

By David Swanson

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The national religion of the United States of America is nationalism. Its god is the flag. Its prayer is the pledge of allegiance.

The flag's powers include those of life and death, powers formerly possessed by traditional religions. Its myths are built around the sacrifice of lives to protect against the evils outside the nation. Its heroes are soldiers who make such sacrifices based on unquestioning faith. A "Dream Act" that would give citizenship to those immigrants who kill or die for the flag embodies the deepest dreams of flag worship. Its high priest is the Commander in Chief. Its slaughter of infidels is not protection of a nation otherwise engaged, but an act that in itself completely constitutes the nation as it is understood by its devotees. If the nation stopped killing it would cease to be.

What happens to myths like these when we discover that flying killer robots make better soldiers than soldiers do? Or when we learn that the president is using those flying robots to kill U.S. citizens? Which beliefs do we jettison to reduce the dissonance in our troubled brains?

Some 85% of U.S.ians, and shrinking rapidly, are theists. Flag worship may be on the decline as well, but its numbers are still high. A majority supports a ban on flag burning. A majority supports the power of the president to kill non-U.S.ians with drones, while a significantly smaller percentage supports the president's power to kill U.S. citizens with drones abroad. That is to say, if the high priest declares someone an enemy of god, many people believe he should have the power to kill that enemy . . . unless that enemy is a U.S. citizen. In secular terms, which make this reality seem all the crazier, many of us support acts of murder based on the citizenship of the victim.

Of course, the Commander in Chief kills U.S. citizens all the time by sending them into wars. Drones don't change that. Drone pilots have committed suicide. Drone pilots have been targeted and killed by retaliatory suicide bombings. Drones have killed U.S. citizens through

accidental "friendly" fire. The hostility that drones are generating abroad has motivated terrorist attacks and attempted attacks abroad and within the national borders of the United States.

But feeding corpses to our holy flag looks different when we're feeding them directly to the president's flying robots without a foreign intermediary. And yet to approximately a quarter of the U.S. public it doesn't look different after all. The president, in their own view, should have the power to kill them, or at least the power to kill anyone (including U.S. citizens) so contaminated as to be standing outside the United States of America -- a frightening and primitive realm that many U.S.ians have never visited and feel no need to ever visit.

Popular support for murder-by-president drops off significantly if "innocent civilians may also be killed." But a religious belief system perpetuates itself not through the positions it takes on existing facts so much as through its ability to select which facts one becomes aware of and [which facts remain unknown](#)

Many U.S.ians have avoided knowing that U.S. citizens, including minors, have been targeted and killed, that women and children are on the list of those to be killed, that hundreds of civilian deaths have been documented by serious journalists including victims' names and identities, that U.S. peace activists went to Pakistan and met with victims' families, that the U.S. ambassador in Pakistan said there was a U.S. government count of how many civilians had been killed but he wouldn't say what it was, that the vast majority of those killed are not important leaders in any organization, that people are targeted and killed without knowing their name, that people are targeted and killed merely for the act of trying to rescue victims of previous strikes, that the wounded outnumber the dead, that the traumatized outnumber the wounded, that the refugees who have fled the drone strikes are over a million, that the drone wars did not replace ground wars but began war making in new nations so destabilized now by the drone strikes that ground wars may develop, that some top U.S. military officials have said the drones are creating more new enemies than they kill, or that what drones are doing to our reputation abroad makes Abu Ghraib look like the fun and games our media pundits said it was.

If our courts killed without trials there would be by definition a risk of killing the innocent. The same should be understood when a president and his flying robots, or missiles, or night raids, kill without trial.

If we were being bombed we would not deem it any more acceptable to kill those who resisted than those who did not. Therefore, the category of "innocent civilian" (as distinct from guilty non-civilian) is suspect at best.

The vast majority of the "worst of the worst" locked away in Guantanamo have been exonerated and freed, something that cannot be done with drone victims. Yet John Brennan, once deemed unacceptable for his role in detention and torture, is now deemed acceptable. The goodness of his murdering evil beings outweighs the badness of his detaining and torturing people who were sometimes misidentified. The dead cannot be misidentified. The president has declared that any unidentified dead male of fighting age was, by definition, a militant. After all, he was killed.

Yet, this we know for certain: He was someone's child. He was someone's loved one. He was someone's friend.

We have a responsibility right now to grow up very, very quickly. Our government is breaking down the rule of law and stripping away our rights in the name of protecting us from an enemy it generates through the same process. Drones are not inevitable. Drones are not in charge of us. We don't have to fill our local skies with "surveillance" drones and "crowd control" drones. That's a choice that is up to us to make. We don't have to transfer to mindless hunks of metal the heroism heretofore bestowed just as nonsensically on soldiers. There is no excuse for supporting the murder of foreigners in cases in which we would not support the murder of U.S. citizens. There is no excuse for supporting a policy of murdering anyone at all.

There is no excuse for allowing your government to take your son or daughter and give you back a flag. There is no excuse for allowing your government to take someone else's son or daughter. Ever. Anywhere. No matter how scared you are. No matter what oath of loyalty you've robotically pledged to a colored piece of fabric since Kindergarten. Actual robots can perform the pledge of allegiance as well as any human. They do not, however, have any heart to place their hand over. We should reserve our hearts for actions robots cannot do.