

The Everyday Extremism of Washington

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Secretary Doomsday and the Empathy Gap

A front-page *New York Times* headline last week [put the matter politely](#) indeed: "In Pakistan, U.S. Courts Leader of Opposition." And nobody thought it was strange at all.

In fact, it's the sort of thing you can read just about any time when it comes to American policy in Pakistan or, for that matter, Afghanistan. It's just the norm on a planet on which it's assumed that American civilian and military leaders can issue pronouncements about what other countries *must* do; publicly demand various actions of ruling groups; opt for specific leaders, and then, when they disappoint, attempt to replace them; and use what was once called "foreign aid," now taxpayer dollars [largely funneled](#) through the Pentagon, to bribe those who are hard to convince.

Last week as well, in a prime-time news conference, President Obama [said](#) of Pakistan: "We want to respect their sovereignty, but we also recognize that we have huge strategic interests, huge national security interests in making sure that Pakistan is stable and that you don't end up having a nuclear-armed militant state."

To the extent that this statement was commented on, it was praised here for its restraint and good sense. Yet, thought about a moment, what the president actually said went something like this: When it comes to U.S. respect for Pakistan's sovereignty, this country has more important fish to fry. A look at the historical record indicates that Washington has, in fact, been frying those "fish" for at least the last four decades without particular regard for Pakistani sensibilities.

In a week in which the presidents of both Pakistan and [Afghanistan](#) have, like two satraps, dutifully trekked to the U.S. capital to be called on the carpet by Obama and his national security team, Washington officials have been issuing one shrill statement after another about what U.S. media reports regularly term the ["dire situation"](#) in Pakistan.

Of course, to put this in perspective, we now live in a thoroughly ramped-up atmosphere in which "American national security" -- defined to include just about anything unsettling that occurs anywhere on Earth -- is the eternal preoccupation of a vast national security bureaucracy. Its bread and butter increasingly seems to be worst-case scenarios (perfect for our 24/7 media to pounce on) in which something truly catastrophic is always about to happen to *us*, and every "situation" is a "crisis." In the hothouse atmosphere of Washington, the result can be a feeding frenzy in which doomsday scenarios pour out. Though we don't recognize it as such, this is a kind of everyday extremism.

Being Hysterical in Washington

As the recent release of more Justice Department torture memos (which were also, in effect, [torture manuals](#)) reminds us, we've just passed through eight years of such obvious extremism that the present everyday extremity of Washington and its national security mindset seems almost a relief.

We naturally grasp the extremity of the Taliban -- those floggings, beheadings, school burnings, bans on music, the medieval attitude toward women's role in the world -- but our own extremity is in no way evident to us. So Obama's statement on Pakistani sovereignty is reported as the height of sobriety, even when what lies behind it is an expanding ["covert" air war](#) and [assassination campaign](#) by unmanned aerial drones over the Pakistani tribal lands, which has reportedly killed hundreds of bystanders and helped unsettle the region.

Let's stop here and consider another bit of news that few of us seem to find strange. Mark Lander and Elizabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times* [offered](#) this tidbit out of an overheated Washington last week: "President Obama and his top advisers have been meeting almost daily to discuss options for helping the Pakistani government and military repel the [Taliban] offensive." Imagine that. *Almost daily*. It's this kind of atmosphere that naturally produces the bureaucratic equivalent of mass hysteria.

In fact, other reports indicate that Obama's national security team has been [convening](#) regular ["crisis"](#) meetings and having ["nearly nonstop discussions"](#) at the White House, not to mention issuing alarming and alarmist statements of all sorts about the devolving situation in Pakistan, the dangers to Islamabad, our fears for the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, and so on. In fact, Warren Strobel and Jonathan Landy of McClatchy news service quote "a senior U.S. intelligence official" (from among the legion of anonymous officials who populate our nation's capital) [saying](#): "The situation in Pakistan has gone from bad to worse, and no one has any idea about how to reverse it. I don't think 'panic' is too strong a word to describe the mood here."

Now, if it were the economic meltdown, the Chrysler bankruptcy, the bank stress tests, the potential flu pandemic, or any number of close-to-home issues pressing in on the administration, perhaps this would make some sense. But everyday discussions of Pakistan?

You know, that offensive in the Lower Dir Valley. That's near the Buner District. You remember, right next to the Swat Valley and, in case you're still not completely keyed in, geographically speaking, close to the Malakand Division. I mean, if the Pakistani government were in crisis over the deteriorating situation in Fargo, North Dakota, we would consider it material for late night jokesters.

And yet, in the strange American world we inhabit, nobody finds these practically Cuban-Missile-Crisis-style, round-the-clock meetings the least bit strange, not after eight years of post-9/11 national security fears, not after living with worst-case scenarios in which *jihadi* atomic bombs regularly are imagined going off in American cities.

