Morality as Causality:

Explaining Public Opinion on US Government Drone Strikes

by

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ABSTRACT

Although the US government has been using remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), more commonly referred to as drones, to conduct military strikes against terrorists and insurgents since at least 2001, only around 2011 did media outlets and polling organizations began assessing the attitudes of Americans towards the use of drones as a weapon of war. Initially, public support for drone strikes was robust with nearly 70 percent of Americans expressing approval. As the discussion of drone strikes intensified however, public support declined over 10 percentage points.

Only a handful of studies have examined public opinion and drone strikes, and all have focused exclusively on explaining support. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature and explain opposition to drone strikes. The primary argument put forth in this dissertation is that people's beliefs determine their opinions, and their morality determines their beliefs. Although independent opinion formation is often considered a cognitive process, I argue that, at least in the case of drone strikes, the opinion formation process is largely an affective one.

By examining media coverage and elite discourse surrounding drone strikes, I isolate three narratives which I believe communicate certain messages to the public regarding drone strikes. I argue that the messages produced by elite discourse and disseminated by the media to the public are only influential on opinion formation once they have been converted to beliefs. I further argue that conversion of message to belief is largely dependent on individual moral attitudes.

To test my arguments, I conduct a survey-experiment using subjects recruited from Arizona State University's School of Politics and Global Studies student subject pool.

My research findings lead to two key conclusions. First, opposition to drone strikes is largely the product of the belief(s) that drone strikes are not necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, and that drone strikes kill more civilians than do strikes from conventional aircraft. Second, whether an individual expresses support or opposition to drone strikes, moral attitudes are a relatively good predictor of both beliefs and disposition.

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PREFACE

The first US "drone strike" occurred on October 7th, 2001. In an attempt to kill the Taliban's top Commander, CIA agents launched a single hellfire missile from an MQ-1 *Predator* aircraft. What made this attack unique, is that the pilot pulling the trigger for this strike was over 7000 miles away from the intended target. At the time it occurred, this strike garnered very little media attention. However, as the US government's use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) expanded, people outside the military began to pay attention.

Although drone strikes steadily increased during the Bush Administration, the use of RPA as weapons of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency peaked during the Obama administration. Not coincidentally, so did public scrutiny. Beginning around 2009, media coverage of drone strikes dramatically increased. Human rights groups "investigated" the human costs of drone strikes, anti-war advocates protested outside military bases, and legal scholars debated the legality of "targeted assassinations." Government officials and policy-makers pushed back, touting drone strikes as both highly effective and vitally necessary in the "War on Terror."

In 2011, newspapers and polling organizations began to query the American public regarding its attitudes toward drone strikes, and by 2015 there were dozens of books dedicated to the issue of drone strikes. Drone strikes were featured in movies and television (often in less than flattering terms), and by 2013 it seemed that most Americans were fully aware that the US government was using "pilotless" aircraft to target and kill terrorists overseas. Aware, although not necessarily informed.

My interest in drone strikes, stems from my own personal experience. After returning from a deployment to Afghanistan in 2009, I was looking to make a change in my military career. When the opportunity to become an MQ-1 drone operator presented itself, I took it. In 2010 I began training at Randolph, Air Force Base in San Antonio Texas. As an enlisted man, I would not be piloting drones. In the Air Force only officers are pilots. Instead I would be a Sensor Operator, which meant I would be in control of the drone's cameras and lasers, and when the time came, I would be the one guiding the missile onto the target.

I completed my training in January of 2011, and 4 weeks later was inserted into my unit's duty rotation. Like most military operations, drone operations are 24/7, 365 days a year. There are times, of course, when operations are suspended due to weather or maintenance, but operating a military drone is not a Monday through Friday, nine-to-five job. You work weekends, you work holidays, and on your days off, you are subject to recall. Being a Sensor Operator was not the hardest job I have ever had in the military, nor was it the easiest. It was however, the most satisfying.

As drone operators we scanned routes for improvised explosive devices (IED), we provided security over-watch as troops slept, and we took insurgents and terrorists off the battlefield. In short, we made sure that as many US troops as possible would come home to their families, alive and in one-piece. We did not, as many have claimed, carelessly and callously kill innocent women and children. And for most of my time as a Sensor Operator, I believed the American people knew this.

In 2013, while sitting in the flight operations center waiting to be relieved off shift, one of our newest Sensor Operators entered and asked, "Master Sergeant Davis, why are

there people outside the front gate protesting us?" Before I could answer him, one of our officers, a former B-2 pilot, chimed in. "Ain't you heard son? We kill babies." The pilot was obviously being sardonic, but despite the coarseness of his answer, he was, I now believe, correct. The reason those protesters were outside our gate that morning and, I argue, the main reason that most people who oppose drones do so, is the belief that drone strikes cause an inordinate number of civilian casualties.

Understanding that the protesters outside our gate were motivated by this belief was relatively easy, as several of them were holding signs that read "Drones Kill Children!" Realizing that drone strikes were not as popular among the general public as the media had led me to believe, took a bit more effort. During my time as a drone operator, I read the newspaper, I watched movies and I absorbed a lot of the negative things that were being said and written about drones. Mostly I just shook my head and dismissed it as typical "anti-war" rhetoric. Again, I believed most Americans knew better.

In 2014 I entered the PhD program at Arizona State University. While engaged in my studies I continued to work as a Sensor Operator part-time. Two or three times a month, usually on weekends, I would drive 110 miles to my duty station and, weather permitting, fly four to six combat support sorties. Because of my close involvement with this issue, my initial impulse was to steer clear of directing my dissertation efforts towards drone strikes. But as I began to read actual research papers dealing with the various arguments surrounding drone strikes, I realized that due to my close involvement with the issue, I was in a position to contribute certain insights and perspectives that seemed to missing in the literature.

Now, this is not to imply that I am an expert on all things related to drones and drone warfare. I am not. My knowledge and experience is circumscribed within the boundaries of MQ-1and (to a lesser degree) MQ-9 operations within certain recognized zones of armed conflict. So while I almost certainly know more about the particulars of drone operations than most of the people who have written on the subject, my knowledge and ability to definitively answer specific questions about drone strikes has well-defined limits. I worked for the United States Air Force, not the CIA. When it comes to controversial issues like "double-taps"—the practice of targeting rescuers with a second missile strike—I cannot definitively say that this does not happen. I can only say that I have never observed it, and the rules of engagement I operated under for over seven years would not have allowed it.

Of course even if I were an expert on all things drone-related, I wouldn't be able to reveal anything here that isn't readily accessible on the internet. The usefulness of my understanding of how drones operate, of what capabilities they possess and don't possess, extends only as far as GOOGLE. If it can't be supported with a web-search, it won't be used here. What my experience does allow for however, is the ability to spot arguments/perspectives that don't quite make sense. To me, the idea that public support for drone strikes is "high", doesn't quite make sense. Neither does the fact those interested in explaining public support for drone strikes seem to be totally *uninterested* in explaining opposition.

The reason most commonly put forth to explain public support for drone strikes, is that they effectively target terrorists while keeping US military personnel out of harm's way. Intuitively, this makes perfect sense. A large majority of Americans support the

military, and an even larger majority is concerned about protecting the United States from terrorist attack. So if a majority of Americans support drone strikes that makes sense right? Apparently for a lot of academics interested in this issue, it doesn't.

Granted, while the body of research examining public opinion and drone strikes is relatively small, it oddly focuses almost exclusively on explaining public *support* for drone strikes. Even odder is the general tone of this research, which seems to view explaining support for drone strikes as akin to finding a cure for a disease, or at the very least discovering the answer to some inscrutable puzzle or riddle. Despite an almost obsessive fixation on explaining support for drone strikes, there appears to be a complete lack of curiosity about what explains opposition.

For me this presented a puzzle. In my experience drones save lives, both military and civilian. Beyond just removing the need for a pilot and aircrew, drones permit near-continuous military over-watch of forces on the ground, and can provide near-immediate air support if those troops come in contact with enemy forces. Route surveillance using drones allows for the detection of improvised explosive devices. Once spotted the location of these devices can be relayed to ground units, who can then safely remove or detonate them before anyone, military or civilian, is harmed. The GPS and laser-guided munitions drones employ are precise, and they deliver a much smaller payload than the weapons used by most other aircraft. This, along with the extended loiter-time drones provide, greatly minimizes the risk of injuring or killing innocent civilians. In effect, drones protect US military personnel, kill terrorists, and avoid killing civilians. So why are so many academics puzzled (and apparently disturbed) by the fact that a majority of Americans support their use?

To me, the most obvious answer was that I had underestimated just how many people believed that drone strikes "kill babies." Apparently, the idea that drone strikes kill an inordinate number of civilians is a conjecture not limited to just the anti-war crowd. Opponents of drone strikes routinely argue that drone strikes are imprecise and have caused the death of thousands of innocent civilians. Regardless of its validity, this narrative has, I believe, taken root in the consciousness of a large segment of the American public. This project represents my attempt to understand how and why this narrative came to be so pervasive.

INTRODUCTION

Every opinion is a marriage of information and values—information to generate a mental picture of what is at stake, and values to make a judgment about it (Zaller, 1991, pg.1215).

On October 7th, 2001, a single hellfire missile was launched from an MQ-1 *Predator* aircraft, with the intent of killing the Taliban's top Commander, Mullah Mohammed Omar (Woods, 2015). Although ultimately the strike was unsuccessful, the United States' use of armed, remotely piloted aircraft (RPA)—better known as drones—to attack both enemy combatants and terrorist suspects quickly accelerated. Since that first failed attempt, the US government has conducted hundreds of drone strikes killing thousands of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters (Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2017). These successes notwithstanding, the use of drones as a weapon of war has become a highly controversial issue.

Supporters of drone strikes point to the fact that drones reduce the risk to US service members by eliminating the need to send pilots into harm's way, and that drones are both necessary and effective at combatting terrorism. Opponents dispute these claims, arguing that drone strikes are imprecise and have caused the death of thousands of innocent civilians. They claim that drone strikes have killed only a handful of high-level terrorists, but that the ill-will created by drone strikes increases terrorist support and recruitment, making the United States more vulnerable to terrorist attack. Opponents further argue that despite the benefit of reducing potential US service member casualties, the fact that drone operators face no real danger may not only make political leaders too quick to resort to force, but drone operators too callous about the act of killing. The debate over the use of armed drones has become polarized, publicized, and political, and as a result, news and

polling organizations have taken an interest in measuring public opinion towards drone strikes.

The overarching question this project seeks to answer is, "What shapes American public opinion on the issue of drone strikes?" Only a handful of studies have attempted to address this issue, and all have been aimed almost exclusively at explaining support. Little to no attention has been given to explaining opposition. Opinion formation is a process. In order to fully understand what motivates Americans to support or oppose drone strikes, an examination of the entire opinion formation process is required.

Why Study Drones?

While ultimately I hope that my ideas regarding the connections between morality, beliefs, and public opinion can be extended outside the context of drone strikes, proximately this dissertation is about public opinion and drone strikes. For all practical purposes, drone strikes are simply another use of military force. A Hellfire missile or laser-guided bomb produces the same effect when it impacts its target regardless of whether it is launched from a drone or from a more traditional aircraft. There is a large body of research dealing with the causes and correlates of support for the use of military force, so why single out support for drones as a special concern?

