



VETERANS FOR PEACE
HUMBOLDT BAY
CHAPTER 56

THE FOGHORN

AUG/SEPT
2016

“Cutting Through the Fog of War”

“A Uniquely American Tragedy”: The Staggering Myths About Gun Control

By Dennis A. Henigan, Salon

*The gun lobby’s disproportionate political power will never be overcome until these fallacies are destroyed
tortured mythology*

The issue of guns in America causes people in other parts of the developed world to look at our country and shake their heads. They just don’t get it. They don’t understand why so many Americans have such passion for their guns. They don’t understand why gun control is such a contentious issue. Most of all, they don’t understand how America can tolerate its chronic carnage of deaths and injuries from gunfire, particularly among our children and particularly after the horror of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 in which 20 first graders and six adults lost their lives. American children ages five to fourteen are eighteen times more likely to die of a gun homicide and eleven times more likely to die of a gun suicide than children in twenty-two other high-income countries.

Across all those high-income nations, the United States accounts for more than 90 percent of the gun deaths of children under fifteen years of age. President George W. Bush, of all people, once noted that an American teenager is more likely to die from a gunshot than from all natural causes of death combined. God bless America. Particularly her children.

This uniquely American tragedy is often viewed from a political perspective. At every level of government, a powerful lobby, the National Rifle Association, disproportionately influences gun policy. The Washington Post has called the NRA “arguably the most powerful lobbying organization in the nation’s capital and certainly one of the most feared.” A 2005 poll of congressional “insiders” by the “National Journal” found that Democrats rated the NRA the “most effective” interest group on Capitol Hill; Republicans ranked it number two. One “insider” hastened to add: “Effective does not necessarily mean ethical.” In fact, a 2006 Harris Poll found the NRA one of the most recognizable, and least trusted, public policy organizations in the nation.

What is truly astounding is that the NRA is able to block the enactment of legislation that is spectacularly popular with the American people. Reinstating the ten-year ban on AK-47s, UZIs, and other military-style assault weapons, enacted in 1994, enjoyed the support of 78 percent of the American people, with only 16 percent opposed, when Congress, under NRA pressure, allowed it to lapse. Despite surveys taken after the Newtown shooting, showing almost 90 percent public support for requiring background checks for all gun sales, legislation to extend the Brady Bill background checks to private sales failed to muster the necessary sixty Senate votes to cut off debate; the legislation never even reached the floor of the House of Representatives. Even mandatory registration of handguns has the support of 75 percent of Americans, yet it has no serious support in Congress.

Gun owners and non-owners alike favor proposals to strengthen gun laws. A poll conducted by Republican messaging guru Frank Luntz showed that 74 percent of current and former NRA members, as well as 87 percent of other gun owners, support universal background checks. A majority of self-identified NRA members supports handgun registration and mandatory safety training before purchasing a firearm. These are positions vehemently opposed by the NRA’s leadership.

The NRA’s power, of course, can be overcome. The Brady Bill was enacted into law in 1993 and is still stopping criminals from buying guns from gun dealers. Yet even the successful struggle to enact the Brady Bill can be seen as an illustration of the NRA’s clout. Though the bill had public support consistently in the 85–90 percent range, it took seven years to become law.

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The triumph of bumper-sticker logic

Shortly after I began my tenure as a lawyer and advocate for the Brady gun control group, I started to notice a peculiar repetitiveness in my opponents' arguments. Whether it was on radio or TV talk shows, panel discussions, or speeches with audience Q&A, there was a striking similarity in the substance of the arguments, and even the language, used by my opponents.

Over and over again, I would hear "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." I would hear "When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." I would hear "An armed society is a polite society." I had seen these sayings on bumper stickers for years, but I discovered that my opponents actually argued in these terms. Even when these exact phrases weren't used, the thoughts they express were conveyed in other words. In more scholarly settings, critics of gun regulation would dress up their arguments in the arcane language of academia and in mountains of statistics, but their basic claims could, to a remarkable degree, be boiled down to the same themes I had heard on countless talk shows.

