



## **Afghan Drone Strike: What Happened to the Media's Vaunted Trump Era Skepticism?**

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**Glenn Greenwald:** Hey, everyone, it's Glenn Greenwald, back with another episode of System Update exclusively on Rumble, and I'm basically making this video to ask one very simple question. What happened to the Trump era media skepticism of which corporate journalists were so proud for having done during the four year period when Donald Trump was president? And it's really ironic that I'm even asking that question, because from the time I began writing about politics in 2005, one of my principal media critiques was that journalists refuse to say when politicians were lying, they would say, this politician says, this is a politician says this, and they would just wash their hands and call it a day. They would actually explicitly argue sometimes that it wasn't their role to say who was telling the truth and who wasn't. I always found that so bizarre. If journalists aren't there to say who's telling the truth and who isn't, what is the purpose of journalism? If they're not going to say when politicians are lying or at least saying things without evidence. They [journalists] used to just recite what politicians said, even when they had no evidence in their possession to believe it were true. And yet, lo and behold, when Donald Trump became president, everything changed. Suddenly, they began essentially practicing journalism, as I had been advocating it for 10 years, not because I was advocating it, but because Trump was president. I'll just show you a few examples of what I mean.

You've certainly seen things like this over and over. Here from The New York Times in November of 2016 before Trump was even president. It says Trump claims with no evidence that, quote, "millions of people voted illegally". So instead of just saying Trump claims millions of people voted illegally, they would point out Trump presented no evidence, just basic journalistic skepticism that I had barely ever seen in the 11 year period from the time I started writing about politics until they started doing this. Here's another example from The Washington Post. Trump claims without

evidence that NBC was caught fudging a TV interview with him. Instead of repeating the claim, they noted it was without evidence. CNN loved to do it. Here's just one of countless examples from May of 2018 where they said Trump doubles down on, quote, "spy claim without evidence". And you can see here they would not only say it, but they would love to put it on the on screen graphic. It was always Trump claims falsely or Trump claims without evidence. Some people would say to me, "aren't you happy they're doing what you've been calling on the media to do for a long time?" And I always said the same thing, which is I would be happy if I believed that they would actually do this from now on, that it would be an enduring practice as opposed to what I always knew it was, which was a one time only change in how they conduct themselves when it comes to reporting on Donald Trump.

We didn't need to wait very long for the proof of that. We can use the example of Sunday's drone strike in Afghanistan to see how they've abandoned this completely and have gone back not just to washing their hands of things, but to mindlessly believing, uncritically disseminating whatever the government says, even when there's no evidence, even when it turns out to be untrue without saying that. So, as you probably know, there was a drone strike on Sunday in retaliation for the heinous suicide bombing attack on Kabul that killed 13 US Marines and dozens of Afghans as well and Central Command issued a statement on August 27th, and you can see it right there. They end their statement after they say they did a drone strike by saying, quote, "We know of no civilian casualties". We know of no civilian casualties, no evidence, no corroboration, nothing specific. They just asserted it to be true. And suddenly that became treated as gospel. This assertion, even though there was no evidence. Here you see The New York Times national security reporter Charlie Savage, who in 2020 was the same reporter who took the CIA's claims that turned out to be false, that the Russians had placed bounties on the heads of U.S. soldiers, which was leaked to him by the CIA and then used by pro-war Democrats and partnership with Liz Cheney to demand that Donald Trump's withdrawal plan from Afghanistan be blocked. He's back at it. Mindlessly repeating what the government says as long as it helps Democrats. You can see there he's tweeting above a tweet from another journalist quoting an AP article that reads US officials, quote, "drone strikes vehicle with multiple suicide bombers on the way to Kabul airport. Threat believed eliminated". And Charlie Savage above that tweet says the US clearly has a remarkable intelligence line of sight into ISIS-K right now. He has no idea whether it's true, but he's gushing effusively about how incredibly competent the US government is. They [US] had no idea what was going to happen in Afghanistan. Joe Biden a month ago was saying, we think the Afghan forces are going to ward off the Taliban. It's extremely unlikely the Taliban was going to take over all of Afghanistan. They had

no idea what was happening in Afghanistan. They released a statement from commanders in the military asserting that they surgically got these ISIS-K planners and no civilian casualties. And then this New York Times reporter with no evidence starts gushing as if it's true mindlessly and uncritically. Here you see a similar tweet from Jennifer Griffin, who I respect as a national security reporter. Charlie Savage has also done good work, by the way. She does the same thing. She summarizes what the US government says. They carried out a drone strike. They killed ISIS-K planners in Kabul. And she just asserts at the end quote, "no civilian casualties". All throughout the media you see it over and over. Here's The New York Times report on that drone strike. It simply quotes uncritically a commander in Afghanistan who said, quote, "The unnamed airstrike occurred in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. Initial indications are that we killed the target. We know of no civilian casualties." No - "he asserted it without evidence". No - "he presented no evidence". just disseminated without a molecule of skepticism.