According to Heyns,[1] drones are "unique." Because they make the long-range employment of lethal force across national borders easier, they afford nations the ability to keep their own forces out of harm's way. As a result, drones make it more likely that countries will go to war and stay at war. Therefore, because of the threat to international peace and harmony they represent, drones necessitate "special care and regulation in their

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[1] United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions and professor of human rights law at Pretoria University.

use." (Heyns, 2015, pg. vii). Riza argues that drones represent a serious challenge to the "warrior ethos." Unlike pilots who fly conventional combat aircraft, drone operators enjoy total "impunity" from the risks associated with war. The immunity from retaliation that drone operators enjoy takes the "heart" out of killing and in doing so discounts the "awful complexity" of war. This negatively impacts the "…conversation among combatants engaged in the game of mortal combat," and threatens to destroy the moral foundations of warfare (Riza, 2013, pg. xiv). Others have referred to drones as, "a lens through which US foreign policy is understood" (Bergen and Rothenberg, 2015), a "revolution in military affairs" (Franke, 2018), and "the ideal, poll-tested counter-terrorism policy" (Cronin, 2013). So while missiles and bombs may be indifferent as to what aircraft they are launched from, for many people drones represent more than just another type of military force. They represent a social and political phenomenon, worthy of special inquiry.

Why Public Opinion on Drone Strikes is "Potentially" Important

Attitudes regarding the value of public opinion to inform public policy diverge sharply. Idealists regard the public as a pool of wisdom where citizens weigh the evidence and make reasoned decisions and believe that public participation is a necessary condition for the construction of sound laws. Realists, on the other hand, view the public as a source of "emotional and shortsighted thinking", and argue that there are several practical obstacles preventing the public from ever being fully informed. As such, the inclusion of public opinion in policy-making can only impede effective governance (Holsti, 1996).

From the standpoint of analyzing public policy however, the value of public opinion is far less important than its effects. Early research into the effects of public opinion on policy-making tended to indicate that public opinion was volatile and incoherent (Lippmann and Merz, 1920; Almond, 1950), and that the public was inclined to blindly follow elite leadership (Lipset, 1966; Verba, et.al.,1967). This led most to conclude that public opinion was not a significant determinant of public policy.

Since the 1970's however, research has emerged indicating that public opinion is important for the formation of policies and/or laws dealing with the use of military force. Examining data collected during the Vietnam War, Burnstein and Freudenberg found that cumulative war costs, public opinion, and anti-war demonstrations all produced significant effects on the outcomes of Senate roll call voting (1978). Other researchers have found a direct and significant correlation between US public opinion and US defense spending (Hartley and Russett, 1992; Wlezien, 1996). Since drone strikes are currently an important component of the "War on Terror" this suggests that there is the potential for public opinion to impact the US government policies on the use of armed drones.

However, when it comes to public policy, Americans tend to emphasize domestic issues over foreign issues (Markel, et.al. 1949; Holsti, 1996). When asked if they feel whether it is more important, *at this time,* for the President to focus on foreign or domestic issues, Americans have consistently, and by a large margin, indicated that domestic issues should be given priority (Pew, 2016). Since the use of armed drones to attack terrorists overseas is ultimately a matter of foreign policy, it stands to reason that for most Americans the issue of drone strikes will be relatively peripheral, and therefore

unlikely to provoke any significant political response. So while Americans may express strong opinions about drone strikes, they should not be expected to cast their vote based on this issue.

A series of questions included in the survey-experiment I conducted for this dissertation asked respondents how a political candidate's support for drone strikes would affect their voting preferences. When asked about a person seeking election to Congress, 30 percent of respondents indicated they would be *less* inclined to vote for someone who expressed support for drone strikes, while 21 percent indicated they would be *more* inclined to vote for this person. When asked about someone running for President who expressed support for drone strikes, 29 percent indicated they would be less inclined to vote for this person, while 27 percent indicated they would be more inclined to vote for this person.[2] This suggests that while there is no clearly discernable preference or rejection for politicians who support drone strikes, a candidate's position on the use of armed drones appears to be important to more than 50 percent of the American electorate.

Of course without any basis for comparison it is difficult to say just *how* important the issue of drone strikes is to this 50 percent. It may well be that for most of these individuals the issue of drone strikes sits well below several other important issues on their list of political priorities. However, in 2015 two members of the *Congressional Progressive Caucus* (Keith Ellison and Raul Grijalva) sponsored an amendment aimed at providing "greater oversight of the U.S. drone program" proving that the potential for

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[2] Specifically, respondents were asked—If a person seeking your vote for [Congress/President] expressed support for the use of armed drones overseas would you be…1) more inclined to vote for this person, 2) less inclined to vote for this person, 3) neither more nor less inclined to vote for this person. Because experimental subjects were exposed to a treatment condition prior to answering these questions, only respondents from the control condition were used in this analysis (N = 98).

organized political action in response to drone strikes is a real possibility (Grijalva, 2014). Returning to Burnstein and Freudenberg's findings that during the Vietnam war Senate voting was significantly affected by concerns over cumulative war costs, public opinion, and anti-war demonstrations, we should expect that if the costs of drone strikes—human or otherwise—come to be perceived by the public as being too high, future drone operations could face significant political backlash and subsequent funding issues. If public opinion shifts towards the opposition of using drones to combat terrorism, then members of Congress may increasingly find themselves under pressure from their constituencies to support measures that curtail, or even eliminate the use of armed drones. Whether such measures were the "right" or "wrong" thing to do would be irrelevant in the face of political necessity. Public opinion on drone strikes is important because it has the potential to radically alter the way the United States currently conducts the "War on Terror."

Why Focus on Opposition?

Public support for drone strikes has been explained as the effect of biased poll questions (Kreps, 2014), the result of a lack of effective criticism from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (Kreps and Wallace, 2016), a desire to keep military pilots and aircrew out of harm's way (Walsh, 2015; Schneider and Macdonald, 2016), and as an anger response to the threat of terrorist attack (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos, 2018). To the best of my knowledge, no attempts have been made at explaining opposition.

Considering the reasons most often given for supporting drone strikes—that they keep the United States safe from terrorist attack and protect the lives of US military pilots and

aircrew while doing so—I believe the question researchers should be asking is not why a majority of Americans support drone strikes, but rather why such a large minority oppose them.

Additionally, it is not methodologically sound to assume that what explains opposition to drone strikes is simply the opposite of whatever explains support. It might be argued that in the context of public opinion, support and opposition are distinct opposites, and therefore, when one studies support one is also, at least indirectly, studying opposition. If a study finds that "X" correlates with support for drone strikes, it seems natural to assume that the absence of "X" correlates with opposition. At the causal level however, such assumptions may not hold. If the goal is to understand how Americans form their opinions on the issue of US drone strikes, then explaining support is only half of the equation.

Scope Conditions

This dissertation deals exclusively with *US public opinion* regarding *US government* drone strikes *overseas.* As such, no data or discussion related to foreign public opinion, foreign drone strikes, or the use of drones domestically (by the federal government or other agencies) is included in this analysis. Additionally, while the both the US Department of Defense (DoD) and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are involved in the US government's use of armed drones in the "War on Terror", this analysis does not distinguish between strikes directed by the DoD and strikes directed by the CIA. The reason for this lack of discrimination is twofold. First, although the CIA has been involved in the US government's use of armed drones from the outset (Whittle, 2014), the organization's role in US drone operations is technically classified.

Furthermore, since most (if not all) drone strikes involving the CIA are combined operations with the DoD Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), distinguishing between a CIA strike and a military strike, is more complex that might be assumed (Chesney, 2016). Therefore, what (if any) role the CIA played in any particular strike, or even what percentage of drone strikes involve the CIA, is unknown. Second, the focus of this dissertation is US public opinion and drone strikes. While some who engage in the discourse surrounding US government drone strikes do emphasize the CIA's involvement in drone operations, many do not. By and large, what reaches the public is a single image, with little distinction made between the effects of strikes directed by the CIA and strikes directed by the US military.

Road Map

The belief that drone strikes cause large numbers of civilian deaths is conjecture. However, for most Americans, the idea that drones are an effective way to combat terrorism and protect US military lives while doing so, is also conjecture. As Walter Lippmann once wrote…

> *Of any public event that has wide effects, we see at best only a phase, and an aspect…Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine* (1922, p.53).

Although the state of mass communication and its relationship with the public has undoubtedly changed since Lippmann wrote those words, his observations are still valid today. When it comes to complex political issues, direct experience plays only a small

role in how people formulate their opinions. This is especially true in the case of the US government's use of armed, remotely piloted aircraft.

Since the majority of the debate over drone strikes revolves around US operations in Pakistan, reliable information regarding the actual number of deaths, and whether those killed are civilians or terrorist fighters, is extremely difficult to come by. With one lone exception, each of the 400 plus drone strikes that have taken place in Pakistan has occurred in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This area is governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), a colonial-era policy that assigns FATA residents the status of second-class citizen. Under the FCR an individual can be held responsible for the crimes of their relatives, and the federal government can seize personal property without warning, explanation, or compensation. The Pakistani military tightly controls access to FATA, keeping independent observers out. Additionally, all US drone strikes occurring in Pakistan are technically covert, and therefore remain unacknowledged by the US government. Even when drone strikes are conducted in places other than Pakistan, such as Afghanistan, Yemen or Syria (which have access issues of their own), the US military is still not completely forthcoming with details of specific strikes, due to a need to safeguard capabilities and tactics. This lack of access to the areas where drone strikes take place, coupled with a need for military secrecy, essentially ensures that your average American will know very little about drone capabilities and operations. As such they will have very little factual basis for deciding what to believe when confronted with conflicting information.

Public opinion is the aggregated result of independent opinion formation. It is the product of a collective discourse, revolving around a variety of competing and

complementing viewpoints. These viewpoints, along with individual attributes such as ideology, gender, experience, occupation, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and political partisanship, are what govern the process of independent opinion formation. When a person endorses a particular viewpoint, they tend to embrace the opinion that is generally associated with that viewpoint. Additionally, when someone endorses a viewpoint, they are expressing a belief. In this dissertation, I present a very simple argument. I argue that beliefs are the main predictors of public opinion on drone strikes. Specifically, I argue that opinions are the result of beliefs, and beliefs are the result of moral attitudes.

Beliefs are not the same as truth. Truth accords with reality, beliefs may or may not. However, while *objectively* truth and belief are not the same, *subjectively* they are. Everyone has had the experience of believing something that turned out not to be true. Most (narcissists and know-it-alls excepted) would admit that at least some of the beliefs they currently hold are likely wrong. Few however would be able to give you an example. People tend to *think* what they *believe* is true. Once a person learns (and accepts) that a belief they hold isn't true, they tend to stop believing it.

John Zaller's *Receive-Accept-Sample* (RAS) model is designed to help examine the process of political opinion formation. According to Zaller individuals *receive* messages about a political issue, *accept* those messages based on how well they conform with prior beliefs, and then *sample* from the messages they have accepted based on which of those messages are currently salient (1992). The RAS model stipulates that once a message is *received*, it is either accepted or resisted. Only messages that are *accepted* are later available to be *sampled* from and incorporated into the opinion formation process. I argue that only messages that are *believed* will be accepted.

When a person is tasked to form an opinion on an issue, what they are sampling from, is their beliefs. Therefore, to understand how a person formed their opinion on an issue, you first need understand what they believe regarding that issue, and more importantly why they believe it. Zaller's RAS model is designed to explain the formation of *political* opinion, and describes the opinion making process as a process of cognitive engagement. According to Zaller, affective engagement is likely to affect opinion formation only when it leads to intellectual engagement. In this dissertation, I apply the RAS model of public opinion formation to public opinion on US drone strikes, but with a distinct focus on affective engagement.

In explaining where the messages that influence public opinion come from, Zaller writes, "To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live" (Zaller, 1992, pg.6). These "others", according to Zaller, are *political elites,* and they include politicians, high-level government officials, various experts and policy specialists. Zaller contends that the public largely receives elite messaging through the popular media, and that even when an individual learns about an issue from a friend or family member, he or she is most likely receiving second-hand information that originated with an elite. He goes on to conclude the information which eventually reaches the public on an issue, is never a full accounting, but rather a "stereotyped" version of the facts.

