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This is the transcript of an interview that ran on The Michael Slate Show with James Cavallaro of Stanford University, who co-authored a study titled "Living Under Drones." The interview was part of the show that aired on Pacifica radio station KPFK, Los Angeles, on January 25, 2013.

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Michael Slate: The idea of this drone warfare, we hear it constantly, continuously, and some people are outraged, but really, generally there's not enough outrage and part of that I think comes from people looking at this as sort of a very clean, very surgical, sort of, "this is sort of just the way that war is conducted today and actually, it's a nicer war. There's not as many American boys being killed in a war like this." Your study kind of slams that all to hell and says that the entire narrative around drone warfare is false. Tell our listeners what you're talking about there.

James Cavallaro: Well, to start, it's worth spending a bit of time on what the narrative has been. And I think you summarize it well. What I would add is, the idea that has been dominant in mainstream media in the United States—and this is largely fostered by the official discourse—the main idea has been that drones and drone strikes are surgically precise, that the only casualties caused by drone strikes are terrorists. And since that has been the main narrative, naturally it has served, among other things, to mute opposition to drones. We were very concerned by this narrative because information that we had and also others—and organizations had approached us to see if we would be interested in investigating independently what the consequences of drones and drone strikes actually has been in Pakistan. And we took up that challenge and spent pretty much the year 2012 to date investigating intensely what have been the consequences of drones and drone strikes in Pakistan.

And the result of our work is the report that you cited, "Living Under Drones." But in a sense, of course I'm happy to get into much more detail on this, is the dominant narrative of surgically precise strikes that hit only terrorists, is simply false. That, in fact, drones hit civilians. Drones hit all sort of buildings and that drones have a significant impact on entire communities who

are, on a daily basis, terrorized by these unmanned vehicles flying overhead that at any moment can fire down a Hellfire missile that can kill anyone who happens to be within the blast radius.

Slate: Let's jump into this one at a time here. Because one of the things that you just said about it is supposedly the narrative being it doesn't hit civilians. You're arguing that in fact it does. Civilians are deeply impacted, in fact killed by this drone warfare. And this is something that really, you know, well look, frankly, we're living in a situation where the U.S. government basically says—what did Brennan say? It was in the single digits, or there's virtually none, no civilians have been killed. Nobody in the U.S. regime actually admits to significant civilian murder as a result of this drone warfare. How do you speak to that?

Cavallaro: Well, first what's important, and there was an important piece written by Jo Becker and Scott Shane in late May in the *New York Times*. And that piece investigated the process by which drones are authorized, or at least some drone strikes, and I can get into the details of what the focus of that piece was and what could and should still be considered in more depth. But one of the very important revelations in that piece was that the administration counts those who are killed in a strike, if they are males of combatant age, which is quite a broad range—if a male in the relevant age range is killed in a drone strike, the administration considers that person to be a combatant, unless there is posthumous evidence demonstrating that person's innocence.

So think about that. Take a second. Wrap your head around that. What it means is, if the United States fires a Hellfire missile from a drone and it kills some group of men, the United States considers that they're all militants.

Well, of course, if that's your calculation method for establishing who is a militant or combatant, of course your figures for non-militant or noncombatant deaths will be low. In fact the presumption should be of innocence of those who are killed and there should be some examination, a thorough examination into who the victims are. That's one of the major concerns that we had in this report and one of the issues which we think needs significant response and attention as soon as possible from the administration.

But even without that mischaracterization of those who have been targeted, there is plenty of information. And we went through all the information in media sources and in what are called data aggregators, and there are three major data aggregators. And even the most

conservative data aggregators, with whom we have significant issues because of their undercounting, even they are talking about scores and scores, if not hundreds and hundreds of civilians. And the most reliable data aggregator has calculated up to as many as 800, nearly 900 civilians killed.

So the single digits narrative is fantasy. And it's highly problematic because what it does, is it allows most people in the United States to accept the false narrative of surgically precise, terrorist-only weapons, almost as though these weapons were able to go down to a house level, knock on the door, establish that the person is a terrorist by overwhelming evidence, establish that the person is imminently plotting and about to strike and kill Americans, and then and only then killing the person.

That's what it allows people to believe when that's not the case.

Slate: Jim, one of the things when you're talking about this, the idea that—It struck me, especially when I saw this thing, and I'm familiar with the *New York Times* article you were referring to. And when I saw this thing about they clear up any mistakes posthumously. I mean, one, I think you're right. You would think that they would make that clarification, make that decision before they killed somebody, but even there, there's a certain cynicism and a real, deep, disgusting unreal thing in there, because posthumously after being hit by a drone is a pretty gruesome affair from what I understand in your report. It seems like that's actually almost a given, that that's not going to happen.