For gun control advocates, the sad fact is that the bumper-sticker arguments of the National Rifle Association and its allies have an impact on the gun debate that needs to be acknowledged. I am not suggesting that these arguments cause most people to oppose specific gun control proposals; as already noted, a wide range of proposed restrictions on guns has broad public support. However, because the arguments sound like they have more than a kernel of truth, they have had an important long-term effect on the intensity with which the public favors gun control, particularly as it is reflected in its level of activism on the issue and its voting behavior.

Years of public-opinion polls on guns suggest that support for gun control is a mile wide and an inch deep. People will tell a pollster that they favor a host of gun restrictions, but surveys show a far smaller percentage will act on their support or will make it a major factor in determining their support or opposition to a particular candidate for office. Surveys show that opponents of gun control are far more likely than gun control supporters to give money, contact a public official, express an opinion on a social networking site, or sign a petition on the gun issue.

Although there is little doubt that the level of gun control activism increased after Newtown, surveys still indicate that gun-rights supporters are more likely to say they are "single-issue" voters than are gun control supporters. According to a 2015 Gallup poll, 40 percent of voters who want gun laws to be "less strict" say they would only vote for a candidate who shares their views on gun control, whereas only 21 percent of voters who want gun laws to be "more strict" say they would make their election choices solely on the gun issue. A 2014 Yale University survey showed an even more dramatic gap: among voters who thought gun laws

should be less strict, 71 percent said they would never vote for a political candidate who did not share their position on gun control, compared with just 34 percent of those who support stricter gun laws.

This gap is ameliorated to some extent by the fact that far more Americans favor making our gun laws more strict than favor weakening them, by a margin of 55 percent to 11 percent, with 33 percent wanting them kept as they are, according to a 2015 Gallup poll. Nevertheless, this intensity gap strikes fear in the hearts of politicians who perceive that, particularly in swing districts or states, where a relatively small number of committed single-issue voters can make the difference in a close election.

As veteran Democratic pollster Peter Hart explained, "You can win the vast majority of the public, but it becomes a nonvoting issue for them. And the people opposed to gun control make it their single most important issue. That's the challenge." President Obama, expressing frustration that Congress would not act to strengthen gun laws during his administration, recognized the "single-issue" problem. Indeed, he declared that he would no longer support candidates who do not support "common-sense gun reform" and challenged other gun-law supporters to join him in that pledge. This continuing intensity gap may well be related to the resonance of at least some of the NRA's oft-used bumper-sticker arguments.

Let's take, for example, the declaration "Guns don't kill people, People kill people." The suggestion that the violence that has long plagued our society is rooted in the evil that lurks in our souls is effectively used to marginalize, as relatively insignificant, issues related to the specific instrumentalities of violence. The slogan has been remarkably effective in diverting attention from the issue of gun regulation to the endless, and often fruitless, search for more "fundamental" causes of criminal violence.

To take another example, a great paradox of opinion polling on gun issues is that the public consistently supports enactment of gun legislation, even though it does not think it will be effective. In 1994, the year following the enactment of the broadly popular Brady Bill and the year the assault weapon ban passed with overwhelming public support, one poll showed that only 34 percent of the American people believed that gun control laws would reduce violent crime, while 62 percent said they would not. Thirteen years later, an ABC News poll revealed similar attitudes; although 61 percent of those surveyed supported stricter gun laws, only 27 percent thought they would do "a lot" to reduce gun violence."

A CNN poll in 2015 found that 58 percent thought it unlikely that expanded background checks would keep guns out of the hands of convicted criminals. In other words, at some basic level, the public is convinced that "When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." This belief cannot help but diminish the intensity of public support for further gun restrictions and the likelihood that such support will be translated into activism and voting behavior. It

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is difficult to motivate people to work and vote for gun control if they are not convinced it will make a difference.

The gun advocates' bumper-sticker messages, when examined critically, reveal themselves as mythology compounded by convoluted reasoning. Yet they continue to exert an outsized influence on public attitudes toward guns and gun control. Unless these messages are challenged and discredited, our national paralysis in addressing gun violence is likely to persist.

Are logic and evidence irrelevant?

Some may think this discussion reflects an embarrassing level of naiveté about the politics of gun control. If the barrier to progress is the continued fear of the NRA's raw political power, they will say, it will never be enough to show that the NRA's arguments make no sense. As one columnist said about the gun control debate, "This dispute isn't about logic anymore than the stem-cell dispute is about science. It's about the power of an interest group to impede what looks to most of us like genuine public progress." Let me be clear: I am not arguing that destroying the NRA's mythology will be sufficient to overcome the NRA's political influence. I believe, however, that the gun lobby's political power will never be overcome until these myths are destroyed. Political power is not unconnected to ideas.