The RAS model is predicated on intellectual engagement. This implies that the opinion formation process is a fact gathering process, in which people gather information and refine their assessments. Drone operations are classified, and only a small number of

military and military-related personnel have any direct experience or informational access to drone operations. This raises the serious question of where the political elites debating the merits of drone strikes are getting their "facts"?

Elite discourse on drone strikes is divided, with those supporting strikes arguing that drone strikes are effective and necessary, and those opposed directly refuting those claims. So how does the public decide who to believe? Previous research has indicated that the American public is poorly educated on the most basic facts of drone strikes and drone operations (Schneider and Macdonald, 2016). Therefore, the ability of the average American to assess any argument about drone strikes on its empirical merits is almost certainly limited. Because of this, I believe that the process by which most Americans decide what to believe about drone strikes, is largely an affective one.

In making my argument I adhere closely to Zaller's RAS model. Like Zaller, I contend that the messages that have the greatest impact on public opinion formation originate in the discourse of elites, and are transmitted to the public by the popular media. Also like Zaller, I contend that the first step of opinion formation is the reception of these messages. Where I depart from Zaller is in my conceptualization of the opinion process as a mostly affective one. I argue that the most important step in the RAS process, is the *acceptance* of messages. I argue that at this stage, messages cease to be just messages and become beliefs. Messages that are received, but not thought to be true, will be rejected. Only received messages that are thought to be true (i.e. believed) will be accepted, Therefore, only beliefs can shape opinion. This makes understanding personal belief the most important part of understanding opinion formation.

Jonathan Haidt argues that when it comes to opinion formation, "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (2012, pg.1). In Haidt's *Social Intuitionist Mode,* intuition precedes judgment and, unlike in the RAS model, there is no clear distinction made between emotion and cognition. According to Haidt, cognition comes in two forms, intuition and reasoning, with intuition frequently taking the form of moral judgments. I argue that moral judgment is the primary means by which people decide what to believe about drone strikes. When people are faced with conflicting messages, the one they will accept will largely accord with their moral predispositions. Cognition will play a part, only insofar as the message being communicated holds little or no moral salience to the individual receiving it.

This dissertation seeks to accomplish two things. First, I attempt to fill a gap in the literature by examining public opposition to drone strikes. I argue that given the reason most often presented to explain support for drone strikes—that they allow for the effective targeting of terrorists while protecting pilots and aircrew—opposition to drone strikes is much higher than should be expected. I believe this higher than expected level of opposition is the result of the belief that drone strikes kill large numbers of civilians being accepted by a significant number of Americans. Second, I attempt to ascertain how, in an environment of competing narratives about drone strikes, individuals decide what to believe. I argue that belief is the ultimate determinant of opinion, and that, at least in cases where there is very little public knowledge regarding an issue, moral attitudes are the primary determinant of belief. In effect, I believe that the debate over drone strikes has become, for many, a moral issue.

Since the opinion formation process begins with the popular media, in Chapter 1, I examine the media's framing of polls measuring public opinion on drone strikes and conclude that this characterization is based more off normative expectations, than empirical reasoning. I argue that the media's characterization of support for drone strikes as high at least partially explains why the handful of empirical studies which have been done on public opinion and drone strikes have focused almost exclusively on explaining support. After examining this research, I further conclude although the two reasons typically given by the US news media to explain public support for drone strikes—concerns for protecting the United States from terrorist attack and concerns for the safety of aircrew and pilots—are likely accurate, these motivators of support are being effectively offset by a concern for foreign civilian casualties.

In Chapter 2, I expand my study of how the US news media frames drone strikes by examining 1286 articles published by the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal.* Using a "word-count" methodology and focusing on how those killed in drone strikes are described, I find that those killed in drone strikes are much more likely to be framed as legitimate targets than as innocent victims. This accords with previous research on media-framing and drone strikes and raises the question as to why support for drone strikes appears to be declining.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the messages which most affect public opinion on drone strikes reach the public through narrative communication, and that these narratives have had differing levels of success in communicating their primary message to the public. Specifically, I argue that one of the narratives, a narrative I call the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, has been exceptionally effective at penetrating the public

consciousness, and creating an implicit connection between civilian casualties produced by military conflict, and drone strikes.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I develop a theory that explains public opposition to drone strikes as primarily the result of individual moral attitudes. I argue that an individual's decision to support or oppose drone strikes is based off of his or her acceptance of the messages contained within the narratives of elite discourse, and that the acceptance of messages is largely the product of individual morality. In effect, morality determines belief, and belief determines opinion.

CHAPTER 1

EXAMINING PUBLIC OPINION: IS SUPPORT FOR US DRONE STRIKES

"HIGH"?

On September 14th, 2001 the US Congress passed legislation (S.J. Res. 23) authorizing

President Bush to use…

> all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or
>
> persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist
>
> attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or
>
> persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against
>
> the United States by such nations, organizations or persons (US Congress,
>
> 2014).

This legislation, or Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), represents the

justification for the use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), better known as drones, to

conduct strikes against terrorists and insurgents overseas. Since the beginning of the

"War on Terror", hundreds, if not thousands, of drone strikes have been conducted in

Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Syria. While the actual number of

strikes is impossible to ascertain, strikes in Pakistan alone are estimated to number more

than 400 since 2004. In Somalia the estimated number is 42 since 2003 and in Yemen

there have been an estimated 218 drone strikes since 2002 (New America Foundation,

2019). New America does not track drone strikes in any other country.[3] The reasons for

this are unclear, but The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) also tracks US drone

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[3] The New America website does have a section on airstrikes and civilian casualties in Libya, but this section does not deal specifically with drone strikes nor even exclusively with US airstrikes.

strikes in these three countries and their estimates are similar.[4] However, TBIJ also tracks drone strikes in Afghanistan. Since 2015 there have been an estimated 5,888 US airstrikes in Afghanistan, only 308 of which were drone strikes (2019). This means that for the last three years, drone strikes have made up only about 5 percent of all US airstrikes in Afghanistan. It also means that the number of US airstrikes occurring in Afghanistan just since 2015, dwarfs the entire number of drone strikes ever taken in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia combined, by a factor of eight. As Vogel points out, conducted in the proper context and in compliance with the principles of the international humanitarian law (IHL), a lethal strike from a drone is no different than a lethal strike delivered by any other weapons platform. The rules that apply to drones are the same rules that apply to other military aircraft, and the missiles and bombs carried by drones detonate with the same force as similar ordnance released by any other aircraft (Vogel, 2013). So what makes drone strikes such a controversial issue?

Beginning in 2009 US media coverage of drone strikes dramatically increased. This coverage peaked in 2013 and has been, for the most part, steadily declining since. As part of this coverage, major media outlets and polling organizations sought to measure American attitudes on this new and, by many accounts, revolutionary method of combatting terrorism. Initially, public approval for drone strikes was quite high, with polls recording approximately 70 percent support. More recently however, polls have shown support dropping to below 60 percent. In the next section of this chapter I examine this polling, and the media coverage that accompanied it. Specifically, I look at how

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[4] The TBIJ website does not differentiate between drone strikes and other types of US airstrikes. To determine how many of the US airstrikes displayed on the webpage graphics are drone strikes, you must look at the Excel datasheets accessible via links from the main page.

public support for drone strikes was consistently framed by the media as being "high" despite the fact that the reasons being given to explain public support suggested that support for drone strikes was actually lower than should be expected.

In the third section of this chapter I look at the empirical evidence for the two most commonly cited reasons given to explain public support for drone strikes—concerns over terrorism and concern for protecting the lives of pilots and aircrew—and conclude that both these reasons can be overridden by concern for the lives of foreign civilians. This chapter establishes the rationale for breaking from the norm and attempting to explain opposition to drone strikes.

Public Opinion and Polling: How the Media Frames Support for Drone Strikes

Public opinion is the aggregated result of independent opinion formation While individuals may form their opinions privately, without necessarily being aware of other peoples' preferences and choices, individual opinions are inevitably the result of a societal-level discussion. Collective discourse, facilitated by the mass media, creates a variety of competing and complementing viewpoints which individuals choose from when forming an opinion. This is not to suggest that individuals do not make up their own minds regarding what they believe about specific issues. Personal attributes such as ideology, gender, experience, occupation, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and political partisanship also play a critical role in opinion formation. Still, the various viewpoints that people are exposed to, along with the information presented to support those viewpoints, serve as the primary framework for the process of independent opinion formation (McCombs, et.al. 2011).

Frames are cognitive structures that help people organize meanings and interpret events. When the news media uses frames it selects certain aspects of an issue or perceived reality and makes those aspects more salient as a way of promoting a particular "problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, pg.52). By framing public support for drone strikes as high, the news media promotes the idea that majority support for drone strikes is a problem that must be explained. I argue that the news media's characterization of support for drone strikes as high, is based not off the majority standard as it appears, but rather off the normative expectations of those reporting on the polls. If one compares public support for drone strikes against support for other uses of military force, or assesses support based on the reasons most commonly given to explain public support for drone strikes, public support for drone strikes appears to about what one should expect, if not a bit lower.

I believe that this mischaracterization of support has impacted the examination of public opinion on this issue. Although there is only a small body of academic research examining public opinion on drone strikes, the focus of this research has been on explaining support. No attempts have been made at explaining opposition. I believe this unity of focus is largely due to the media's characterization of public support for drone strikes as high. If support is "high", then the question to be answered is, 'why do people support drone strikes?' If support were characterized as "low", the question to be answered would be, 'why do people oppose drone strikes?' How support is perceived affects the questions people ask, and how the opinion formation process on this issue is studied. Additionally, since opinion formation is a communicative process, in which

individuals are guided by the viewpoints they are exposed to, the media's characterization of public support for drone strikes as "high" represents a viewpoint, and as such becomes part of the opinion formation process. Therefore, how support for drone strikes is characterized in terms of "high" and "low" matters not just for how opinion formation on this issue is studied, but also for how it is formed.

Opinion polls represent the outcome of independent opinion formation. Although expressed as general measures, what these outcomes represent are collections of individual beliefs. As such, opinion polls provide direct insight into how individuals think and feel. However, that insight is limited. Opinion polls are designed to inform us of what people believe, not why they believe it. In order to understand why individuals hold the opinions they do, and subsequently why public opinion is what it is, we must go beyond analyzing outcomes and begin examining process. To do this we need to know what viewpoints individuals have likely been exposed to, and what personal attributes likely factored into their opinion.

Additionally, opinion polls cannot by themselves tell us whether a measure of public opinion is "high" or "low." High and low are relative measures, and as such they must have a standard of comparison to be relevant. Ideally, this standard of comparison will be determined based off the reasons we provide for the outcomes we observe. Without an examination of the opinion formation process, it is unlikely that our assessments of "high" and "low" will meet this ideal standard. Without an understanding of why people hold the opinions they do, assessments of "high" and "low" cannot be empirical in nature. Instead they will be based off the personal assumptions and expectations of those making the assessments.

Although the US government has been using remotely piloted aircraft (RPA)—more commonly referred to as drones—to target and eliminate terrorists and enemy combatants since 2001 (Woods, 2015), polls seeking to measure the American public's support for drone strikes only began appearing around 2011. Conventional wisdom, at least among those reporting on this polling, is that public support for drone strikes is high. In this chapter, I challenge that conventional wisdom.

After a review the US news media's coverage of polls measuring public opinion on drone strikes, I apply a series of empirical standards of comparison, and conclude that these standards suggest that support for drone strikes is not high and, based on the reason(s) most often given by the media to explain public support for drone strikes—that they effectively target terrorists while keeping US military personnel out of harm's way—is likely lower than should be expected. I then examine the empirical support for these explanations and conclude that a desire to keep US military personnel out of harm's way and concerns about terrorism *are* very likely key factors motivating public support for drone strikes, but that support for drone strikes can be overridden by concerns for foreign civilians.

