (lower left quadrant of Table 1). In this location, we might expect that a policy should be generally avoided as there is neither a case for how this is the best policy nor the most *just* policy. It assumes people are rational or at least update their preferences over time in response to new knowledge. One example might be corporal punishment in the United States. Since the 1980s, there has been a pretty long,

TABLE 1

Efficacy Versus Morality of Targeted Killings

| | | Efficacy | |
|----------|---------|------------------------|--------------------|
| | | Not Effective | Effective |
| Morality | Moral | Moral, Not effective | Moral, Effective |
| | Immoral | Immoral, Not effective | Immoral, Effective |

steady decline for support for spanking children.¹ This question may be in part a moral one, but the results of a mountain of research suggest it is ineffective (Gershoff, 2010) as a parenting strategy.

The space where a policy is just but ineffective is more complicated. Take school integration as an example. Although contentious, sometimes violently in its day, segregation today as a policy has few supporters. Given this change in the moral landscape, the efficacy of this policy has been mixed at best. As a recent report on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) 60 years later and events in Ferguson, MO, have shown, segregation of races still occurs at alarming rates across the United States.² For supporters of targeted assassinations, few claim that it is the just choice regardless of its efficacy.

Most of the debate turns on issues of efficacy. Defining efficacy then seems like a pedantic, academic task. Carson (2017) has made the choice to do so by examining both the frequency and the timing of future attacks. Given the multiple ways we might operationalize terrorism and efficacy (Abrahms, 2006; Thomas, 2014; Young, 2016), Carson offers reasonable alternatives. She uses suicide attacks, highly lethal total attacks, and total attacks. The choice of how to think about efficacy, however, is likely not driving the results. Moreover, this is nearly identical to how policy makers like Rumsfeld consider these targeted killings as more or less effective.³ In sum, then, our task is to try to provide policy makers a sense of whether we are in the effective or the ineffective column as a means for evaluating the policy.⁴

Evidence

Evaluating the evidence that leads to policy choices is always filled with some level of subjectivity. Carson (2017) comes down on the side of the evidence suggesting the effects are “negligible,” finding small partial support for deterrence arguments. The author is careful to place the results in conjunction with what has been done before and, like most scholarly researchers, suggests conflicting results. Although the editors of the journal implored me to

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1. Critics would argue that support was near universal in the United States and now is more mixed, which would be accurate. For our purposes, the point is that over time, people's views have changed as research over the efficacy of corporate punishment might change some people's views (brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2014/11/06/hitting-kids-american-parenting-and-physical-punishment/). Like in other areas, the United States tends to be an outlier when it comes to violence as in places like Europe, there are less reported incidences (nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/child-abuse-neglect-uk-today-research-report.pdf).
 2. civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/news/press-releases/2014-press-releases/ucla-report-finds-changing-u.s.-demographics-transform-school-segregation-landscape-60-years-after-brown-v-board-of-education
 3. I would assume, however, that Rumsfeld and colleagues did not really think about how to model this process formally like Carson (2017) does in this article.
 4. If we were moral philosophers, which I am not, then the task might be to identify if we are in the moral or immoral row. I do not draw the legal not legal distinction as that is not necessarily synonymous with morality; see segregation.

not call for more research, I will listen halfway. I am not sure we need more data or analysis as much as more theorizing. Let me explain. Rumsfeld offered a precise mechanism for how to evaluate efficacy. Targeted killings removed individuals from the world who would perpetrate future violence. That micro-decision can end that person using future violence, but how does it affect individuals connected to that person in the shorter and longer term? We have solid aggregate results to evaluate that question, but we do not have a sense of the microdynamics. One obvious reason is that doing a study that would allow us to make valid causal inference would require randomization and individual-level analysis. For moral and practical reasons, this is impossible. An alternative is to use simulation to examine these processes at the level at which they are operating. Bennett (2008) and Findley and Young (2007) offered two such modeling approaches that focus more on insurgency, but a similar approach could be used to examine and theorize about the exact mechanisms that are in operation during targeted assassinations. To get a better sense of the backlash mechanism, we also need to ask backlash *by whom?* Folks that commit violence? Are supportive of it? Are part of the political or ethnic community connected to the recipients of targeted assassination? This only comes from more careful theorizing. I would be hesitant to make any recommendation until we can rule out one mechanism over another or at least have the best possible theory that can logically sort one result from the other. To provide a contemporary example from Carson's (2017) data, the targeted assassination of the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, might have indeterminate effects from the analysis precisely because of its multiple competing effects on different audiences. It might have reduced violence initially for supporters of Sunnis in Iraq but increased it for Global Jihadists, and ultimately seeded the birth of ISIS as new leadership for AQI emerged. Without a model that can understand with some parsimony the relative effects on these actors, the results remain indeterminate.

Terrorist, Terrorism, Terror

Carson (2017) uses the term "terrorist" throughout the article, which suggests an individual who does one thing—terrorism. As Charles Tilly (2004) implored in his seminal essay:

The terms terror, terrorism, and terrorist do not identify causally coherent and distinct social phenomena but strategies that recur across a wide variety of actors and political situations. Social scientists who reify the terms confuse themselves and render a disservice to public discussion.

In this discussion of policy, I would suggest that we are identifying behaviors that we would like to see ended, not confusing actions with actors (Asal, De la Calle, Findley, and Young, 2012). Embedded in Carson's (2017) discussion is a set of rationalist assumptions: Actors try to maximize benefits and minimize costs of their actions, and actors will choose actions that provide the best ratio. Consistent with this, we need to think about multiple ways actors can act depending on context. Juergensmeyer (2000) made a related point to

Tilly's (2004) about murder. When someone murders, when do we call him or her a murderer? Only when this action is committed? Only when the person is convicted of the crime? Do we call the person this after having served time? The main point is that people do lots of things and are politically involved in many ways. Calling them one thing is inaccurate and unhelpful when trying to understand their behavior. Importantly for policy discussions, using the term "terrorist" seems to *a priori* justify extra-systemic violence against them as *we don't negotiate with terrorists*.⁵ We as scholars need to use more value-neutral language to inject some sober language into what can be an inflamed public discourse (Moore, 2015).

Conclusion

As we get a better handle on the evidence and theory, one of the greatest challenges is to do future work that examines whether the results hold in other contexts (against other groups, other time periods, or other geographic locations). The good news is that we have solid data⁶ and an array of quality evidence now to start building a fuller picture. The purpose of these essays is noble. Can we start to make evidence-based policy recommendations in light of what we know now? I would come down on the side of recommending given the state of theorizing and mixed empirical evidence that the United States avoid this policy. From an efficacy perspective, it is indeterminate. The moral piece is a little more clear to me but will ultimately be in the eyes of the beholder. Being the judge, jury, and executioner of an individual without due process given the questionable efficacy suggests to me avoiding this policy.

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5. Even though governments do, often in secret.

6. See the Global Terrorism Database (start.umd.edu/gtd/).

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