Cavallaro: Well, let me put it this way, because we can't know everything, and there's so much secrecy surrounding the U.S. drone practices. Virtually everything is shrouded unfortunately in an inappropriate secrecy, and evidently there's some margin that we understand, for national security that might be legitimately invoked, but it's been used to cover everything related to the drone program, including its very existence.

But again, what we know from the way drones work is those who are very close to the blast radius are incinerated, so it would be highly difficult at a minimum to establish information about those victims. But what I can say is, we are unaware of any serious, comprehensive effort by the United States to find out almost anything about those who are struck by drones. And we also are aware of the fact that in many instances, authorities have been unable even to identify those who've been killed, much less to establish who the person was, what the person was doing, if the person was a combatant, etc.

So, yes, you're right, there's very little to suggest that there is any significant attempt posthumously to exonerate those who've been killed. Which leaves you with: If you were killed, you were a combatant. And then if you roll that backwards, what does that do, that knowledge that drone operators and administrators and administration authorities have, that if they make a mistake, or if they target the wrong people, there's unlikely to be any consequence. What does that do to their targeting decision and their willingness to fire drones? I don't know. But it's a question that concerns me.

Slate: Exactly. And one other thing you guys raise in the report that really, really sort of just smacked me in the head is the point that they often describe, and you see this in the press all the time, they describe the victims of, or the targets, because they don't really ever talk about "victims of," they talk about the targets of the drone attacks are all "militants," which is a phrase you actually call for at the end of your report, you guys call for actually, stop using the term "militant" so easily, and start trying to define people as what they are. Because militants does seem to be a word that's been thrown around to obfuscate everything that's really going on there. What's the story with that?

Cavallaro: Yeah, it is. And I don't want to head too far into the realm of legalese, but militant is a term that sounds as though it legitimates or justifies the killing of the person. So that if a person is a militant, then that person could be killed by a drone. And that's not the case under international law.

In order for a target to be legitimate under international humanitarian law, the laws of war, the person would not only have to be a combatant, but the person would have to be engaged in an activity that imminently threatens interests that the United States could protect, like, say, U.S. lives or interests in Afghanistan, across the border, and there would have to be no means of capturing that person.

So a person could be a militant or a combatant, not be posing a threat to U.S. interests, and/or be subject to capture. And if any of those are the case, in other words, if a person is not presenting a threat to the United States, or if the person could be captured, then that person should not be killed by a drone strike, or could not or should not legally.

So that's one issue, which is very important, is who can the United States kill, or might be able

to kill legally, and who can it not kill? But secondarily, and this is in many ways the bigger issue, what we've seen in the mainstream media is that the reporting on drone strikes in an area known as FATA, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, of Pakistan, which is an area of extremely difficult access because of the terrain, but also because it's cordoned off by the Pakistani military. It's an area in which, you simply can't enter. And what media sources have done, is report in effect verbatim, information from anonymous security officials about who was killed. So anonymous security officials who evidently have an interest in saying that those who they killed were combatants, as opposed to, "Hey, we killed a bunch of civilians today!"—they tell the media, anonymously, what they want the media to print. And the media then, obediently, unfortunately, in many, many instances, has simply printed what they are asked to print by anonymous sources.

We don't think that's an appropriate role for an aggressive, democratic media. And one of the things that we call on is for journalists to speak more critically about who are their sources, and also to interrogate what they're saying. So that if the only source for the assertion that all those who are killed are militants is an anonymous security official, maybe if you're a journalist, you say, "We don't know who they are. They're people. They're men. Some people, or some anonymous sources said they were militants," as opposed to "militant, militant, militant, militant," throughout the article.

So there is some responsibility here on the part of the media.

Slate: Tell me this, Jim. How does this add up when you throw in something that was, again, as you read the report, you keep getting more and more outraged—the idea of "double-tapping." Can you explain to my listeners what double-tapping is, and what that says about the civilian targeting?

Cavallaro: So, double-tapping refers to a practice where a drone will fire a Hellfire missile, a first strike, and then shortly afterwards, fire a second strike. And there have been a significant number of cases where this has been documented to have occurred in Pakistan. What that means in practice is, there's a missile strike. It hits a target. It has a blast radius. There may be a number of people who are killed, or maimed or injured in the blast radius. And now what's happened is, when others, first responders, have gone in to assist those who are injured and may still be alive, a second strike kills them. And because that has happened so frequently, unfortunately, in an area known as North Waziristan, which is the epicenter of these strikes, the people with whom we spoke, and we spoke with seventy people from that area who had been directly affected by drone strikes—they told us that they won't go into an area where a drone has struck, because they're afraid that they'll be the victim of a second strike.