A Short History of Polling and Media Coverage

In October 2011 the Pew Research Center posed the following question to 712 post 9/11 veterans and 2,003 members of the general public…

> *As you may know, the United States military has made increasing use of unmanned aircraft called "drones" to launch aerial attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Do you think the increased use of drones by the military is a good thing, or a bad thing?*

Eighty-six percent of military veterans and 68 percent of the general public responded that drone attacks were a "good thing" (Pew Research Center, 2011). In February 2012, a Washington Post/ABC News poll asked respondents to indicate if they, "…strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the use of unmanned 'drone' aircraft against terrorist suspects overseas." When the categories were collapsed, 83 percent of those surveyed approved of drone strikes, while only 11 percent disapproved (6 percent indicated they had no opinion on the matter). Approximately a year later, a Farleigh-Dickinson poll asked, "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the U.S. military using drones to carry out attacks abroad on people and other targets deemed a threat to the United States?" Seventy-five percent of Americans approved of such attacks, while only 13 percent of respondents disapproved (Woolley and Jenkins, 2013). The large majorities returned by these early polls prompted news media outlets to report public support for drone strikes as unequivocally "high." For example, in a column for the *Washington Post,* titled, "The American Public Loves Drones," Chris Cillizza argued that because drone strikes are perceived to be effective at targeting terrorists without placing US military lives at danger, American minds are "made up on this matter", and that if left to the public, "drones are here to stay" (2013). Few in the media were inclined to question Cillizza's assessment.

Referencing a poll taken by the *Christian Science Monitor,* LaFranchi (2013) argues that the "firm majority" of Americans (57%) supporting drone strikes is evidence of "continued enthusiasm" for President Obama's counter-terrorism policies. In another *Washington Post* column titled "Americans are fine with drone strikes. Everyone else in the world? Not so much." Fuller (2014) concludes that the 52 percent of Americans

supporting drone strikes in the poll she cites, "really, *really* don't care about foreign policy right now—especially when they don't have to worry about losing American lives abroad". Writing for POLITICO and citing a Pew Research Center poll which found 58 percent of Americans approved of drone strikes against "extremists", Lerner (2015) characterized support as "overwhelming."

Polling on public support for drone strikes essentially stops in 2015, but during the short time this issue was in the media spotlight two very important messages were conveyed to the public. The first was that public support for drone strikes is not only high, it's unwaveringly high. The second was that the reason Americans are so supportive of drone strikes is that drone strikes allow for the effective targeting of terrorists (which keeps the United States safe from terrorist attack) while keeping US military personnel out of harm's way. While there is some empirical evidence for this latter claim (Kreps, 2014: Walsh, 2015, Schneider and MacDonald, 2016; Fisk, Merolla and Ramos, 2018), an examination of polling trends shows the former to be false.

The Downward Trend in Support for Drone Strikes and the Majority Standard

While polls taken in 2011 and 2012 do show a rather large majority of Americans supporting drone strikes—67.8 percent on average—polls taken after 2013 indicate a *decrease* in average support of more ten than percent, and an *increase* in average opposition of more than ten percent (from 21 to 31.8 percent).[5] With seven polls taken between September 2011 and May 2015, the Pew Research Center has the most

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[5] 18 polls taken between 2011 and 2015 asking similar questions about support for the use of armed drones indicate that prior to 2013 support for combat RPA averaged 67.8% and opposition averaged 21%, after 2013 support averaged 57.3% and opposition averaged 31.8%. For polls taken in 2013 (the largest segment of the sample) support averaged 65.6% and opposition averaged 21.3%. See Appendix A for a list of polls included.

consistent and comprehensive series of polls on this issue, and within this set of polls there is consistent and noticeable fluctuation in support for drones strikes, ranging from a high of 68 percent in 2011, to a low of 52 percent in 2014 (see figure 1.1). This suggests that, at least as of 2013, many Americans *had not* made up their minds on drone strikes, and also casts doubt on the belief that drones are here to stay. Despite fluctuations and a steady decline however, as long as the number of Americans supporting drone strikes stayed above 50 percent, those reporting on the polls appeared to be comfortable characterizing public support for drone strikes as high.

Support for US Drone Strikes
Pew Research Center
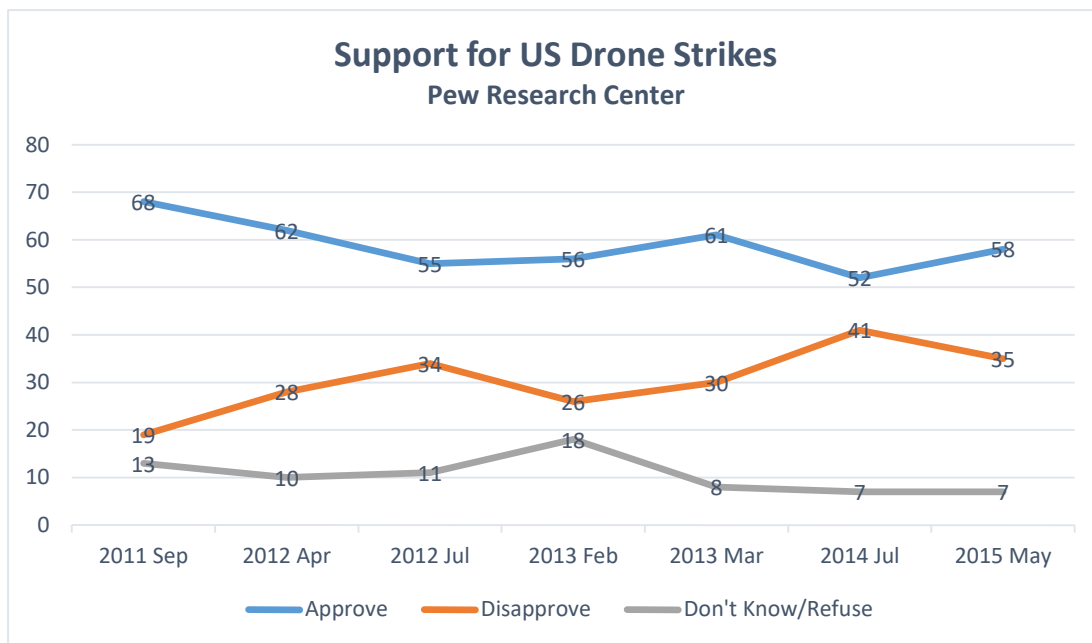
Figure 1.1. Support for US Drone Strikes

Since public opinion is a consensus, the majority standard often feels intuitively correct. The majority standard is not, however, the standard public opinion on social issues is normally held to. For example, In February 2017 *The Washington Post* ran a

story with the headline, "You have to be a Christian to truly be American? Many people in the U.S. say so." The story details findings from a Pew survey that found 32 percent of Americans believe that being a Christian is an integral part of being an American. Both the headline and the tone of the article make it clear that, despite being far less than 50 percent, this number should be considered high. In addition to contrasting US results with Australia, Canada, and select European countries (all of which placed much less emphasis on Christianity as a component of national identity), the article emphasized the significance of the results by pointing out that the nearly "one-third" of Americans who feel this way, do so "despite the history of religious liberty that dates back to the nation's earliest days" (Zauzmer, 2017).

Here the standard of comparison isn't majority vs. minority, it's outcome vs. expectations. The belief that citizens are free to worship whatever god they choose, or to worship no god at all, is woven into our national identity. So when 32 percent of poll respondents indicate that they believe there should be a religious test for citizenship, that number challenges expectations by being higher than what most feel it should be in a country founded on religious freedom.

If the majority standard were the basis being used here, then we should expect these poll results to be greeted with enthusiasm, and headlines of this article to read, "American's Love Religious Tolerance", or "Poll Finds Overwhelming Support for Religious Diversity." In this case however, the 68 percent of Americans who do not believe that a person has to be a Christian to be an American are not the focus. Instead it is the minority opinion that warrants interest and attention, and the message being communicated to the public is that 32 percent is too high. This illustrates that when it

comes to matters of public opinion, judgments of high and low are largely independent of the raw numbers. People's normative expectations play a crucial role in what, if any, significance they assign to polling results. I believe that the reason the media has so consistently characterized support for drone strikes as high is that those reporting on polls measuring public opinion on drone strikes have been applying a normative standard.

When Cillizza, writes "To be sure the average American isn't paying close attention to the issue of drones and how they are being used", that the debate over what the government can and cannot do using drones, as well as what it should be required to tell the public, is a "worthy" one, and that, "making policy decisions based on what the public wants (or thinks it wants) is a dangerous game" (2013), he is injecting a set of assumptions into his discourse, based on his normative preferences. The claims that average Americans are not paying attention to an issue that is worthy of their attention, and that policies based on what Americans *think* they want are dangerous, strongly suggests that in Cillizza's opinion, Americans should not be as supportive of drone strikes as they are and that if they were just better informed, they wouldn't be.

Similarly, in explaining why Americans support drone strikes much more than do people in other countries Fuller writes, "Drone airstrikes look a lot different when you are exporting the strikes instead of expecting them" (2014). LaFranchi refers to President Obama's use of drones to target terrorist leaders as an "aggressive campaign" that has "generated controversy overseas and among counterterrorism experts" (2013). And, after describing US public support for drone strikes as "strong" in its headline, *Al Jazeera* informs its readers that a majority of Americans "still" support drone strikes, "despite criticism that the attacks have taken the lives of innocent people" (Dizard, 2015).

Messages such as these communicate both causal interpretations and moral evaluations which suggest support for drone strikes is inappropriate, and that those who support drone strikes are either uninformed or morally obtuse.

Because these journalists have been exposed to viewpoints which criticize drone strikes, they believe that support for drone strikes *should* be lower than it is. They expect that concerns over government transparency, the opinions of other nations, controversy among counter-terrorism experts, and criticisms related to civilian casualties will resonate as strongly with the public as they have with them, and lead to a majority of Americans opposing drone strikes. When this does not happen, the normative expectations of these journalists are not met, and the outcome of public opinion polls on drone strikes are interpreted and reported as high. When journalists characterize support for drone strikes as high, it is not because a majority of Americans support drone strikes, but rather because more Americans support drone strikes than these journalists feel *should* be the case.

Applying an Empirical Standard of Measure

One general expectation in the study of opinion formation is that related issues should yield similar levels of consensus (McCombs, et.al., 2011). Therefore, the most straight-forward empirical standard for assessing whether or not support for drone strikes is "high" or "low" would be a comparison of public support for drone strikes to public support for other uses of military force. Unfortunately, in the context of the United States recent and ongoing military operations against terrorism, I know of no polling that has addressed public opinion regarding any *specific* application of military force other than drone strikes. This makes a direct assessment of the difference between public support for

drone strikes and public support for the use of other applications of military force extremely difficult.

As part of this project, I conducted a survey-experiment using subjects recruited from Arizona State University's School of Politics and Global Studies student subject pool. Like an experiment, survey experiments compare a "treatment" condition with a "control" condition. Subjects in the treatment condition receive a specific stimulus that those in the control condition do not. The outcomes are measured and differences between the two groups are noted. Because of random assignment, any differences in outcomes can be attributed to the application of the treatment. In most cases, survey experiments provide "the best of both worlds" in that they combine the generalizability and external validity of a survey with the valid causal inference and internal validity of an experiment (Nock and Guterbock, 2010).

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics survey software. Subjects were first asked to complete a short demographics questionnaire, followed by a 30 question moral attitudes inventory (the reason for this inventory will be discussed in the next chapter). Next, subjects were randomly sorted into either one of four treatment conditions or the control condition. In each condition subjects read a short news report (approximately 500 words) that served as the treatment stimulus.[6] Finally, subjects were asked to answer a series of questions designed to measure their opposition to various uses of military force (including drone strikes), and beliefs about the use of armed drones. All news reports were stripped of any source identification and edited for length. Each subject group consisted of approximately 100 subjects.

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[6] The CONTROL group read a news report of approximately equal length describing the awarding of the 2028 Summer Olympics. This news report also did not contain the word "drone."