Keep in mind a certain irony here: We essentially know what those crisis meetings will result in. After all, the U.S. government has been embroiled with Pakistan for at least 40 years and for just that long, its top officials have regularly come to the same policy conclusions -- to support Pakistani military dictatorships or, in periods when civilian rule returns, pour yet more money (and support) into the Pakistani military. That military has long been a [power unto itself](#) in the country, a state within a state. And in moments like this, part of our weird extremism is that, having spent decades undermining Pakistani democracy, we bemoan its "fragility" in the face of threats and proceed to put even more of our hopes and dollars into its military. (As Strobel and Landy report, "Some U.S. officials say Pakistan's only hope, and Washington's, too, at this stage may be the country's army. That, another senior official acknowledged Wednesday, 'means another coup.'")

In the Bush years, this support added up to at least [\\$10 billion](#), with next to no idea what the military was doing with it. Another [\\$100 million](#) went into making that country's nuclear-weapons program, about which there is now such panic, safer from theft or other intrusion, again with next to no idea

of what was actually done with those dollars. And now the Obama administration is rushing to create a new Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund that will be [controlled](#) by General David Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command. If Congress agrees -- and in this panic atmosphere, how could it not? -- there will be an initial rushed down payment of \$400 million to train the Pakistani military, probably outside that country, in counterinsurgency warfare. ("The fund would be similar to those used to train and equip Iraqi and Afghan soldiers and police, Petraeus said.")

Doomsday Scenarios

Oh, and speaking of extremism, the ur-extreme statement of the last few weeks came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and was treated like the most ho-hum news here. In congressional testimony, she [insisted](#) that the situation in Pakistan -- that Taliban thrust into Swat and the lower Dir Valley -- "poses a mortal threat to the security and safety of our country and the world."

Umm... Okay, the situation is unnerving -- certainly for the Pakistanis, the large majority of whom have not the slightest love for the Taliban, have opted for democracy and against military dictatorship with a passion, and yet strongly oppose the destabilizing American air war in their borderlands. It could even result in the fall of the elected government or of democracy itself -- not exactly a rare event in the annals of recent Pakistani history. It's undoubtedly unnerving as well [for the American military](#), intent on fighting a war in Afghanistan that has spilled disastrously across the open border. (As Pakistan expert Anatol Lieven [wrote recently](#): "The danger to Pakistan is not of a Taliban revolution, but rather of creeping destabilization and terrorism, making any Pakistani help to the U.S. against the Afghan Taliban even less likely than it is at present.")

In other words, it's not a pretty picture. If you happen to live in the tribal borderlands, or Swat, or the Dir Valley, squeezed between the Taliban, the Pakistani Army, whose attacks cause great civilian harm, and those drones cruising overhead, you may be in trouble, [if not in flight](#) -- or you may simply support the Taliban, as most of the rest of Pakistan does not. If you happen to live in India, you might start working up a sweat over what the future holds on the other side of the border. But all of this is [unlikely](#) to be a "mortal threat" even to Islamabad, the Pakistani military, or that nuclear arsenal American national security managers spend so much time fretting about. It is certainly not a "mortal threat to the security and safety of our country."

So here's a little common sense. If Pakistan poses a mortal threat to you in New York, Toledo, or El Paso, well then, get in line. Believe me, it will be a long one and you'll be toward the back. Despite constant reports that lightly armed Taliban militants are only 60 miles from the "doorstep" of Islamabad, Pakistan's national capital, and increasing inside-the-Beltway invocations of Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution in Iran, you're [unlikely to see](#) a Taliban government in Islamabad anytime soon, or [probably ever](#). As one unnamed expert commented recently in the insider Washington newsletter, the *Nelson Report*, "I find it troubling that we are hyping the 'security situation' in Pakistan. Pakistan is not being taken over, the FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] is. This has been happening since 2004."

Mind you, when Vice President Joe Biden said something extreme about flu precautions -- don't take the subway! -- the media didn't hesitate to [laugh him off stage](#). When Hillary Clinton said what should be considered the equivalent about Pakistan, everyone treated it as part of a sober national-security conversation.

Of course, when it comes to hysteria, nothing helps like a nuclear arsenal, and in recent weeks nuclear doomsday [scenarios](#) have [broken out](#) like a swine flu pandemic, even though a victorious Taliban regime in Islamabad with a nuclear arsenal would undoubtedly still find the difficulties of planting and detonating such devices in American cities close to insurmountable.

By the way, for all our kindly talk about how the poor Pakistanis just can't get it together democracy-wise, the U.S. has a terrible record when it comes not just to promoting democracy in that country, but to really giving much of a damn about its people. In fact, not to put too kindly a point on things, Washington has, over the past decades, done few favors for ordinary Pakistanis. Having played our version of the imperial Great Game first vis-à-vis the Soviets and, more recently, a bunch of *jihadi* warriors, we are now waging a most unpopular and destabilizing air war without mercy in parts of that country, and another deeply unpopular war just across its mountainous, porous border.