And we had some really gruesome testimony of people who were near enough to strikes to see victims, and the victims are screaming and people won't go in to help them because they're afraid they'll be hit by another strike. But there's an important point here, Michael, if I could elaborate here, is, the nature of the drone strikes, double-tapping, as it's called, is one phenomenon, is such that because people don't know when drones are going to strike, all sorts of ordinary activities have been affected in these areas. And people are suffering from significant psychological trauma according to the symptoms that they describe to us, and also according to the interviews that we did with mental health professionals who have treated people from that area.

Slate: Now, Jim, you started to talk about that, the living under drones. What's the impact of this? As I understand it, one of the things that blew my mind was when, and I think there was somebody who was part of your team. I can't remember whether it was with Stanford or NYU, Jennifer Gibson I think her name was.

Cavallaro: Jennifer Gibson was part of our research team at Stanford and then graduated and is now working with an organization based in London.

Slate: Well, she wrote an op-ed piece for the *LA Times* where she talked about how so many of us think that a drone strike is sort of, the drone comes in, one or two of them come in, just appear out of nowhere and that they fire a single missile or two missiles or whatever into a crowd of people and then they disappear. She said, actually, you're talking about a situation where 24/7, people are living under the threat of drones, literally. Is that the case?

Cavallaro: So here's what we were able to document. I went to Pakistan twice for a couple of weeks and spent time speaking with, again, this group of 70 people who, in several shifts, came and met with us, who live in areas where drones fly overhead, and who are directly affected because some of them, themselves, had been injured or maimed by drone strikes, or they lost a relative or many relatives, or because they'd had drones hovering over and had fired Hellfire missiles in their communities.

So these are people who are living constantly under drones. And what they told us—and this is really part of what really had the greatest impact on us, as much as the death and destruction and maiming evidently has an impact on anyone. What they told us is, the drones in their

communities hover overhead at times 24 hours a day for several days on end. They emit a buzzing sound. And we spoke with many, many people and they would imitate the sound, a *bz zz-zzzz-zz*

, like a bee. It's something that even when they're sleeping, it's there, and it's in the back of their heads. And they have no idea when one of these drones will fire a Hellfire missile down on their communities. They also don't know where it will hit or who it will hit.

So imagine what this does to them on a daily basis. They're walking in the bazaar: they don't want to get too close to someone if they don't know who that person is, because maybe that person is suspected of being a combatant by the drone operator and maybe a drone will hit that person. And if it does and I'm within 15 or 20 yards, I will be killed by the shrapnel.

So that's the logic, and what it's done is it's cast a pall on all sorts of activities. People told us for instance they don't go out of their houses unless they have to. They don't congregate with three or four men any more. They don't go to religious services. They don't go to funerals. And here's maybe the worst, is many people told us they don't send their children to school anymore. Because they don't know where they are. They don't know where they're going to be. They don't know if they're going to wander into an area where there's a group of men that might look to someone in, say, Nevada, who's watching a video image, like a group of militants or combatants.

So the entire community has been profoundly affected. And the other major effect, evidently related to the first, are the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, the symptoms of other psychological maladies, of stress-related disorders that many people with whom we spoke told us about. They're suffering themselves and have many others in their community suffering. I would say in a sentence, in a short sentence: The United States has not declared war on Pakistan and is not officially engaged in a war in North Waziristan, but the narratives of people in that area were narratives that sounded like people living in a war zone.

That's the way people living under drones experience drones and drone strikes.

Slate: I know you were careful not to get into all the legalese and legalisms, in terms of language before, but a significant part of your study actually does raise the question of the legality or illegality of all this. And that really strikes me because I'm looking at it and I'm thinking, OK, how many crimes are going to be allowed to be committed, and to me, from my own viewpoint after reading the study and my own thinking about it beforehand, these kinds of

things, at the very least must violate half a dozen international laws. It just seems to me, humanitarian law has to be violated time and time again in the process of this whole drone warfare system. What did you guys find about that?

Cavallaro: So, I'll try and be succinct, but let me start by saying there is significant evidence, and we pull it together in this report. And there are other sources as well that demonstrate that there's every likelihood that many, many drone strikes have occurred in violation of international law. But here's what makes it a tricky—and this is part of, I would say, the strategy, although I can't speak to, knowingly, what the strategy of the administration is, but it seems as though this may be what they've been thinking. You can imagine a hypothetical scenario—one can imagine—where there's a person in North Waziristan, a combatant, and the combatant is about to fire a missile, and the missile will strike and kill I don't know how many Americans in Afghanistan, hypothetically, OK? And there's no way to arrest this person. And the person has the missile and is about to fire it.

And in that circumstance one can imagine, well, it might be legal under those circumstances as described for the U.S. or someone to use some sort of lethal military strike, such as a drone, to attack that person before the person, who is about to imminently attack and kill many Americans, can fire the missile he's about to fire, right?

