

Obama's Predator joke—no laughing matter

By Bill Van Auken
6 May 2010

To the guffaws of assembled media celebrities, President Barack Obama used his monologue Saturday night before the Washington Correspondents Association dinner to joke about using Predator drones, a weapon that has killed hundreds of civilians on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and enraged millions throughout the region.

Obama's joke was ostensibly aimed at the pop group Jonas Brothers, who were among the large number of show business types invited to the annual affair. The President began by noting that his two pre-teen daughters were fans of the boy band and went on to warn: "...but boys, don't get any ideas. Two words for you: predator drones. You will never see it coming. You think I'm joking?"

Like virtually all of the supposed humor employed at such affairs, Obama's joke was directed to Washington "insiders," government officials, politicians of both parties and members of the media elite itself, all of whom would know what he was talking about and could generally be expected to find nothing amiss in his remarks.

The Predator drone has become a hallmark of the Obama administration's bloody escalation of the nearly nine-year-old war in Afghanistan and its expansion across the border into Pakistan.

According to one recent estimate by Pakistani officials, some 700 Pakistani civilians, the majority of them women and children, were killed by Hellfire missiles fired by drones in attacks ordered by the White House during Obama's first year in office. The officials indicated that for every alleged Al Qaeda or Taliban figure killed in these remote-controlled assassinations, 147 civilians have died.

A running tally of reported casualties kept by the web site *pakistanbodycount.org* puts the total number of civilians killed since the first known US drone attack on Pakistan in May 2004 at 1,226.

So the butt of Obama's joke was, in the first instance, the people of Pakistan, whose rage against the drone

strikes has fed a wave of anti-American sentiment.

But the joke was not on the Pakistanis alone. Not so coincidentally, the same night that Obama was delivering his monologue, New York City's Time Square was paralyzed by an attempted car bombing that could have claimed hundreds of lives. According to police investigators, Faisal Shahzad, the suspect arrested in connection with the attempted terrorist act, said he was driven to the action after seeing the bloody effects of the drone attacks during a recent visit to his native Pakistan.

And the joke doesn't end there. Last month, Obama made history by officially ordering the assassination of a US citizen—the American-born Muslim cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki—on foreign soil, presumably also to be executed by means of a Predator missile strike.

The Democratic administration has carried one step further the logic of the Bush White House's assertion of the right to proclaim American citizens "enemy combatants" and thereby imprison them on executive order, without charges or trial. The Obama administration has arrogated to itself the right to serve as judge, jury and executioner, assassinating US citizens on the president's sole say-so that they are enemies of the state.

This, presumably, was what Obama's joke writers saw as "edgy." Here one is dealing with an American president who has self-proclaimed and—at least within the ruling establishment—universally accepted police-state powers to assassinate innocent civilians as well as US citizens branded as his enemies. To threaten to utilize these real powers against Disney-promoted pre-teen idols was no doubt seen as hilarious.

Involved here is not merely a wildly inappropriate joke, but rather one of those moments that provide an unintentionally revealing look into the real state of political life and culture within Washington's ruling establishment. From the state apparatus, to a corporate media that acts as its propaganda arm, to the current inhabitant of the White House himself, it is dominated by an atmosphere of brutality and dehumanization in which every crime committed to further the interests of

America's ruling financial elite is justified.

Indeed, just days before Obama delivered his "joke," legal experts testified on Capitol Hill to the effect that the drone assassinations in Pakistan constitute violations of international law, and that those who order them as well as the CIA operatives, military personnel and private contractors who execute them from air-conditioned cubicles thousands of miles away in the US can be prosecuted as war criminals.

The link between this prevailing political outlook and the brutal 2007 massacre of civilians in Baghdad exposed in the videotape recently released by WikiLeaks becomes clear, as does the near universal indifference if not outright hostility of the corporate-controlled media to this exposure.

While the most repugnant, the Predator drone remark was not the only revealing element in Obama's monologue. He allowed that he was disappointed at not having received the Nobel prize for physics—a cynical acknowledgement of the absurdity of awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to an American president who not only is waging two wars of aggression, but who used his acceptance speech to proclaim Washington's "right" to launch new wars wherever it sees fit.

And he quipped that "all of the jokes here tonight are brought to you by our friends at Goldman Sachs. So you don't have to worry—they make money whether you laugh or not." Again, the supposed humor stemmed from the cynical acknowledgment of what is. The recently indicted Wall Street firm was Obama's biggest campaign donor in the 2008 election, and his administration, stacked with former Goldman Sachs executives, from his treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, to his chief economic adviser, Lawrence Summer, has diverted trillions of dollars in public funds to bail out the Wall Street finance houses.

The laughter from the media talking heads and celebrities had an unmistakable significance. They all know that Obama's posturing as an opponent of war and Wall Street corruption is nothing more than a cover for an administration that is pursuing militarist aggression abroad and the defense of big money interests at the expense of the masses of working people at home.

Obama's remarks provoked relatively little outcry, particularly from the ostensibly liberal and "left" voices in the media. The response was notably muted even compared to the reaction to George W. Bush's equally repellent "joke" delivered to a similar 2004 dinner of the Radio and Television Correspondents, in which he

provided "humorous" captions to pictures showing himself searching high and low in the White House. "No weapons of mass destruction here," read one.

The reference was to the exposure of the principal pretext for the US war against Iraq—supposed "weapons of mass destruction" in the hands of the Baghdad government—as a lie. Then, as now, it was a real insiders' joke, in that the media itself played an indispensable role in foisting this lie onto the American people and justifying a war of aggression that has claimed the lives of more than a million Iraqis and nearly 4,400 US troops.

Nonetheless, sections of the media—as well as leading figures in the Democratic Party—voiced outrage, however hypocritical, at Bush making light of a war that was already proving so costly, as well as unpopular.

Had Bush been in power and made a joke similar to Obama's, there no doubt would have been similar indignant (albeit phony) statements from the "life-style" left. But when Obama jokes about killing people with Predator drones—after a year in which he has ordered attacks that have claimed the lives of hundreds of Pakistani women and children and left hundreds more maimed for life—they just shrug it off.

What does this event reveal? The political establishment as a whole, both major political parties and the lapdogs of the Washington media, are utterly indifferent to the sentiments of average working people.

Moreover, no section of this establishment holds any genuine commitment to democratic rights or the principle of social equality. In order to defend the interests of a wealthy oligarchy, all of them are prepared to pursue and to justify criminal policies that are leading the broad mass of the American people into a deepening catastrophe.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>