While the purpose of the experiment was to test hypotheses put forth in Chapters 4 and 5, an examination of data from the control group of the experiment indicates there is no significant differences in opposition to the use of drones and opposition of other common applications of military force, including the deployment of large numbers of US ground troops. While in terms of causal inference, opposition cannot be considered the reciprocal of support, in terms of measurement, it sometimes can. In this case I asked subjects, "Do you support or oppose the United States using [type of military force] to target terrorists in other countries?" Opposition was indicated using a six-point response scale ranging from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose." Responses were coded 1-6, with higher numbers representing higher levels of opposition.

The military force options presented to respondents included, the deployment of large numbers of conventional ground forces, the deployment of Special Operations Forces such as Navy Seals and Army Rangers, the use of manned aircraft, strikes by long-range weapons such as guided missiles, and drone strikes.[7] When the mean levels of opposition for each of these applications of military force were compared, drone strikes are opposed less than all other uses of force, with the exception of Special Operations Forces. However, none of these differences are statistically significant. This suggests that if public support for other applications of military force were assessed in the same manner as support for drone strikes, support for these applications of force against terrorists overseas would be essentially the same as support for drone strikes. This argues against

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[7] The question regarding opposition to drone strikes was copied verbatim from the Pew Research Center, therefore in this question the wording differed somewhat from the question regarding other uses of military force. In the case of support for drone strikes, the question read, "*Do you approve or disapprove of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircraft called drones to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia?*"

the media's characterization of support for drone strikes as "high." Table 1.1 displays the results of the means comparison. While the mean opposition to drone strikes was less than opposition to other uses of military force (with the use of special operations forces being the lone exception) the differences were not significant.

Table 1.1. Opposition to the Use of Military Force

Type of Force	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
Drone Strikes	98	3.00	1.143	
Ground Forces	98	3.33	1.441	0.110
Special Operations Forces	98	2.76	1.415	0.241
Manned Aircraft Strikes	97	3.12	1.467	0.565
Guided Missile Strikes	98	3.26	1.501	0.217

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Yet another way we can attempt to assess the empirical validity of characterizing public support for drone strikes as high is by evaluating support based off the factors used to explain it. As discussed above, the media has tended to explain the majority levels of support observed in polling as the result of a desire to keep US military personnel out of harm's way, and/or concerns over terrorism. How those in the media came to this conclusion is unclear, as research supporting such assertions was not published until well after this narrative became a media staple. However, considering the average American's support for the military and fixation on the threat of terrorism, this explanation is intuitively appealing.

In the next section I will review the research on drone strikes and public opinion that suggests the desire to keep US military personnel and concerns over terrorism are indeed

factors that motivate support for drone strikes. First however, I examine how well public

support for drone strikes accords with public support for the reasons given by the media

to explain it.

Applying Comparative Standards of Measure

If, as the media suggests, public support for drone strikes is driven by the desire to

keep military personnel safe while conducting strikes on terrorists, then public support

for the military and concern for protecting the United States from terrorist attack should

be good indicators of support for drone strikes. When asked who contributes the most to

society, Americans rate members of the military above teachers, doctors, scientists,

engineers, and the clergy (Pew Research Center, 2013a). When asked whom they trust

most to act in the best interest of the public, Americans again give the military top

ranking (Kennedy, 2016). In terms of raw percentages, approximately 3 out of 4

Americans can be consistently counted on to express respect, support, and confidence in

the nation's men and women in uniform (Newport, 2017). This represents 13-15 percent

gap in support for the military and support for drone strikes.[8]

Even more pronounced is the gap between public concern over terrorism and support

for drone strikes. Between 2002 and 2018, Americans were asked how important it was

for the President and the Congress to focus on "defending the country from terrorist

attacks."[9] In every year more than 90 percent of those polled responded that such action

was either a "top priority", or "very important" (Pew, 2018a). This makes the gap in

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[8] This number is derived by comparing the drone support averages discussed in the first section, with the polls referenced by Pew, 2013; Kennedy, 2016; Newport, 2017.

[9] The full question read, "*I'd like to ask you about priorities for President [current president] and Congress this year. As I read from a list, tell me if you think each one should be a top priority, important but lower priority, not too important or should not be done.*"

concern over terrorism and support for drone strikes more than 30 percent. Figure 1.2 displays the results of this polling.

Defending the Country from Terrorist Attacks
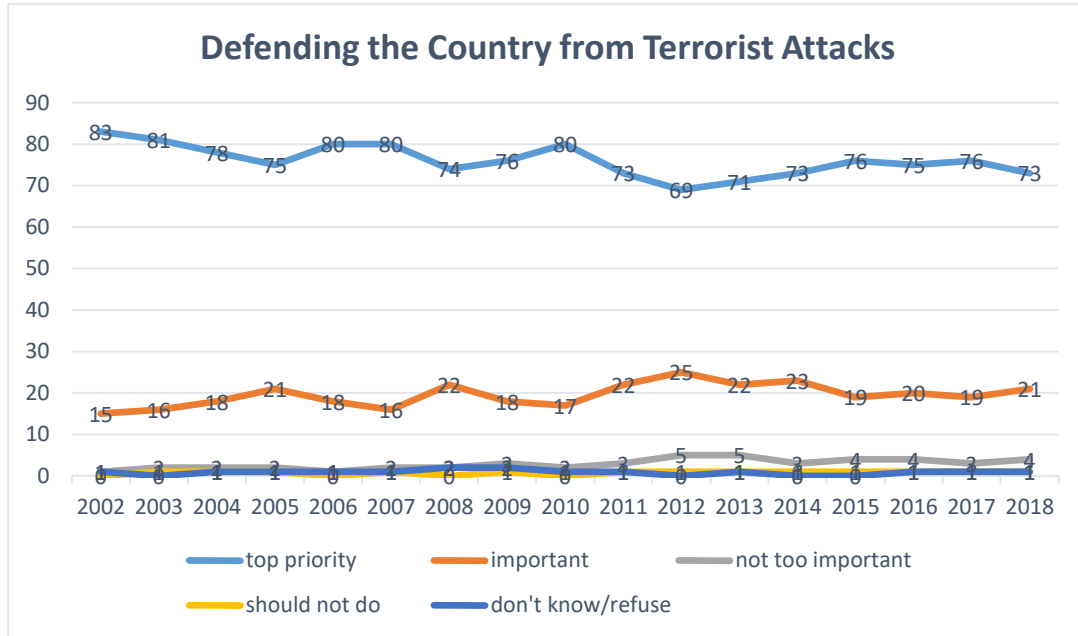
Figure 1.2. Defending the Country from Terrorist Attacks

Even at the lowest point in 2012, fully 69 percent of respondents indicated that they believed combatting terrorism should be a top priority for the President and Congress. This is seven points higher than the 62 percent who expressed support for drone strikes in April of 2012, and fourteen points higher than the 55 percent who expressed support three months later. In 2013 there was an average gap of 12.5 percent between the number of Americans who believed fighting terrorism should be a top priority and the number of Americans who supported drone strikes, and by 2014 the gap had grown to 21 percent. Overall, the average gap between those expressing the highest concern for defeating terrorism and those willing to use drone strikes to do it is 13.4 percent. When those who felt that defeating terrorism is "very important" are added to the equation, the gap rises to

35.6 percent. Overall, when the categories of "top priority" and "important' are combined, at no time between 2002 and 2018 do fewer than 93 percent of respondents express a significant concern over terrorist threat. In effect, while 9 out of 10 Americans are concerned about terrorism, only 6 out of 10 are willing to use a drone to do something about it. If concerns over the threat of terrorism are driving support for drone strikes, this gap suggests something is working against support for drone strikes.

These measures are of course, not perfect proxies. Drone strikes represent a lethal solution to the problem of terrorism. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a significant number of Americans are concerned about terrorism but would prefer that methods such as diplomacy and/or apprehension and trial be used to deal with the threat. In the case of support for the military, it may be that these measures are not simply imperfect, but are *uniquely bad* for assessing the relative level of support for drone strikes. Much of the reason Americans admire and respect the military is that, when necessary, military members are *required* to sacrifice their lives to protect the United States and its citizens. In an all-volunteer military, every man and woman who has accepted this responsibility, has done so willingly. Drone operators sit hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away from the battlefield. So while the use of an unmanned aircraft inarguably removes the physical risk to military personnel, it also removes the potential for sacrifice. As Stern notes, "There is something that feels not quite right about a weapon whose use entails no direct physical risk to the user" (2015, pg.65). Therefore, because they face no risks, the public may not view drone operators as true members of the military. As such the respect and admiration the public generally holds for the military, may not equate to support for drones.

Additionally, as discussed earlier, distinguishing between drone strikes conducted by the US military and the CIA is a difficult proposition. Therefore, since drone strikes are routinely attributed to both organizations, it may be that the gap between support for the US military and support for drone strikes is the result of CIA involvement in drone operations. Polling data collected by NBC and the Wall Street Journal indicates that public support of the CIA has consistently lagged well behind public support for drone strikes (Dann, 2017). If a large segment of the public believe that drone strikes are predominantly the domain of the CIA, then the gap in public support between drone strikes and the US military is easily explained. That support for drone strikes falls somewhere in-between support for the military and support for the CIA suggests that most Americans understand that drone strikes (in general) should not be attributed exclusively to either organization. To what degree the attribution of responsibility for drone strikes to either the CIA or the US military affects public opinion on drone strikes is an interesting question. Unfortunately, I do not, at this time, have the data to assess the effects of such attributions.

However, even if we explain the gap between public concern over the threat of terrorism and public support for drone strikes as the result of a significant number of Americans wanting to address the problem through other, non-lethal means, we still have to ask by what measure can support for drone strikes be considered high? If, as the data I presented earlier suggests, there is no significant preference for drone strikes over other applications of military force, then the gap in concerns over terrorism and support for all uses of military force should be approximately the same. In effect, support for using drone strikes to target terrorists isn't high, its normal.

Similarly, this raises the question of why the preference for drone strikes is not significantly greater than the preference for other applications of military force, especially the deployment of ground troops or special operations forces, both of which place military personnel directly at risk. If the primary factor motivating public support for drones is the desire to avoid military casualties, then something must be mediating this effect. Possibly it is the lack of recognition of drone operators as true members of the military, worthy of admiration and respect. However, it is not the drone operators who are being kept out of harm's way; it is the pilots and aircrew that would have to conduct the missions if drones were not available to do so. Therefore, I suspect that the reason drone strikes are not significantly preferred over other applications of military force is something else. In the next section, I present evidence that indicates public support for drone strikes is indeed motivated by desires to protect US military personnel and concerns over terrorism, *but* these motivations can be overridden by concern for the lives of foreign civilians.

The Foundations of Public Support for Drone Strikes

While the conclusions of journalists may be largely intuitive, there is empirical evidence that suggests public support for drone strikes can be attributed to American concerns over terrorism, and a desire to keep military personnel safe from harm. Again, only a handful of studies have examined public opinion on drone strikes, and virtually all of these studies have focused exclusively on explaining support. Despite this unitary focus on support, these studies do however provide significant insight into what drives opposition to drone strikes. Below I examine four studies on public opinion and drone strikes, two of which provide evidence that concern for avoiding military casualties

contributes to support for drone strikes, and two that suggest concerns over terrorism contribute to support. Importantly, these studies also suggest that both these foundations of support can be undermined by concerns for foreign civilian casualties. This indicates that opposition to drone strikes is quite likely driven by the belief that drone strikes cause an inordinate number of civilian casualties.

Concern for US Military Casualties

Since the end of the Vietnam War it has been widely accepted that Americans will not tolerate large numbers of US military casualties. As the number of body bags returning from the warzone increases, support for continued military action diminishes (Mueller, 1973; Gartner, 2008). Public response to incidents such as the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut and the 1993 'Battle of Mogadishu' stand as direct evidence of Americans aversion to seeing US military service members killed in action. As retired US Army Major General Robert Scales famously noted, America's number one center of gravity is dead soldiers (2016).