So you can imagine, you can work into the intellectual possibility of that occurring. Here's what happens. Because that intellectual possibility occurs, and because the United States has taken measures to close off investigations to shroud drone strikes in secrecy, unfortunately to make sure that media do not know what's happening, the administration is able to say, "Our strikes are legal. We won't provide any basis for why that's true. We won't let you know what the legal memoranda say. We won't let you know the specifics of what happened in any of these cases. But because there's some theoretical, hypothetical possibility that maybe there could be a legally valid drone strike, we're just going to tell you they're legal. Now go away, stop investigating and report what I tell you."

That's what we've gotten. And that simply is not good enough in a democracy. It's not good enough with the media, that should be concerned about human life, and it's not good enough with a society of citizens who should be concerned about human life. Anywhere. Not just in the United States, but human life in Pakistan. And it should also concern us when we know that 176 children, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, have been killed by drone strikes in Pakistan, and as many as 880 civilians.

So there are very, very serious legal questions that need to be answered. And I don't think they're going to be answered until people get outraged and demand those answers from authorities.

Slate: You know it's interesting, Jim, to think about people doing that, and to me it's really important. Because here you look at it, and you guys make a point in your study that, since Obama came into office, the number of drone strikes and the devastation caused by drones, has just increased immensely in three years. It's...

Cavallaro: Five- or six-fold.

Slate: Yeah.

. **Cavallaro:** By five or six times.

Slate: Yeah, and people keep turning away and turning away and turning a blind eye to this. And I was thinking even these things, like you were talking about the things to be talked about in terms of a "personality strike," in a certain sense if you're going after one person and you think you got this. And while that's bad enough, he also has instituted these things called "signature strikes," which to me, just by the very description of them, the character of them—Jesus! What are we thinking, that we can sit and say, "OK, this makes sense to me"?

Tell people what a signature strike is and what do you think about that?

James Cavallaro: You're absolutely right. What's most worrisome about the drone practices of the United States are the signature strikes. So let's just go through what the difference is. A personality strike is one where an individual has been identified. The United States military or CIA authorities know who the person is. They have reason to know that the person is involved in al-Qaeda or the Taliban, and is plotting an incident imminently, represents a threat, can't be arrested, all of that criteria that would have to be filled, and they decide to target that person.

Let's put that to the side. And we should put that to the side because all evidence suggests that that kind of strike, a personality strike, is a small percentage of the strikes that have taken place, particularly in recent years. Where most strikes occur is in what's called the signature strike context. And what does that mean? It means that people who are watching the videos, the images taken by drones—they're watching those images, god knows where, possibly at some CIA location, undisclosed location in the United States, in Nevada, elsewhere—they're watching those images and they assess from those images, based on the pattern of activity, that the people that they're looking at are combatants, that those people are plotting or engaged imminently in an attack on U.S. interests and that they can't be captured. At least that's what they're telling us.

And when they establish all that, from the video screen, then they fire one Hellfire missile, and maybe a second when first responders come, to kill those people. That's almost certainly where most of the deaths have occurred. And that is far beyond where a lot of the focus of the media has been in recent months, particularly since the *New York Times* article that we referred to earlier by Jo Becker and Scott Shane which talked about Obama's role in making decisions about the first kind of strike, the personality strikes, where the individual who is targeted is known. The focus has been on personality strikes, even though most of the deaths almost certainly have occurred in signature strikes where someone is looking at a video image and deciding, "Oh, these people, they're probably up to no good. They're probably doing something that will have lethal consequences for the United States. We don't think we'll arrest them, so we'll kill them. That is a context which, again, I think raises—should raise—all sorts of red flags.

Slate: Absolutely. And Jim, one last thing, just so people can have this on their minds as they go about their business after hearing this interview, the numbers. What are the numbers involved?

Cavallaro: The numbers of people killed?

Slate: Yes.

Cavallaro: We're looking at unfortunately several thousand now in Pakistan, and again there are others in Yemen, but that wasn't the focus of our report. But the numbers—the best source, which is the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, had the numbers through early September at between 2,562 and 3,325 people, of whom, they were able to classify with all of

the ambiguity in the information, between 474 and 881 as civilians, and 176 as children. And again, many more of those could be civilians, but there's not enough information to know that. So significant numbers. If you look at the numbers of people killed, it's on the order of people killed on 9/11.

Slate: Where can people find the study?

Cavallaro: The site is livingunderdrones.org. There they can find the study. There's a video, all sorts of resources relevant to this issue. And hopefully—one thing I'll say is, this is an issue where again, to the extent people are involved and outraged and let people in Congress and the administration and others know, that might start some sort of—some process of accountability within the United States.

Slate: Thank you very much for joining us.

Cavallaro: Thank you very much, Michael. I appreciate it.