The source of the NRA's disproportionate political power is not simply its money and the intensity of its supporters' beliefs; it is also its effective communication of several simple themes that resonate with ordinary Americans and function to convince them that gun control has little to do with improving the quality of their lives.

The connection between politics and ideas on the gun issue is nicely demonstrated in the 2006 book "Take It Back" by Democratic Party strategists James Carville and Paul Begala. Carville and Begala were solidly in the camp of Democrats who believe their party has been damaged by its identification with the gun control issue. They argued that Democrats should "defuse" the gun issue, essentially by agreeing with the NRA that we should simply enforce existing gun laws, but not pass any new ones.

Those who believe that exposing the gun lobby's bumper-sticker fallacies would have no effect on the politics of gun control should consider this passage from the Carville-Begala book on the issue of whether the Democrats should push to require background checks on gun sales at gun shows:

Sponsored by Senators Joe Lieberman (D-CT) and John McCain (R-AZ), the bill would require that people who buy guns at gun shows pass the same background check required for purchases made in stores. Okay. Sounds reasonable. But what is the political cost-benefit analysis? A study by the Clinton Justice Department showed that just 1.7 percent of criminals who used

guns in the commission of a crime obtained their gun from a gun show. By extending the Brady Bill to catch such a small percentage of transactions, Democrats risk inflaming and alienating millions of voters who might otherwise be open to voting Democratic. But once guns are in the mix, once someone believes his gun rights are threatened, he shuts down.

Notice the question: What is the political cost-benefit analysis? What Carville and Begala are saying is that gun control simply doesn't do enough good, as a policy matter, to be worth the political cost of advocating it. Presumably, the "political cost-benefit analysis" would be different if they were convinced that stricter gun laws would really save thousands of innocent lives and prevent untold suffering.

Dig beneath the surface of this passage and it is easy to uncover two of the NRA's favorite myths. The cavalier dismissal of the need for gun-show background checks is a variation on the theme of "When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." It turns out that, on the issue of gun shows, the Carville-Begala analysis is highly misleading. They cite a Justice Department survey of federal firearms offenders showing that only 1.7 percent of the offenders said they got their guns at gun shows. This ignores the well-established fact that many gun criminals buy their guns from gun traffickers who, in turn, bought their inventory at gun shows. Many criminals simply don't know that their guns originated at gun shows. Carville and Begala overlook the joint Justice-ATF (the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) study of federal trafficking investigations showing "a disturbing picture of gun shows as a venue for criminal activity and a source of firearms used in crimes."

The reference by Carville and Begala to gun owners feeling that their "gun rights are threatened" by background checks implicitly

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Next VFP56 meeting will be held
on Thursday, Sept. 1st at
7:00 PM.
Meeting will be held at 24 Uni-
tarian Fellowship Way, Bayside,
Jacoby Creek Road. Veterans and
non-veterans are more than wel-
come to come and help us dialogue
about what we together can do to
bring about peace in this complex
world.



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invokes the classic “slippery slope” argument. Carville and Begala obviously see some validity to the idea that gun show background checks will lead to serious invasions of the right to bear arms. The political conclusion reached by Carville and Begala follows directly from their policy conclusion about the impact of gun control.

It seems clear that the persuasive power of the Carville-Begala political argument to fellow Democrats likely was enhanced because the NRA’s bumper-sticker logic has managed to sink in to our collective consciousness about the relationship between guns and violence. Conversely, exposing the NRA’s mythology as transparently empty and dangerous would have made it more difficult for Democrats to “defuse” the gun issue by embracing the NRA’s view. On the gun issue, as with other issues, politics and policy are connected.

In December of 2003, former President Clinton, speaking at the Brady Bill’s ten-year anniversary celebration in Washington, DC, cogently addressed the way the gun debate is conducted in this country and how it impacts our nation’s ability to make greater progress in preventing injury and death from gunfire. He said he was always struck by the disconnect between the gun lobby’s arguments and what is happening in real life. “This is all about getting people to stop thinking,” he said, “ignoring the human consequences of a practical problem.” He went on: “But the consequences here are quite severe, because the landscape of our recent history is littered with the bodies of people that couldn’t be protected, under sensible gun laws that wouldn’t have had a lick of impact on the hunters and sportsmen of this country.”

