

Legitimation of United States Drone Warfare: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Since 2002, the United States has engaged in a new form of warfare that is not fought by armies or navies, but by pilotless aircraft able to conduct surveillance and direct missile strikes across the globe. To date, U.S. military drones have launched hundreds of attacks against locations in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen (BIJ 2016). During the presidency of Barack H. Obama, a program that began as a strategic alternative to direct military intervention became the dominant means of confronting imminent threats to national security before they came to fruition. Increased reliance upon this new technology has brought on criticism internationally (IHRCRC 2012; Amnesty International 2013), but domestic support remains high (Pew Research Center 2015). Using a theoretical framework based upon Critical Discourse Analysis, I examined the discursive features employed by President Obama and his advising legal and counterterrorism staff to legitimate the use of drone missile strikes. Taking into account previous studies on strategies of legitimation (van Leeuwen 2008; Reyes 2011), I examine how social actors representing the Obama Administration rationalize the moral and ethical appropriateness of the program, use hypothetical futures to legitimate present actions, and employ metaphorical conceptualizations that dehumanize both suspected terrorists and innocent civilians.

References

- Amnesty International. 2013. "USA: The Devil in the (Still Undisclosed) Detail. Department of Justice 'White Paper' on Use of Lethal Force Against US Citizens Made Public." *Amnesty International Publications*.
- International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (IHRCRC) at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law. 2012. "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan."
- Pew Research Center. 2015. "Public Continues to Back U.S. Drone Attacks". Retrieved February 1, 2016 (<http://www.people-press.org/2015/05/28/public-continues-to-back-u-s-drone-attacks/>).
- Reyes, Antonio. 2011. "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions." *Discourse & Society* 22(6): 781-807.
- The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ). 2016. "Get The Data: Drone Wars Archives - The Bureau of Investigative Journalism". Retrieved February 1, 2016 (<https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>).
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2008. *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.