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Potential CIA director's hearing disrupted by protestors against drones

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NCR Today

On Thursday, protesters, several of them women of grandmotherly demeanor, disrupted a Senate hearing on the nomination of John Brennan for CIA director, forcing Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), chair of the proceedings, to clear the room.

As President Barack Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser, Brennan has overseen a massive expansion of US drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, and it was this legacy that dogged him during the hearings.

"Halt the drones! You are a traitor to US democracy!" shouted one protester before the hearing officially began. It was the first of many interruptions in which the dissenters stood up and voiced objections to a policy that, until recently, has had very little public scrutiny.

The raucous scene reminded me of other moments in U.S. history when American patriots argued passionately over course of action. Take an audio tour of Boston's Old South Meeting House and you can hear a dramatic representation of colonists vehemently debating a plan to sabotage the British ships carrying tea anchored in the town's harbor.

Drones, however, are not as benign as tea. Touted as today's weapon of choice because of their reported ability to target only "bad guys," they are also killing civilians. Exactly how many is a question the Obama administration refuses to answer because drone strikes are considered classified operations.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a U.K. nonprofit, estimates that since 2004, CIA drone attacks have killed 2,638 to 3,474 people, of whom 473 to 893 are civilians. The New America Foundation puts

the numbers somewhat lower, from 1,953 to 3,279, of whom 261 to 305 were civilians.

"Mr. Brennan, if you don't know who they are, I have a list. I have a list with all the names and ages," said one of the silver-haired women as she stood up during the Thursday hearing and unfurled a scroll of pages taped together, listing some of the victims of US drone strikes that international journalists have painstakingly tried to identify.

Four of the eight protesters have just returned from a trip to Pakistan, where they met with victims of U.S. drone strikes. I am sure this is why they spoke with such urgency about the human consequences of weapons that for most of us are out of sight and out of mind.

The death toll from drones, at best a guesstimate, only partially describes the hazards of these unmanned, remote-controlled weapons. There is "the psychological impact of drones constantly buzzing above overhead," writes Noah Shachtman in a September article for *Wired* magazine. He tells of a villager who reported seeing 10 or 15 drones overhead every day. At night, the noise was making the man crazy because he couldn't sleep. Shachtman goes on to point out that the covert notion of the drone campaign "produces strange imbalance in the way civilians are treated from war zone to war zone." Victims of a bombing by U.S. troops in Afghanistan are usually compensated (a small amount) while victims of a drone strike in neighboring Pakistan are not and remain unacknowledged.

Many critics have described the U.S. drone program as a terrifying game-changer with regard to the rules of war and due process. The Obama administration's use of targeted assassinations in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan -- "and where else?" asked one of yesterday's protesters -- to "take out" insurgents violates national sovereignty. And now the Justice Department has released a white paper that purportedly explains when it is lawful for the government to carry out an extrajudicial killing of an American citizen believed to be affiliated with a terrorist organization.

As of Feb. 4, 100 religious leaders and members of faith-based communities have signed a statement urging the Senate to reject Brennan as CIA director. The statement describes Brennan as "the mastermind behind the lethal drone program which is killing innocent civilians abroad and sowing strong anti-American sentiment throughout the world."

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The drone program has granted the executive branch unprecedented authority in determining who is "targeted" and is contributing to "a world of chaos and lawlessness," the statement says. Here's an excerpt:

Every week on "Terror Tuesdays" John Brennan and President Obama go over a "Kill List" and assume the roles of prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner by deciding who lives and dies at the receiving end of American drone missiles. People on this secret Kill List have never been charged, tried or convicted in a court of law, and are given no opportunity to surrender. Drone strikes kill not only their intended targets, but innocent people, including hundreds of children, something that John Brennan has previously denied.

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