I was in the audience that day and I was struck with his observation that “this is all about getting people to stop thinking.” This is, in fact, the impact of the pro-gun slogans. They do not stimulate thoughtful, rational discussion of the “human consequences of a practical problem.” They end thoughtful, rational discussion and replace it with clever catchphrases in service to an immovable ideology. I think President Clinton was getting at the disturbing truth about the gun debate in America. Our nation does a bad job of thinking about guns. Until we get the reasoning right, we will do little to address the “human consequences” of gun violence. It is no exaggeration to say that our nation’s gun policy is paralyzed by a series of fallacies—arguments that appear sound on first hearing, but crumble when subject to careful thought and analysis.

Although exposing these fallacies is necessarily an exercise in reason, it should not be coldly intellectual. It is my hope that the task will awaken the same emotions in the reader that it did in me: Sadness. Then anger. When President Obama unveiled a series of executive actions on guns three years after the Newtown massacre, he reminded the nation that it was a mass killing of first graders. “Every time I think about those kids, it gets me mad,” said the president, wiping away tears. It should, in fact, make all of us angry. It should lead us to realize that too many of our fellow citizens have

perished or been severely injured because the pro-gun fallacies have held sway for far too long. They have excused inaction and justified misguided policies. Because gun violence is, literally, a life-or-death issue, the NRA’s tortured mythology has cost innocent lives. Too many have died for us to tolerate it any longer.

Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action

Peace flotilla and nonviolent direct action at Trident nuclear submarine base mark anniversary of atomic bombings

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Silverdale, Washington: Local peace activists staged a water-based nonviolent protest and witness for peace in Hood Canal at the Trident nuclear submarine base on August 9th marking the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. The activists travelled along the Bangor waterfront where nuclear warheads and Trident missiles are loaded onto submarines and where submarines are resupplied for ballistic missile patrols in the Pacific Ocean. On August 8th activists staged a vigil and nonviolent direct action in which some activists blocked the entrance gate to the same Naval base.

The August 9th peace flotilla, named “Boats by Bangor,” included the original peace ship, the Golden Rule, which set sail in 1958 to the South Pacific to stop nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere. A National Project of Veterans for Peace, the Golden Rule continues to inspire many peacemakers and peace ships around the world.

The Golden Rule, skippered by Rich Giles, led kayaks and another sailboat, the S/V Silent, along the entire length of the waterfront of Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, including the Delta Pier and the two Explosives Handling Wharves at Bangor where Trident submarines are maintained and nuclear warheads and Trident D-5 missiles are loaded into submarines.

The peace flotilla included 15 people aboard the Golden Rule, 5 people on S/V Silent, and 13 kayakers.

The flotilla was a collaborative effort by Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action and Veterans for Peace, and included members of the annual Pacific Northwest Interfaith Peace Walk led by the Bainbridge Island Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Temple.

Hood Canal is tightly controlled by the Navy with multiple easements from State agencies that restrict access and development near the submarine base, and with a series of federally established security zones that are enforced by Coast Guard, Navy, and Marine Corps personnel. Military personnel were courteous and

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professional in their interactions with the August 9th peace flotilla.

This was the first year for a large water-based presence since the first Trident submarine, the USS Ohio arrived at Bangor in 1982. The flotilla is part of a continuing effort by activists to lift the veil of secrecy involving nuclear weapons in Puget Sound.

The “Boats by Bangor” event followed an early-morning action on August 8th by Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action at the Main Gate to the Trident submarine base. While people vigiled on the roadside, and after Ground Zero Peacekeepers safely stopped traffic, four activists risked arrest by entering the roadway carrying banners and blocking traffic into the base.

Sue Ablao, Bremerton, WA and Mack Johnson, Silverdale, WA carried a banner identical to the bus ad currently running on Seattle Metro Transit buses that reads, “20 miles west of Seattle is the largest concentration of deployed nuclear weapons in the U.S.” The banner included a map with a line drawn from Bangor to Seattle.

