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My cousin in Germany recently sent an email asking if I didn't want to return to my erstwhile homeland. “Much as I admire President Biden,” she said in a follow-up telephone conversation, “I can't stand his condoning drone strikes that kill uninvolved families.”

So the news has reached Europe. While this was to be expected, it reinforces the view abroad of America as a war-mongering nation. Here is what happened:

In the midst of chaotic evacuations from Afghanistan, the U.S. military avenged itself for a suicide bomber's airport attack by sending off a drone on August 29, 2021. Afterwards the Pentagon claimed the strike wiped out a member of the Islamic State group that was about to attack American troops.

The claim was a whitewashing lie. As the Associated Press (AP) reports, not only did the military murder Zemerai Ahmadi, a valued member of an American humanitarian aid organization, it also killed seven children and two adults of Ahmadi's family. Terrified of likely Taliban retaliation, they were in the process of obtaining visas to the U.S. AP documented Ahmadi's car,

a Toyota Corolla, struck by a Hellfire missile in his driveway. Near tears, Ahmadi's younger brother showed a cellphone photo depicting his three-year-old daughter in her favorite dress, juxtaposed with another photo of the girl's charred body after the attack. Meanwhile the Pentagon falsely claimed that a large secondary blast was caused by explosives hidden in the car's trunk. No such blast occurred from the car, as AP was able to verify—the house in its cramped compound remained undamaged; a brick wall next to the car remains intact.

Responding to public outcry *The New York Times* began a visual (video) investigation. It identified the driver and obtained security camera footage from Ahmadi's employer that documented crucial moments during his day, which challenged the military's account. This prompted the Pentagon to undertake its own investigation.

On September 17 the Pentagon acknowledged that the drone strike had been a "tragic mistake" that killed 10 civilians, including seven children. The car posed no threat at all, the investigators had concluded.

"I offer my profound condolences to the family and friends of those who were killed," Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of U.S. Central Command, told reporters at a Pentagon news conference.

Is that it? A perfunctory apology to the press? They killed ten people for nothing! Ten innocents who did their best to help the American cause! The Pentagon owes the stricken family corrective actions to the extent possible; however, these are unlikely to be forthcoming. The Pentagon will claim its hands are tied, now that the Taliban is in charge. It looks to me like the military prefers not to confront the horrors and tragedies that follow its deadly errors; doing so may prompt a moment's contrition: "What on God's green earth are we doing? We send these hellfire toys halfway across the globe as if they were objects in a game of *Call of Duty!*"

A month prior to the drone strike, on July 27, 2021, Daniel Hale, charged under the Espionage Act of 1917, was sentenced to four years in prison for leaking documents that reveal the horrors of American drone warfare. Hale had also disclosed a secret (though unclassified) rule book that details the watchlisting of people and categorizing them as known or suspected terrorists without needing to prove they did anything wrong. As result of the leak, we know that:

* Since 2004, 14,000 confirmed drone strikes have hit Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

* 9,000 to 17,000 people were killed before this latest attack by both U.S. military and CIA drones.

* Of these, an estimated 2,200 were children. Others were women and multiple American citizens.

* During one five-month period of a Special Operations campaign in Afghanistan, more than 200 people were killed who were not intended targets.

In a handwritten letter to the judge who presided over his case, Hale, a former U.S. Air Force intelligence analyst for the National Security Agency (NSA), recalled his own experience locating targets for American drone strikes. He felt it “necessary to dispel the lie that drone warfare keeps us safe, that our lives are worth more than theirs.”

Was he sorry he took with him 17 pages of military documentation as he left his employer? “I am here because I stole something that was never mine to take — precious human life,” he said at his sentencing. He also said, “I couldn’t keep living in a world in which people pretend [these] things weren’t happening.” And, explaining further: “With drone warfare,

sometimes nine out of ten people killed are innocent.” Almost sobbing he added, “You have to kill part of your conscience to do your job.”

Hale had enlisted in 2009. In 2013 he was assigned to NSA and the Joint Special Operations Command at Bagram Airfield, the largest U.S. military air base in Afghanistan, where he helped identify targets for assassination. He left the Air Force in February 2014. Thereafter he leaked the classified documents regarding U.S. kill lists and civilian casualties of drone strikes. Later that year the FBI raided his home.

In 2016 Hale (as “Anonymous”) released his essay, “Why I Leaked the Watchlist Documents.” These documents established that the killing of civilians was far more widespread than previously acknowledged. It tormented him that it’s “wrong to kill the defenseless.” Drones are a tool, not a policy—but the policy is assassination. The essay has been included in a collection published by Simon and Schuster and edited by Jeremy Scahill and his colleagues at *The Intercept*. The Library Journal describes *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program* as “A searing, facts-driven indictment of America’s drone wars and their implications for US democracy and foreign policy. A must-read for concerned citizens.” Hale was found guilty under the outdated and highly controversial Espionage Act in July 2021. In August 2021 he received the Sam Adams Award for Integrity and Intelligence for “performing a vital public service at great personal cost—imprisonment for

truth-telling.” Yet the government-sponsored assassinations continue, and so does punishing whistleblowers like Hale. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (D-MN) has pleaded with President Biden; so far, there’s been no presidential reaction.

It took massive protests across the country to hasten the end of the Vietnam War, which was unwinnable from the start, although the military lied to the American people about our supposed successes. The lies went on for years. Today’s drone assassinations are equally secretive and sinister, and equally incongruous with the country’s principle that all humans “are created equal.”

For two decades Americans told one lie after another about what they were doing in Afghanistan. The more the military acted politically, the more public trust in the institution eroded. Civilian leaders felt hemmed in by a Pentagon that was always asking for more troops and more time, writes the *New York Times*.

The relationship between military and civilian leaders needs an infusion of direct and honest dialogue, now that the released documents make possible the long-overdue debate about the policy of drone warfare and its results. Sadly, the public’s mistrust of the military enabled the conflict to continue when it should have been shelved long ago.

Psychologists warn a disease of despair is haunting this country, in equal measure over racial and economic injustice and excessive spending on weapons and wars. I won't turn my back on it and retreat to my childhood home as my cousin suggests, though I'm tempted. It behooves all of us to find ways beyond government-sanctioned hopelessness.