Considering the esteem most American's have for those serving in the armed forces, anything that allows the US military to accomplish its mission and reduce the risks to its members should garner a high level of public support. The belief that public support for drone strikes is the direct result of concern over military casualties is so intuitive and widespread, it serves the basis for an entire line of argument *against* using drones for combat. Several scholars have argued that by reducing the human costs of war, drones allow governments to bypass the primary objection citizens have to going to war. By undermining the Kantian notion of the democratic peace, drones increase the chance nation's will not only go to war, but stay at war (Saur and Schornig, 2012; Kaag and

Kreps, 2013; Heyns, 2015). For many, the ability of drones to remove the risk to pilots and aircrew serves as a self-evident explanation to the American public's support for drone strikes. The American public's concern for military casualties however, is not absolute.

A case study of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, found that while Americans are not indifferent to US military casualties, they are willing to accept them, and accept them in significant numbers, if they believe the cause of the war is just, and the chance of success is high (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 2006). Similarly, a RAND report on this subject found that Americans are willing to tolerate military casualties if they feel the benefits of a successful operation warrant it (Larson, 1996). The American public will not limitlessly sacrifice foreign civilians to protect US military service members, and when expected military casualties are low (5-10) there is essentially no preference for the life of a US service member over that of a foreign civilian (Johns and Davies, 2019). Although Americans hold US military members in high esteem and will accordingly place a high value on their lives, this value is not absolute. When deciding whether or not to accept military casualties, the American public performs what is essentially a cost-benefit analysis that includes consideration for the lives of civilians. There is no reason to suspect that drone strikes constitute an exception to this rule.

Additional evidence that concern for civilian casualties tempers support for US drone strikes comes from research designed to discover the circumstances under which Americans favor the use of drones over the use of manned aircraft (Schneider and Macdonald, 2016) In this study, subjects were presented with a series of scenarios for conducting military airstrikes where both "manned" and "unmanned" aircraft were

available for use. Varying the risk in their scenarios between "low" to "high", and giving

subjects four strike options (manned, unmanned, both, neither). Researchers found that

while Americans generally prefer the use of drones, this preference does not hold in

situations where foreign civilians are placed at risk. When given a scenario where there

was a high risk of civilian casualties, subjects reversed their preference for drones, and

chose to use manned aircraft to carry out strikes. This indicates that Americans are

willing to risk the lives of military service members to prevent foreign civilian casualties.

Importantly, it also suggests that many Americans believe that the best way to avoid

killing civilians is to not use a drone.

In an experiment similar to the one described above, Walsh (2015) found that the

prospect of foreign civilian casualties creates a larger negative influence on support for

the use of military force than does the prospect of US military casualties. And while this

effect held true for all uses of military force, Walsh found that among those who

continued to support a use of military force and accept the risk of potential civilian

casualties, deaths caused by drones led to more regret and dissatisfaction with strike

outcomes than did casualties caused by manned aircraft. In effect, respondents were more

upset about killing civilians when those civilians were killed by drone strikes. This

suggests that when it comes to the relationship between concern for civilians and the

willingness to use military force, there is something unique about the use of drones.

Taken together, this research suggests that when civilian casualties are not a factor,

and a perceivable threat to pilots and aircrew exists, those who support the use of military

force will favor the use of armed drones over manned aircraft. However, when the

possibility of killing foreign civilians is perceived as high, the American public will be

willing to risk the lives of its military service members to mitigate this possibility. Concern for military casualties is not absolute, and support for drones can be tempered by the specter of civilian death.

Concern Over Terrorist Attack

A second, closely related, explanation often given by the media to explain why a majority of Americans support drone strikes is a desire to combat terrorism and/or protect the United States from terrorist attack. A recent study provides some empirical evidence for this assertion. Seeking to understand how threat perception and emotions work together to impact support for drone strikes, Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos (2018) conducted an experiment where subjects were exposed to a stimulus making the threat of terrorism immediately salient, and then asked to report their current emotional state and their level of support for drone strikes. Reasoning that terrorist threat could evoke feelings of either fear or anger and citing literature that suggests angry people are more likely to support punitive military actions (Lerner and Tiedens, 2006), the authors hypothesized that individuals who respond to the threat of terrorism with anger will be more likely to support drone strikes. What they found was that when Americans were primed with the threat of a terrorist attack, they responded with anger and increased support for drone strikes.[10]

In an attempt to explain why, despite criticisms regarding the ethics and legality of drone strikes, public support for drone strikes has remained high, Kreps (2014) investigated how the wording of poll questions might affect public opinion. In a sampling of 21 polls conducted between September 2011 and December 2013, Kreps noticed that

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[10] This effect also held for French and Turkish subjects.

embedded within the poll questions was the message that the targets of drone strikes are terrorists. The typical poll question formulation presented the two main claims of the US government—that the strikes do not violate international humanitarian law (IHL) and have legal authorization—as uncontroversial. This led Kreps to suspect that the reason criticisms of drone strikes had not translated into lower levels of public support lay in how drone strikes are framed in most poll questions.[11] According to Kreps, this repeating of the "government narrative" amounts to "sidestepping the questions about whether intended targets are actually terrorists (distinction) and about the amount of collateral civilian damage drones cause (proportionality)," and gives Americans an incomplete picture of the controversial nature of drone strikes (2014, pg.3).

To test her arguments, Kreps conducted an experiment designed to remove the assumption that the targets of U.S. military drone strikes were exclusively terrorists, by introducing concerns over violations of IHL and legal authorization. Kreps found that when concerns regarding the deaths of civilians (distinction and proportionality) were made salient, support for drone strikes was significantly reduced, dropping from 52 to 27 percent. When concerns regarding the domestic and international legality of drone strikes were made salient support also dropped (52 to 36 percent), but not by a statistically significant margin. These results provide strong support for Kreps' argument that the assumption embedded within poll questions that those targeted by drone strikes are terrorists explains the majority levels of support for drone strikes observed in most polling. Taken in conjunction with the findings of Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos, this

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[11] Typical question formulations include, "Do you favor or oppose the use of unmanned aircraft, also known as drones, to kill suspected members of Al Qaeda and other terrorists?" [NBC/WSJ, 2013], and "Do you favor or oppose the United States using unmanned aircraft or drones to carry out bombing attacks against suspected terrorists in foreign countries?" [CBS News, 2013].

suggests that a concern over terrorism is a key factor in explaining support for drone strikes. However, Kreps' findings also suggest that concerns over terrorism can be overridden by concerns for the lives of foreign civilians. Much like in the experiment conducted by Schneider and MacDonald, the introduction of the potential for civilian casualties significantly reduced support for drone strikes. Importantly, Kreps did not completely remove the suggestion that the targets of drone strikes are terrorists from her experimental condition, rather she added the suggestion that those targeted *might* be innocent civilians who have been mistaken for terrorists.[12] Therefore, Kreps' experimental treatment essentially gave respondents a clear choice, support drone strikes against terrorists and take the risk of accidentally killing an unknown number of innocent civilians, or forgo targeting terrorists and insure no civilians are killed. In Kreps study, 73 percent of respondents opted for the latter.

Conclusion

While the desire to protect US military personnel and concerns over terrorism appear to be determinants of public support for drone strikes, there appears to be little to suggest that drone strikes are definitively preferred over other applications of military force. Considering the inescapable fact that drones remove direct physical risk to pilots and aircrew, and the popular perception that drones are an effective means of targeting terrorists, this lack of a clear preference for drones appears to be odds with the perception of public support for drone strikes as "high." If support for drone strikes is not

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[12] The full question read, "As you may know, the United States has been using unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as drones, to target and kill suspected terrorists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. The government's definition of "terrorist" includes individuals who appear to behave in similar ways as terrorists—for example, going to a meeting with community elders—but who may not be confirmed terrorists. Such a broad definition likely means there are more civilian deaths than are actually reported."

significantly higher than support for other applications of military force, especially those which place US military forces at high risk, then either the desire to keep US military personnel safe is not relevant to explaining support for drone strikes, or there is something actively working to counter this concern. Similarly, if concern over terrorism is a significant determinant of support for drone strikes, then we should expect that support for drones strikes to be relatively the same as concern for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, yet we see a large gap between these two measures.

It also does not appear that either concerns over military casualties or the desire to attack terrorists, negates concerns over killing foreign civilians. As discussed above, when presented with a scenario where civilian lives were at risk, test subjects reversed their standard preference for drones, and chose to use manned aircraft to carry out strikes. Similarly, when the possibility of civilian casualties is included in poll questions querying respondents on their support for using drones to strike terrorist targets, support is reduced by almost half. Additionally, a Pew poll taken in 2014 which found that 58 percent of Americans supported drone strikes, also found that 48 percent of Americans were "very" concerned that drone strikes "endanger the lives of innocent civilians" and another 32 percent were "somewhat" concerned (Pew, 2015). In effect, no less than 80 percent of poll respondents expressed concern that drone strikes have the potential to kill innocent civilians. Even if one assumes minimal overlap, that still leaves 38 percent of drone supporters concerned about the effect of drone strikes on civilian populations. This all suggests that if the dominant narrative regarding drone strikes were to become that drone strikes kill large numbers of innocent civilians and are not an effective way of

combatting terrorist threats, a significant number of Americans who currently support drone strikes (potentially two-thirds) would change their opinion.

This narrative exists, and that despite Kreps' misgivings, I believe it has been effective at lowering public support for drone strikes. Opponents of drone strikes routinely cite claims of large numbers of civilian casualties in their arguments against drone strikes, even when their arguments against drones are not specifically about the number of civilians killed. Additionally, they reject the effectiveness of drone strikes in combatting terrorism, claiming that because of the number of innocent civilians killed, drone strikes enhance terrorist recruitment, effectively making the United States less safe. It is the messages communicated in this narrative, I argue, that explains opposition to drone strikes. In Chapter 3 I examine this opposition narrative, as well as two other narratives I believe influence public opinion on drone strikes and test the effectiveness of each of these narratives at communicating its central message. First however, there is one final foundation of support that needs to be examined.

Content analysis has shown that US new media are more likely to frame armed drones as effective tools of counterterrorism, than as weapons that violate international law and human rights (Cohen, 2014; Jones, Sheets, and Rowlings, 2011; Sheets, Rowlings, and Jones, 2015). If this is the case, then it only deepens the question as to why public support for drone strikes isn't higher. In the next chapter, I review previous content-analysis of US news media coverage of drone strikes, and then perform a content-analysis of my own. After examining twelve years of coverage by the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal,* I conclude that drone strikes have in fact been significantly more often

portrayed by the US news media as an effective instrument against terrorism, than as an

application of military force that kills large numbers of innocent civilians.

CHAPTER 2

THE FRAMING OF AN AIRFRAME: HOW THE US NEWS MEDIA REPORTS ON

DRONE STRIKES

All I know is what I read in the papers, and that's an alibi for my ignorance—Will

Rogers

In the last chapter I argued that the news media's characterization of public support as "high" represents a form of "framing" that has impacted how the study of public opinion on the issue of drone strikes has been conducted. *Frames* are cognitive structures that help people organize meanings and interpret events. When the news media uses frames it selects certain aspects of an issue or perceived reality and makes those aspects more salient as a way of promoting a particular "problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, pg.52). The news media's characterization of public support for drone strikes as "high" is a cognitive structure that promotes the idea that majority support for drone strikes is a problem that must be explained.