Washington State Patrol officers removed Ablao and Johnson from the roadway, and shortly thereafter two more activists, Philip Davis, Bremerton WA and George Rodkey, Tacoma WA, entered the roadway carrying a banner that read “No More Genocide In My Name,” a reference to the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

State Patrol removed Davis and Rodkey from the roadway, and issued all four activists citations for being in the roadway illegally and released them.

The two-day witness for peace at the nuclear submarine base marked the 71st anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan.

The Trident submarine base at Bangor employs the largest concentration of deployed nuclear weapons in the U.S. and is the home port for 8 of the Navy’s 14 Trident nuclear powered submarines. More than 1,300 nuclear warheads are deployed on Trident D-5 missiles on SSBN submarines based at Bangor or stored at Strategic Weapons Facility Pacific (SWFPAC) at the Bangor submarine base.

One Trident SSBN submarine at Bangor is estimated to carry about 108 nuclear warheads. The W76 and W88 warheads at Bangor are equal respectively to 100 kilotons and 455 kilotons of TNT in destructive force. One submarine deployed at Bangor is equal to more than 1,400 Hiroshima sized nuclear bombs.

The nuclear warheads at SWFPAC and on submarines based at Bangor have the combined explosive power equivalent to more than 14,000 Hiroshima bombs.

On March 11, 2016, the 10th bi-annual Nuclear Deterrent Symposium was held in Silverdale to discuss the future of U.S. strategic forces. Rear Adm. Charles Richard criticized opposition to the Navy’s \$100 billion plan for 12 new replacement SSBN submarines, proclaiming, “It’s a matter of priorities.” The new

SSBNs would replace the submarines at Bangor. Rear Adm. Richards noted that the USS Ohio arrived at Bangor in 1982 to much protest, and stated, “We have taken that [nuclear weapons] out of the national psyche.”

Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action and Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility are involved in an environmental lawsuit against the Navy’s second Explosives Handling Wharf at Bangor. As a result of the lawsuit, plaintiffs discovered that while the Navy insisted the second wharf posed no new safety risk at the base, the federal agency responsible for explosives siting refused to grant approval. The case was filed in federal court in June 2012 and is currently pending in the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

On December 14, 2015, the Navy filed a lawsuit in federal court to block the release of emergency response plans that might benefit the public in the case of a nuclear accident at Bangor. The lawsuit is still pending.

The U.S. is currently spending more on nuclear weapons programs than during the height of the Cold War.

The U.S. currently plans to spend an estimated \$1 trillion dollars over 30 years for rebuilding the nation’s nuclear facilities and modernizing nuclear weapons.

The New York Times reported that the U. S., Russia and China are aggressively pursuing a new generation of smaller and less destructive nuclear weapons. The buildups threaten to revive a Cold War-era arms race and unsettle the balance of power among nations.

On May 27, 2016, President Obama spoke in Hiroshima and called for an end to nuclear weapons. He said that the nuclear powers “...must have the courage to escape the logic of fear, and pursue a world without them.” Obama added, “We must change our mindset about war itself.”

On July 30, 2016, the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki sent a letter to the U.S. Embassy in Japan asking U.S. President Obama to step up his nuclear disarmament efforts.

The Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action was founded in 1977. The center is on 3.8 acres adjoining the Trident submarine base at Bangor, Washington. Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action offers the opportunity to explore the roots of violence and injustice in our world and to experience the transforming power of love through nonviolent direct action. We resist all nuclear weapons, especially the Trident ballistic missile system.

Please see attached event photos and map for Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor.

Posted by: Gerry Condon <projectsafehaven@hotmail.com>



The Tragedy of Vietnam

By: Larry Hourany

It is not surprising that Tim Martin's column ("A veteran's apology to the people of Vietnam," Times-Standard, 5-29-16) aroused several responses. What is unfortunate is that so many missed the point. We are a country that prefers to hide its mistakes. While we are right to honor our soldiers, our military leaders (our politicians and generals) do not always merit our approbation.