And this brings us to perhaps the most extreme aspect of the mentality of our national security managers -- what might be called their empathy gap. They are, it seems, incapable of seeing the situations they deal through the eyes of those being dealt with. They lack, that is, all empathy, which means, in the end, that they lack understanding. They take it for granted that America's destiny is to "engineer" the fates of peoples half a world away and are incapable of imagining that the United States could, in almost any situation, be part of the problem, not a major part of its solution. This is surely folly of the first order and, year after year, has only made the "situation" in Pakistan worse.

Closing the Empathy Gap?

To complete our picture of this over-the-top moment, we have to leave the heated confines of Washington and head for California's China Lake. That's where the U.S. military tests some of its advanced weapons.

On April 20th, Peter Pae of the *Los Angeles Times* [reported](#) the following: "A 5-pound missile the size of a loaf of French bread is being quietly tested in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles as the military searches for more deadly and far more precise robotic weapons for modern warfare."

This tiny missile called the Spike will someday replace the 100-pound Hellfire missiles mounted on our Predator and more advanced Reaper unmanned aerial drones flying those assassination missions over the tribal lands of Pakistan. New weaponry like this is invariably promoted as being more "precise," and so capable of causing less "collateral damage," than whatever we've been using; that is, as an advance for humanity. But in this case, up to 12 of these powerful micro-weapons will someday replace the two Hellfires now capable of being mounted on a Predator, which means a future drone will have to come home far less often as it cruises the badlands of the planet looking for targets.

According to Pae, this new development is considered a "milestone" in weaponizing robot planes. Chillingly, he quotes Steven Zaloga, a military analyst with the Teal Group Corporation as saying, "We're sort of at the same stage as we were in 1914 when we began to arm airplanes."

Not only that but the Spike may someday soon be mounted on a new generation of more deadly drones, one of which, General Atomics Aeronautical Systems' Avenger or Predator C, is [already being tested](#). It will be able to fly 50% faster than the Reaper and at up to 60,000 feet for 20 hours before returning to base.

In other words, the decisions to be made in future panicky "crisis" meetings in Washington, when "American security" once again faces a "mortal threat," are already being predetermined in the Mojave desert and elsewhere. In the Pentagon's eternal [arms race of one](#), a major vote is being cast at China Lake for future Terminator wars. In a crisis mood of desperation, we tend to fall back on what we know. This, too, plays into Washington's national-security extremism.

By now it should be obvious enough that the military approaches to Afghanistan and Pakistan (or the newly merged Af-Pak battlefield) have been in the process of failing for years. Take just our drone

wars: they are not only killing significant numbers of civilians, but also destabilizing Pakistan's tribal lands -- military and civilian officials there have long [begged us](#) to ground them -- and so creating an anti-American atmosphere throughout that country. Recently, former advisor to Gen. David Petraeus and counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen [told Congress](#):

"We need to call off the drones... Since 2006, we've killed 14 senior Al Qaeda leaders using drone strikes; in the same time period, we've killed 700 Pakistani civilians in the same area. The drone strikes are highly unpopular. They are deeply aggravating to the population. And they've given rise to a feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists and leads to spikes of extremism... The current path that we are on is leading us to loss of Pakistani government control over its own population."

Sage advice. If President Obama temporarily suspended the Bush-era drone war, which his administration has recently escalated, it would represent a start down a different path, one not already strewn with the skeletons of failed policies. And while he's at it -- and here's a little touch of extremism by American standards -- why not declare a six-month moratorium on all drone research of any sort, a brief period to reconsider whether we really want to pursue such "solutions" *ad infinitum*?

Why not, in fact, call for a six-month moratorium on all weapons research? A long Pentagon holiday. Militarily, the U.S. is in no danger of losing significant military ground globally by shutting down its R&D machine for a time, while reconsidering whether it actually wants to lead the planet into a future filled with Spikes and Avengers.

If, however, nothing else was done, at least the president should order his national security team to calm down, skip those crisis meetings on Pakistan, tamp down the doomsday scenarios, and try to take a few minutes to imagine what the world looks like if you're not in Washington or the skies over our planet. Are there really no solutions anywhere that don't need to be engineered first in our national capital?

Tom Engelhardt, co-founder of [the American Empire Project](#), runs the Nation Institute's TomDispatch.com. He is the author of [The End of Victory Culture](#), a history of the Cold War and beyond, as well as of a novel, [The Last Days of Publishing](#). He also edited [The World According to TomDispatch: America in the New Age of Empire](#) (Verso, 2008), an alternative history of the mad Bush years.

[**Note:** You could easily drown in the tsunami of recent semi-hysterical pieces about the Pakistan or Af-Pak situation. Fortunately, I have Juan Cole's [Informed Comment](#), Paul Woodward's [The War in Context](#), and [Antiwar.com](#) to depend on to help me sort through the crucial reportage of this moment. What would I do without them? Let me thank as well Christopher Holmes, TomDispatch Tokyo bureau chief, whose keen eye keeps these posts relatively free of goofs. Note as well the appearance of the first TD author photo in this piece. Site photographer Tam Turse took it. We'll probably be phasing in more of her author photos over the coming months.]

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