Public opinion polling is not the only aspect of this issue to which the news media applies frames. It also frames the effects of drone strikes. In the last chapter I also examined the empirical support for the two reasons the news media has traditionally given to explain public support for drone strikes. I concluded that while concern for protecting the United States from terrorist attack and a desire to avoid US military casualties are good predictors of support for drone strikes, I also concluded that both these motivating factors can be overridden by the concern for foreign civilians. Previous research into the framing of the US government's use of armed drones has indicated that drone strikes are predominantly portrayed by the US media in a manner that reinforces

the idea that those killed by drone strikes are terrorists, and that references to civilians being killed by drone strikes are relatively few (Jones, Sheets, and Rowling, 2011; Cohen, 2014; Sheets, Rowling, and Jones, 2015).

John Zaller's *Receive-Accept-Sample* (RAS) model is a way of examining the process of political opinion formation. According to Zaller individuals *receive* messages about a political issue, *accept* those messages based on how well they conform with prior beliefs, and then *sample* from the messages they have accepted based on which of those messages are currently salient (1992). Importantly, Zaller argues that messages that have the most powerful effects on the formation of public opinion are those transmitted to the public by the mass media. "To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live" (Zaller, 1992, pg.6).

Although ultimately Zaller argues that these "unknown others", are *political elites[13]*, among these elites he includes journalists. So not only is the media the medium by which messages influencing public opinion are transmitted, it is also, at least occasionally, the crucible in which these messages are formed. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to assume that how the US news media frames the effects of drone strikes in its coverage, strongly affects American public opinion on this issue.

In this chapter I attempt to determine how the US news media reports on the effects of drone strikes. Using *RapidMiner* text-analysis software, I conducted a word-count analysis of 1286 articles dealing with the lethal effects of drone strikes. My sample consisted of articles published by the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*

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[13] politicians, high-level government officials, journalists, activists, various experts and policy specialists

between 2006 and 2017. By contrasting the number of times words such as "terrorist", "militant", "insurgent", etc., appear in the text and headlines of these articles, with the number of times words such as "civilian", "women" and "children" appear in the text and headlines of these articles, I attempt to ascertain if the US news media is more often framing those killed by drone strikes as legitimate targets, or as innocent victims.

How those killed in drone strikes are most often portrayed in the media is important in the context of my overall argument in that it assists in determining how messages are *accepted* by the public. If repetition is a key factor in the acceptance of messages, then if those killed in drone strikes are mostly portrayed by the media as terrorists, then this should be the message accepted by most Americans. If those killed in drone strikes are mostly portrayed as civilians, then that should be the message commonly accepted among the public. As public opinion appears to break approximately 60/40 in support of drone strikes, it stands to reason that this ratio should be the approximated in media coverage, with those killed in drone strikes being portrayed as terrorists approximately 60 percent of the time, and innocent civilians approximately 40 percent of the time. To be clear, I do not expect media coverage to be such a perfect predictor of support and/or opposition to drone strikes. Rather, what I hope to accomplish with the analysis in this chapter is to gain a sense of just how important, or unimportant, repetition is to the public acceptance of messages delivered by the US media on drone strikes.

The Media's Influence on Public Opinion

According to Walter Lippmann, where personal experience is limited, opinion must be "pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine" (Lippmann, 1922 pg.59). Generally, when people form opinions on complex political issues, personal

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experience plays a minor role. This is especially true in the case of the US government's use of armed drones. Since only a small number of military and military-related personnel have any direct experience or informational access to drone operations, when forming an opinion on drone strikes, most Americans must rely on what they hear and read in the media.

While there is debate over the extent of the media's influence on public opinion, few argue that the media has no effect at all. Public opinion formation is a communicative process, and the purpose of the news media is to communicate information dealing with the important issues of the day. One of the ways the news media communicates this information is through *agenda-setting*.

Emphasis and Repetition: Is the Agenda Being Set on the Issue of Drone Strikes?

A 1968 survey of undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina asked participants to list what they considered to be the key issues of the day. These issues were then rank-ordered according to the percentage of respondents who considered each issue to be a *key* issue. Next, researchers collected the nine major news sources used by these undecided voters and analyzed the content, rank-ordering issues by the number of stories devoted to each issue. What they found was a nearly perfect correspondence between the perceptions of voters and the amount of news coverage. The more media coverage devoted to an issue, the more important the issue was perceived to be (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Since the 1968 Chapel Hill investigation, there have been more than 400 empirical studies confirming this agenda-setting effect of the media. The effect is both robust and widespread, and it has been observed in cities as diverse as Tokyo, Japan and Pamplona, Spain (McCombs, 2004).

There are several ways in which the news media performs its agenda setting function. While the placement of the story and the size of the headline both signal importance, the most powerful means by which the news media signals to the public that an issue is important is through sheer repetition. Over time, issues emphasized in the news tend to take on personal salience and come to be regarded by members of the public as issues they should be concerned about (McCombs, 2004). By placing the issues it deems most important on the front pages and in the headlines, and by increasing the number of stories devoted to these issues, the news media strongly influences the degree to which the public deems these issues important.

Since placement, headlines, and repetition all represent important ways in which the news media signal the importance of an issue to the public, an examination of these elements in news coverage dealing with US drone strikes should indicate the degree and manner in which the US news media has set the agenda on drone strikes. Because the articles I selected for analysis were collected from online databases, an assessment of where each story was placed in the newspapers printed edition was not possible. Although information on what page and section of the paper the article appeared in was available, this information would not help determine where on the printed page an article appeared *in relation to other stories.* In short, the visual and spatial elements that are critical to the concept of placement in agenda-setting cannot be conveyed by stories downloaded from digital databases, therefore no attempt was made to evaluate this aspect of agenda-setting.

To assess repetition and headlines, 1284 articles were selected[14] from the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* for the period covering January 1, 2006 through December 31, 2017. Beginning with just a handful of stories between 2006 and 2008, both outlets show a steep and relatively steady climb in the number of articles discussing the effects of US government drone strikes, which peaks in 2013 with each news outlet publishing over 100 articles on this issue. After 2013 both outlets show a rather steep and relatively steady decline until 2014 after which, the close similarity in publication of articles dealing with the effects of drone strikes ends. Figure 2.1 illustrates this pattern.
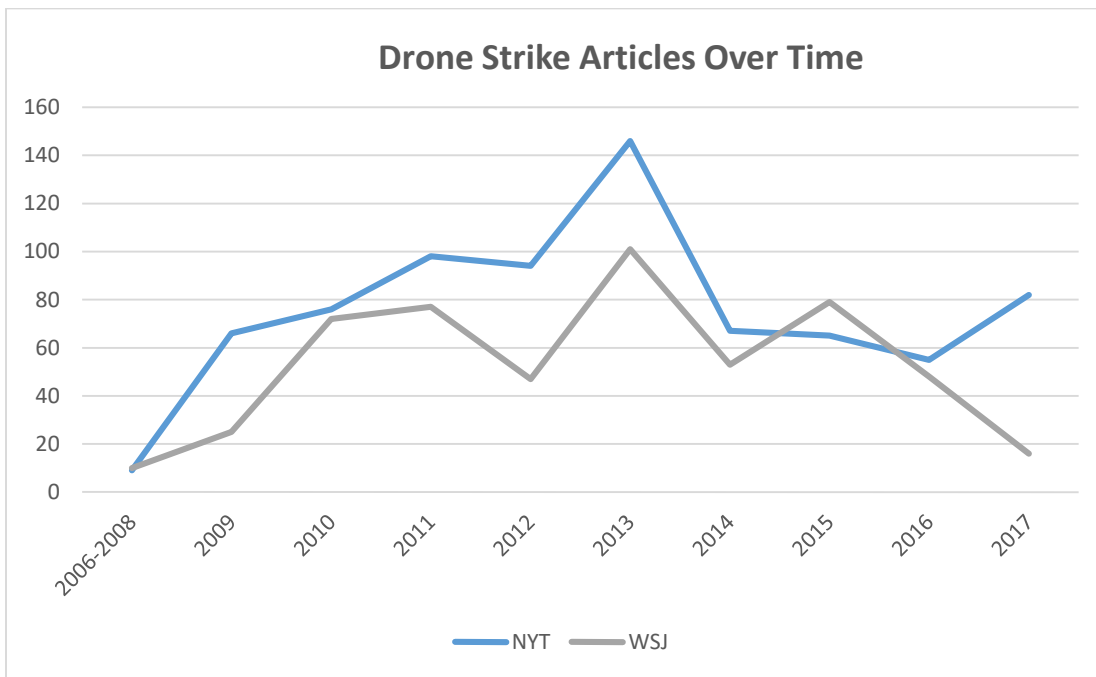
Figure 2.1. Drone Strike Articles Over Time

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[14] A full discussion of the sampling technique used to collect these articles appears in the next section.

In regards to headlines, a comparison of the two news outlets usage of the word

"drone" in the headline of the articles in this sample produces a pattern very similar to the

pattern for articles published, but without the divergence observed in 2014. While this is

somewhat expected, this result is not purely a function of more articles being published.

If one looks at the number of times the word "drone" appears in the headline *as a*

percentage of all articles published that year, there is also a steady increase followed by a

rather rapid decline. The primary difference being that the peak in the percentage of

articles with "drone" in the headline occurs in 2012 for the *Wall Street Journal*, whereas

for the *New York Times* the peak occurs in 2014. Figure 2.2 illustrates this pattern.
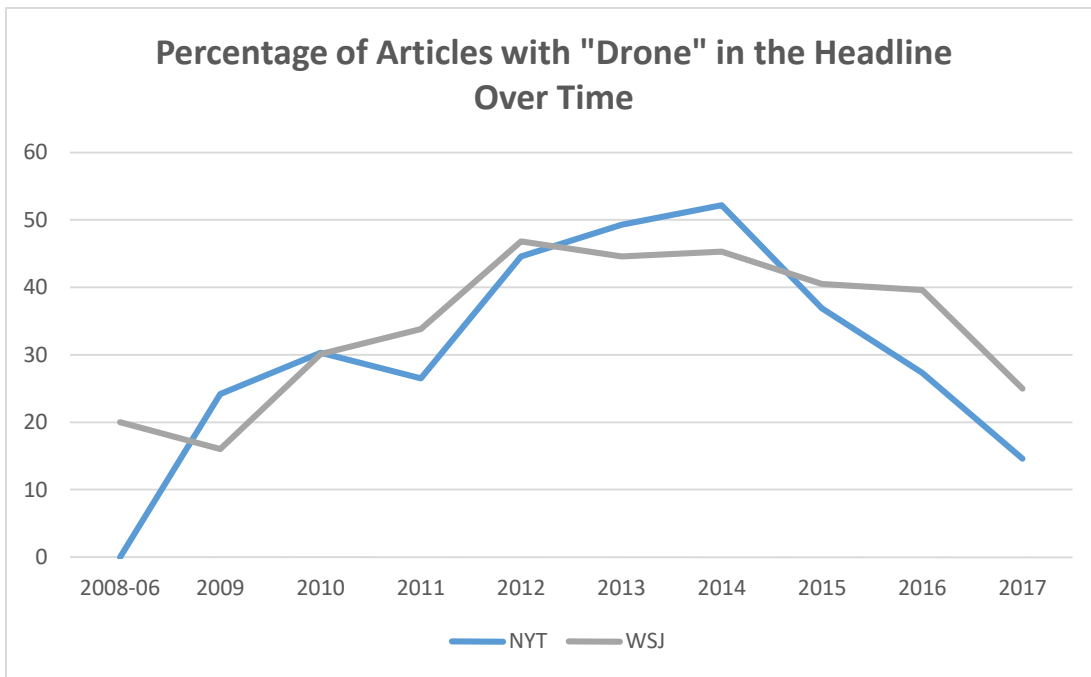
Figure 2.2. Percentage of Articles with "Drone" in the Headline Over Time

This increase in the number of articles discussing the effects of drone strikes leading

up to 2013, along with the increase in the percentage of articles including the word

"drone" in the headline, represents an increase in both *repetition* and *emphasis* of this issue. What it does not indicate, is whether or not the American public was actually paying attention to this increase. Google Trends tracks the number of Google searches a term or topic receives over time and compares these searches as a relative percentage to one another. [15] A Google Trend analysis of web searches for the term "drone strike" shows searches peaking in 2013. Perhaps more interestingly, when yearly article totals are expressed as a percentage of all articles published, and graphed against the Google Trend data, the trend lines are remarkably similar. Figure 2.3 illustrates this comparison.