In 1963, the corrupt President of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, did solicit American help, but while he was staunchly anti-Communist, his troubles centered on the suppression of the Buddhist majority in his own country. (Remember the monks' self-immolation?) So we followed France's 20-year mis-adventure in this nation with one of our own. But what made it worse is the deceptions of our leaders (especially Nixon, Kissinger, and Westmorland) as we got mired ever deeper. We dropped four times as many bombs on this tiny country (8 billion pounds worth) as we dropped in all of WWII. And while more than 58,000 Americans died, so did 3.8 million from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (latest UN figures). And we further inundated that area with prodigious amounts of chemicals (another part of our military-industrial complex that thrived). This abomination also rained down on our own troops. (I have 2 friends who suffered from the unacknowledged ailments.)

We honor our troops for doing what they were told. However, destroying an entire village because it might harbor some enemy, shows how warped our vision to "save" this nation truly was. This was an immoral war in so many ways, it is no wonder our nation was ripped by controversy. One of the greatest tragedies of war is that we so soon forget. Or as some say, attempts to enlighten them "has zero effect." Accordingly, the best day to examine such conflicts might be on the day best illuminating the distinction between reasons and actions. Even the "good Germans" of the 1930's eventually realized they had been lied to.

At some point the average American (if such exists) should ask "what is America's role in the world today?" We seem as much to blunder into a role we don't understand, as to conduct rational and effective policy. As Georgie Anne Geyer has pointed out (Times-Standard, 6-23-16, p. A-4) we "have long wrestled with the conflict between high-minded idealism and realism." The grand experiment that is America is not immune to distraction and degradation: The first because we so willingly allow others to do our thinking without questioning them (who is really happy with American leadership?), and the second because, once involved in world affairs, we abdicate our individual responsibilities to monitor our leaders, and we assume that the atrocities that result are unavoidable. Consequently, once committed we cannot reverse ourselves or otherwise correct our course.

Such behavior is another form of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard). Keep the nasty details hidden and all can be forgiven. But a head-in-the-sand attitude leaves much exposed. And any predator, such as the Russian dictator and other international despots, will gladly reduce our posterior to his/her lunch. America, for all its grand promise, cannot achieve world harmony by imposing its will: War is the least productive long-term "solution."

For this last 50 years we have trolled the waters of peace with an attitude of "our way or the hi-way." Our great lack of success should be a caution on impetuous involvement in turmoil we don't seem to understand. George W. Bush's thoughtless (I would guess) foray into an Iraq he did not understand is costing us treasure and prestige we cannot afford. Rather than impetuosity, we need education and understanding. For example, it seems to be the blinding distinction between "treasure" and making money that has become our underlying motivation!

I believe Tim Martin loves this country so much (as do I) that he is willing to risk excoriation by the minions of orthodoxy. Those who examine the premises upon which we wage war are to be honored as patriots--not scorned as apostates. As one reader intoned: "Have we learned nothing? Wage peace."

Life as a drone operator: 'Ever step on ants and never give it another thought?'

By: Ed Pilkington

In a secluded room at an airbase in Nevada, young men hold the power of life and death over people thousands of miles away. Former servicemen tell their story

When Michael Haas, a former senior airman with the US air force, looks back on the missions he flew over Afghanistan and other conflict zones in a six-year career operating military drones, one of the things he remembers most vividly is the colorful language airmen would use to describe their targets. A team of three would be sitting, he recalls, in a ground control station in Creech air force base outside Las Vegas, staring at computer screens on to which images would be beamed back from high-powered sensors on Predator drones thousands of miles away.

Drones may predate Obama, but his resolute use of them is unmatched

The aim of the missions was to track, and when the conditions were deemed right, kill suspected insurgents. That's not how they put it, though. They would talk about "cutting the grass before it grows out of control", or "pulling the weeds before they overrun the lawn".

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And then there were the children. The airmen would be flying the Predators over a village in the tribal areas of Pakistan, say, when a series of smaller black shadows would appear across their screens – telling them that kids were at the scene.

They called them “fun-sized terrorists”.

Haas is one of four former air force drone operators and technicians who as a group have come forward to the Guardian to register their opposition to the ongoing reliance on the technology as the US military’s modern weaponry of choice. Between them, the four men clocked up more than 20 years of direct experience at the coalface of lethal drone programs and were credited with having assisted in the targeted killings of hundreds of people in conflict zones – many of them almost certainly civilians.

