

ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN KILLED IN DRONE STRIKES WERE US SERVICEMEN

I agree with Greg Sargent. It is depressing (though I find it unsurprising) that a majority of Democrats support drone strikes on American terrorist suspects overseas.

The Post has just released some new polling that demonstrates very strong support for Obama's counterterrorism policies, including 83 percent of Americans approving of his use of drone strikes against terror suspects overseas.

This finding, however, is particularly startling:

What if those suspected terrorists are American citizens living in other countries? In that case do you approve or disapprove of the use of drones?

Approve: 65

Disapprove: 26

[snip]

And get this: Depressingly, Democrats approve of the drone strikes on American citizens by 58-33, and even liberals approve of them, 55-35.

The Democratic Party has, under Obama, significantly abandoned a commitment to civil liberties and rule of law, so I'm unsurprised by these results.

But I wonder how Americans would vote if they learned that one-third of Americans known to have died in US drone strikes were servicemen?

Here's the list:

Kamal Derwish, killed November 5, 2002, purportedly as collateral damage on a strike against Abu Ali al-Harithi; Derwish is alleged to have recruited the Lackawanna Six

Marine Staff Sgt. Jeremy Smith, killed in friendly fire incident on April 6, 2011

Navy Medic Benjamin Rast, killed in same friendly fire incident on April 6, 2011

Anwar al-Awlaki, killed September 30, 2011; Awlaki had ties to AQAP, though the Administration has never released evidence to support their claim he was "operational"

Samir Khan, killed in same September 30 drone strike, purportedly as collateral damage; Khan was a propagandist for AQAP

Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, aged 16, killed in drone strike on October 14, 2011, purportedly collateral damage in a strike aimed at Fahd al-Quso, who was indicted in the Cole bombing

Civil libertarians have long noted that the government's lack of transparency undermines their (possibly entirely legitimate) claims that Awlaki was an imminent threat and the others really were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But the case of Smith and Rast points to the other real problem with Obama's drone program: targeting is prone to analytical errors and Americans may shoot before they've confirmed that targets are enemy forces.

A Marine and a Navy medic killed by a U.S. drone airstrike were targeted when Marine commanders in Afghanistan mistook them for Taliban fighters, even though analysts watching the Predator's video

feed were uncertain whether the men were part of an enemy force.

[snip]

The incident closely resembles another deadly mistake involving a Predator in early 2009. In that attack, at least 15 Afghan civilians were killed after a Predator crew mistook them for a group of Taliban preparing to attack a U.S. special forces unit.

In that case, analysts located at Air Force Special Operations Command in Florida who were watching live battlefield video from the aircraft's high-altitude cameras also had doubts about the target. Their warnings that children were present were disregarded by the drone operator and by an Army captain, who authorized the airstrike.

[snip]

Air Force analysts who were watching the live video in Terre Haute, Indiana, noted that the gunfire appeared aimed away from the other Marines, who were behind the three. The analysts reported that gunshots were "oriented to the west, away from friendly forces," the Pentagon report says.

But the Predator pilot in Nevada and the Marine commanders on the ground "were never made aware" of the analysts' assessment.

When that pilot targeted Rast and Smith, he believed he was targeting someone, at the least, with ties to the Taliban. That is, these servicemen were erroneously and tragically "suspected" of being terrorists. And while some friendly fire is to be expected in a war zone, with drones, such friendly fire stems not from the immediate fog of war, but poor communication and analysis spread out across the globe, and

that poor communication and analysis plagues our drone program generally.

So whether the issue is secret intelligence that may or may not back Administration anonymous leaks about the risk of these “suspected terrorist” targets, or our inability to properly identify the enemy, asking whether American support the drone killing of “terror suspects” grossly simplifies the murky mess that qualifies someone as a “suspect” worthy of targeting.