

OUR “PUBLIC DEBATE” ABOUT DRONES IS A STATE SECRET

While I often disagree with Benjamin Wittes, I rarely think the stuff he writes is sheer nonsense.

This post, which attempts to rebut Eugene Robinson’s column on Assassination by Robot, is an exception.

I disagree, respectfully, with most of his post. But this bit I find just mindboggling.

My former colleague Eugene Robinson has a column in the Washington post entitled “Assassination by Robot,” which seems to me to warrant a brief response. Robinson begins by saying that, “The skies over at least six countries are patrolled by robotic aircraft, operated by the U.S. military or the CIA, that fire missiles to carry out targeted assassinations. I am convinced that this method of waging war is cost-effective but not that it is moral.” And he complains that “There has been virtually no public debate about the expanding use of unmanned drone aircraft as killing machines – not domestically, at least.”

Robinson’s complaint about debate is false, at least in my view. **There has been a significant public debate on the subject.**

In half the countries in which we are known to be using drones—Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia—these drone strikes are still highly, highly classified. (The acknowledged countries are Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.)

When Anwar al-Awlaki’s family sued for due process, the government invoked state secrets, even as Crazy Pete Hoekstra and a stream of

anonymous sources have leaked details of the drone targeting of him for over a year. One of the things Robert Gates specifically invoked state secrets over is whether or not we're engaged in military operations in Yemen. Another is details of our counterterrorism work with Yemen.

B. Information concerning possibly military operations in Yemen, if any, and including criteria or procedures DoD may utilize in connection with such military operations; and

C. Information concerning relations between the United States and the Government of Yemen, including with respect to security, military, or intelligence cooperation, and that government's counterterrorism efforts.

So in the most controversial case out there, our targeting of an American citizen with no due process, the government has said no one can know any details of it. No one.

The secrecy of the drone strikes is a point that Robinson makes, albeit somewhat obliquely.

Since the program is supposed to be secret, officials use euphemisms when speaking about it publicly. John Brennan, President Obama's counterterrorism adviser, said in a recent speech that "our best offense won't always be deploying large armies abroad but delivering targeted, surgical pressure to the groups that threaten us."

But the point needs to be made much more strongly.

If the government says we can't know about the drone strikes—if the government says we can't even know that many of the drone strikes are going on—then what kind of "public debate" are

we having? For the drone strikes that are a state secret, **Congress** can't even engage in a "public debate."

Yeah, I understand that a very limited set of elites argue about drones anyway. But it takes a really twisted understanding of democracy and public debate to claim that drone strikes the government won't even acknowledge are the subject of a real debate.