As a senior airman in the 15th reconnaissance squadron and 3rd special operations squadron from 2005 to 2011 – a period straddling the presidencies of George W Bush and Barack Obama – Haas participated in targeted killing runs from his computer in Creech that terminated the lives of insurgents in Afghanistan almost 8,000 miles away. He was a sensor operator, controlling the cameras, lasers and other information-gathering equipment on Predator and Reaper drones as well as being responsible for guiding Hellfire missiles to their targets once the pilot sitting next to him had pulled the trigger.

Haas, a 29-year-old, in a Notre Dame baseball cap and Chicago Blackhawks ice hockey jersey, looks too youthful to be burdened by such enormous issues. Yet the existential sensation of killing someone by manipulating a computer joystick has left a deep and lasting impression on him. “Ever step on ants and never give it another thought? That’s what you are made to think of the targets – as just black blobs on a screen. You start to do these psychological gymnastics to make it easier to do what you have to do – they deserved it, they chose their side. You had to kill part of your conscience to keep doing your job every day – and ignore those voices telling you this wasn’t right.”

Obama’s drone war a ‘recruitment tool’ for Isis, say US air force whistleblowers

Haas was relatively lucky, in that his team directly launched only two missile strikes during his 5,000 hours of drone flying. The first of those incidents, in January 2011, involved a group of insurgents in Helmand province, Afghanistan, who were exchanging gunfire with US troops on the ground and were duly eviscerated. “No-doubters”, the targets were called in the cold vocabulary of the military drone business, indicating certainty about their enemy status. Such certainty rarely existed, Haas said.

He has also been spared the burden of knowing the overall number of killings in which he played a part as a cog in the wider machinery of drone warfare. When he left the air force, Haas was given a report card that revealed the tally, but he chose to ignore it.

“They handed me a closed envelope with the number in it, but I never opened it. I didn’t want anything to do with it,” he said.

Brandon Bryant, a staff sergeant who worked with US air force Predator drones between 2005 and 2011 as a sensor operator and imagery analyst, did not get away so lightly. He knows for a fact – he saw it on his screen – that he was directly involved in the deaths of 13 people in five separate Hellfire strikes, one in Iraq and the rest in Afghanistan.

Bryant, 30, his head shaved and tattoos covering the backs of his hands, carries himself like a leader and seems to be driven by a determination to own a personal responsibility for the drone campaign he was involved in for five years and five days.

His first “shot”, as the former drone operators call the strikes, was in Afghanistan, where Bryant helped guide in F-16 fighter aircraft to kill three individuals who he was told were reinforcements coming to join anti-US Taliban forces. But when he “got eyes” on the targets, it was obvious to him from their body movements – they were hunkering down, gesturing, looking around – that they were terrified, suggesting to him that they were unlikely to be trained fighters.

After the strike was completed, when Bryant was back with his squadron, there were high-fives all round. He was celebrated for having “popped his cherry” – he had broken his drone virginity with a killing.

In the fourth of the Hellfire strikes in which Bryant directly participated, his team was called in to take out a group of five tribal individuals and their camel who were travelling through a pass from Pakistan to Afghanistan. They were said to be carrying explosives for use in attacks on US troops.

Bryant, together with a pilot and mission coordinator who formed the other two members of his team, tracked the group for several hours from their computers outside Las Vegas. They flew the Predator drone out of sight and beyond earshot of the targets at about 20,000 feet and a distance of about four nautical miles from the group on the ground.

Gamers recruited to pilot drones for US military.

He was puzzled during that time, because there was no sign of any weapons on the men or in the baggage carried by the camel. The drone team patiently waited for the men to descend the valley and bed in for the night, before they let rip with the Hellfire. Even then, there were no secondary explosions, which made Bryant think that his hunch had probably been right – five men and a camel had been reduced to dust for no apparent reason.

“We waited for those men to settle down in their beds and then we killed them in their sleep. That was cowardly murder,” he said.





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LET US HEAR FROM YOU!

If you would like to submit an article, opinion, comment or response to anything you have read which might interest the members of VFP-56, please e-mail it to turtldncer@aol.com, in word format, or mail to Jim Sorter at 1762 Buttermilk Lane, Arcata, CA 95521. Submissions will be included on a first come basis until the newsletter is full. Late arriving submissions will be archived for future issues.



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