Here's from CNN, exactly the same thing. "According to a statement from Central Command, we got the target. We know of no civilian casualties." The same CNN, the same New York Times that three years ago, two years ago was saying when people would say this under Trump or Trump himself would say things like this, he claimed with no evidence, suddenly that journalistic practice is gone and they just assert whatever they're told, as though it's true.

Now, this practice goes back a long way. In 2012, The New York Times reported on the secret drone program that President Obama had ordered and implemented and radically escalated. He was killing people all over the globe, constantly lying about civilians not being killed. And this was The New York Times article that first disclosed that they had a kill list where they would meet every Tuesday and decide who was going to die. No trial, no jury, no evidence, nothing Obama would approve of who they were going to assassinate by drones. And The New York Times called it "a Test of his Principles and Will", and it heralded John Brennan as this incredibly moral Catholic who was the moral conscience of the drone program to make sure that it was being done morally. And yet in the middle of it, they revealed a remarkable fact that the media completely ignored. I wrote about it for years, which was that they had decided as part of this drone program that they would redefine what a terrorist or what a militant was so in that way they could claim all the time, "We killed 12 people. All of them are militants", even though they often had no idea who they even killed. How did they manage that? How did they get to say our drones killed nothing but militants, even though they often usually, in fact, had no idea who they were killing. They did it by redefining militant. This is what The New York Times said, quote, "Mr. Obama

embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties that did little to box him in. It, in effect, counts all military age males in a strike zone as combatants. According to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent." In other words, the Obama administration decided that the definition of militant is anyone that we kill whose male and of military age, it turned out be 18 to 54. And the burden is on you to prove after they're dead that they were actually civilians. And if you don't, they get to count them as militants. They just did an Alice in Wonderland redefinition of militant. I wrote about this constantly all the way back in 2012 when I was writing on Salon for my first journalism job. The headline of my article was "Deliberate Media Propaganda" and the sub headline read, "The media knows - that, quote, - "Militant is a term of official propaganda". How do they know that? Because The New York Times had disclosed that and yet still uses it for America's drone victims.

Even once they learned that Obama had just magically redefined the word militant to mean basically anyone we kill, they would just uncritically ingest government claims that everyone they killed was a militant. Here's what I said in the article at the time. "There is, as usual, about a certain drone strike. No indication that these media outlets have any idea whatsoever about who was killed in these strikes. All they know is that, quote unquote, officials told them that they were militants, so they blindly repeat that as fact. They report this not only without having the slightest idea whether it's true, but worst with the full knowledge that the word militant is being aggressively distorted by deceitful US government propaganda that defines the term to mean any military age males whom we kill. The use of the phrase suspected militants in the body of the article suffers the same infirmity."

They just adopted Obama's definition and just kept going around denouncing what he claimed. I return to this topic two years later. By now, I'm at The Intercept. In 2014, the headline of my article was on media outlets that continue to describe unknown drone victims as, quote, "militants". And there you can see the sub headline. "It has been more than two years since The New York Times revealed that Mr. Obama embraced a disputed method for counting civilian casualties. Yet media outlets continue to use the term." And I noted in the article that even some intelligence officials were concerned that the strikes were killing civilians. And yet, as I wrote, "it's of no concern whatsoever to most media outlets. Most large Western media outlets continue to describe completely unknown victims of US drone attacks as militants, even though they A) no idea who those victims were or what they had done and B), were well aware that the term had been redefined by the Obama administration into Alice in Wonderland level nonsense." Words are whatever we say

they are. They mean whatever we say they mean. That was what the Obama administration did. That's what George Bush and Dick Cheney did. The media went along with it. They suddenly stopped only in the Trump era, where suddenly they found basic journalistic skepticism. And they're now back to mindlessly disseminating whatever the Biden administration says and that's why for 24 hours, they stood up and cheered and applauded that a drone strike had killed only two ISIS bombers on their way to Kabul airport, when, in fact, as we now know and the government is close to admitting, it actually wiped out an entire family of 10 people, 7 of whom were children, several of those under the age of 3. But because they have completely jettisoned their faculties of critical thought or journalistic skepticism with a Democrat back in the office and with Trump gone for 24 hours, all we heard was a completely false tale that came from the Biden administration and got repeated by them with no critical scrutiny. And that's why my question is what happened to the Trump era of journalistic skepticism of which they were so proud when they were doing it. It has completely disappeared. And that really does result in a lot of dangerous propaganda leading us to believe things that are false simply because the government says them. If they want to go work as spokespeople for the Obama administration or the Biden administration, they should go and do that. And then they can just disseminate those statements. But if they want to claim to be journalists doing reporting qne informing the public, basic skepticism [is needed] when no evidence is presented. [Mentioning for example] "Afghans claim it's not true", is needed in order to be anything other than government spokespeople masquerading as journalists.

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