While a yearly aggregation of web searches vs. articles published is arguably too coarse a measure to *definitively* state that public interest is following media focus and not leading it (i.e. the media is indeed setting the agenda and not just publishing what the public is interested in), as news media coverage of drone strikes increased, public interest in drone strikes also increased. As discussed earlier such a 'public-following' relationship has been repeatedly demonstrated (Weaver, et.al., 1981; Winter and Eyal, 1981; Smith, 1987; Eaton Jr., 1989; Takeshita, 1993; Weaver, 1996; Soroka, 2003). This suggests that the pattern observed in Figure 2.4, represents the media setting the agenda on the issue of drone strikes. That public interest was at its highest in 2013, the same year that publication of articles dealing with drone strikes was at its highest, is unlikely to be a coincidence. Regardless of who was ultimately setting the agenda, when public interest in drone strikes was at its peak, so was news media coverage. Therefore, how the media

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[15] Search results are proportionate to the time and location of a query by the following process: Each data point is divided by the total searches of the geography and time range it represents to compare relative popularity. Otherwise, places with the most search volume would always be ranked highest. The resulting numbers are then scaled on a range of 0 to 100 based on a topic's proportion to all searches on all topics. Different regions that show the same search interest for a term don't always have the same total search volumes. https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4365533?hl=en&ref_topic=6248052

framed drone strikes in its coverage likely influenced public opinion. So what aspects of this issue did the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* choose to make salient in their coverage?
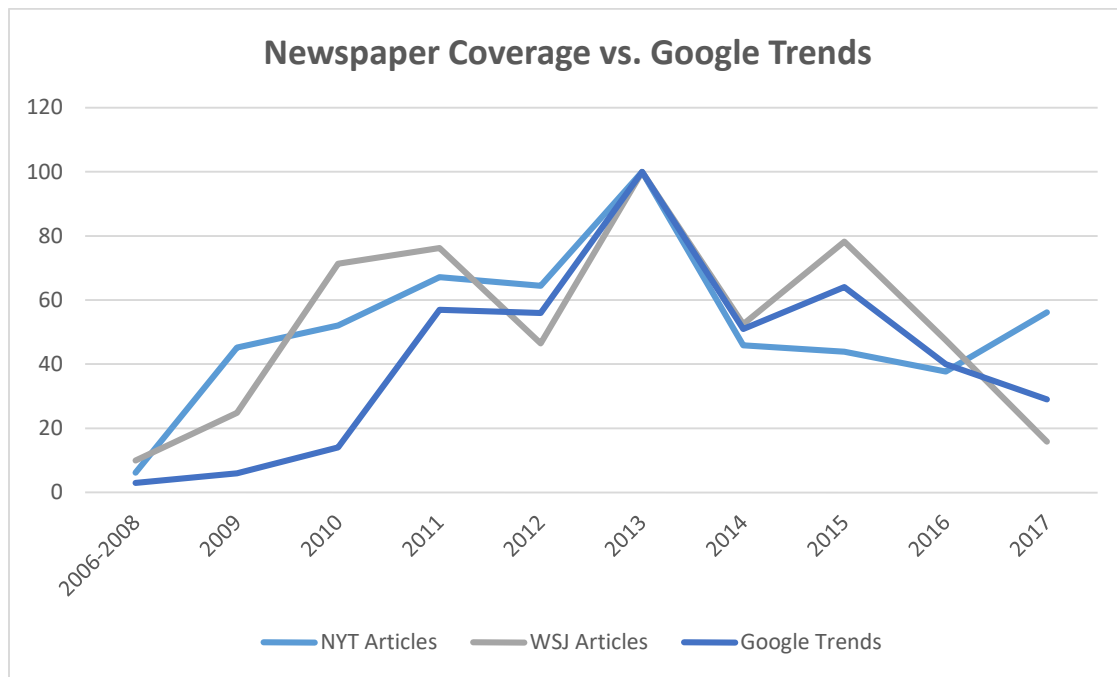
Figure 2.3. Newspaper Coverage vs. Google Trends

Framing: How the Media Presents Drone Strikes

Frames are cognitive structures that help people organize meanings and interpret events. They provide rules for communication and cognition, and how an event or issue is framed directs how people relate to it (Lipisto-Johansson, 2012). Frames provide issue context and meaning through the use of "selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (McCombs, 2004, pg.87). When the media uses frames it selects certain aspects of an issue or perceived reality and makes those aspects more salient as a way of promoting a particular "problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment

recommendation" (Entman, 1993, pg.52). Through framing, the media also has the power to significantly influence interpretation. Aspects of an issue that are emphasized and elaborated upon will ultimately generate more personal salience than aspects which receive abbreviated discussion and/or are excluded from news coverage altogether.

Previous research into the framing of the US government's use of armed drones has indicated that drone strikes are predominantly portrayed by the US media in a positive manner. Using the Vanderbilt Television News Archives, Cohen (2014) analyzed the evening news coverage of NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, and FOX for a 14-year period starting January 1, 2000 and ending January 1, 2014. His sample included 248 broadcasts, the large majority of which occurred after 2010. In coding these broadcasts for analysis, Cohen developed several conceptual frames including a 'National Security Frame' in which the focus was primarily placed on drones as an effective tool of counterterrorism and those killed in drone strikes were portrayed as terrorists, and a 'Human Rights Frame' where violations of human rights and civilian deaths were the central elements. Cohen's analysis also included a 'Technology Frame' in which drones were portrayed as a "fascinating" new technology designed to enhance national security in general, a 'Law/Sovereignty Frame' which focused on drones as a threat to domestic and/or international law and to the sovereignty of other states, and a 'Foreign Drone Frame' that focused on the possession of drone technology by other nations.[16] Cohen found that the 'National Security Frame' was used over three times as much as the next closest frame (Law/Sovereignty Frame), and five times as much as the 'Human Rights Frame'.

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[16] Other frames examined were: Blowback Frame-drones create more enemies than they kill; Domestic Use Frame-focuses on the use of drones inside the United States. Categories of 'other' and 'ambiguous', were used for references to drones not fitting any of the prescribed frames.

In an examination of national differences, Jones, Sheets, and Rowling (2011), hypothesized that American journalists would be more likely to frame US drone strikes as effective, legal, and precise, while simultaneously downplaying civilian casualties, than would foreign journalists. To test this hypothesis, they conducted a content analysis of three media sources: *The New York Times* (American), the *Guardian* (British), and *Dawn* (Pakistan). The study focused on the one-year period from January 1, 2009 to December 31, 2009, and included editorials, features, analyses, profiles, and commentaries[17] dealing with US drone policy. From a total sample of 1,404 articles, 251 were randomly selected for analysis. The researchers coded each selected article in its entirety to determine if the article framed the use of armed drones by the US government as "efficient and effective" or "illegal and inhumane."

The results of this analysis indicated that the *New York Times* was far more likely to frame drone strikes as an effective tool against terrorism (78.3% of the articles examined) than were the *Guardian* or *Dawn* (34.8% and 27.3% respectively)*,* and far less likely to mention civilian casualties related to drones strikes than were the other two publications. In the case of the *New York Times* only 3.2% of the articles examined referenced civilian casualties. This same trio of researchers later used a nearly identical methodology to compare website news coverage from CNN (American), BBC (British), Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya (Arab) for the period of January 1, 2009 to November 6, 2012, and again found US news coverage of drone strikes to be largely positive and significantly less likely to discuss civilian casualties than foreign news sources (Sheets, Rowling, and Jones, 2015). Other researchers who have found positive framing effects in the US

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[17] Letters to the editor were not included

media's coverage of drone strikes include Susko (2014), Dar and Ali (2015), and Davies, Schulzke, and Almond (2018).

Framing and agenda-setting work together to influence public opinion. Before any aspect on an issue can be effectively framed, the public must first be made aware of the issue. The way the news media makes the public aware of an issue, and convinces the public that the issue is important, is through agenda-setting. By "setting the agenda" the news media selects the topics of public discourse and begins the process of public opinion formation. Only after the agenda is set, do frames become the central organizing ideas for news content, and become significant influencers of public opinion ((McCombs, 2004).

As illustrated above, it appears that between 2006 and 2017 both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were setting the agenda on drone strikes. As their coverage of drone strikes increased, so did public interest. While the relationship demonstrated is correlational and the possibility that the news media's coverage is following public interest and not leading it cannot be ruled out, a half of a century of empirical research into the agenda-setting effects of media coverage suggests this is unlikely. Regardless, if the purpose of agenda setting is to arouse the public's interest so that selected aspects of an issue can be effectively framed, the near-perfect correspondence between publication and public interest suggests that how the news media framed drone strikes during this timeframe, likely had a significant influence on public opinion.

Previous research has indicated that US news media sources are far more likely to frame drone strikes as an effective tool against terrorism, and far less likely to mention civilian casualties related to drones strikes. The research detailed in the following

sections, represents my attempt to determine how drone strikes are presented in terms of targeting terrorists and producing civilian casualties. Unlike the previous research discussed above, I will not be coding individual frames within my sample based on valence or accordance with pre-constructed frames. Rather, I will be contrasting word frequency between two opposing categories of terms designed to draw inference regarding how often drone strikes are reported as having killed legitimate targets, and how often strikes are reported as having killed innocent victims.

The use of word counts as opposed to valence measures or pre-constructed frames allows me to systematically assess a larger sample and produces results that are easily replicable. I also examine the sample for references related to the concept of the "PlayStation Mentality," an anti-drone narrative that expresses the belief that because of the design of the aircraft controls, and the great distances that separate drone operators from the battlefield, drone strikes make killing feel like a video game.[18] Since this narrative has often been associated with the idea that drone strikes, by making operators indifferent to the effects of their actions, leads to civilian death, I include it in my analysis.

Method

In order to discover how the US government's use of armed drones was most often characterized in the news in regards to who dies in drone strikes, I conducted a word frequency analysis of 1286 articles published over a twelve-year period by two major US news sources. By constructing several 'keyword categories' I examined the degree to which…

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[18] This narrative, along with two other narratives which focus on the effects of drone strikes, will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

1) Those killed in US drone strikes are characterized as legitimate targets

2) Those killed in US drone strikes are characterized as innocent civilians

3) The use of armed drones is described as a video game

My use of word frequency to examine media framing represents a break from traditional frame analysis methods in that instead of reading each article and looking for specific references to predefined concepts (i.e. frames), I use individual words as indicators of the concept of interest. Again, this allows me to systematically assess a larger sample and produces results that are easily replicable. This method also removes any subjectivity about what is and is not counted as a representation of the concept of interest. This method does present some challenges that traditional methods of frame analysis do not. I address those challenges in a later section.

Sampling

Newspaper articles and editorials dealing with the US use of armed drones overseas were collected from the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* via online databases (Nexis Uni for the *NYT* and ProQuest for the *WSJ*) using the search terms "drone" and "strike". The time-period covered by the sample ranges from January 1st, 2006 to December 31st, 2017, and consists of 1286 articles (*NYT*=758, *WSJ*=528) totaling 1,125,284 words (*NYT*=716,108, *WSJ*=409,176). All articles returned by these searches that met the selection criteria were included in the sample. The selection criteria for articles is as follows.

1) Articles must include the word "drone" at least twice within the combined text of the headline and story. Articles making only a single reference to drones, regardless of context, were excluded from the sample.

2)Articles must be either news stories (including short press releases) or editorials. No book or movie reviews, or letters to the editor were included in the sample.

3) Articles must directly address the United States' use of armed drones overseas. For the purpose of this study, an article "directly addresses" the United States' use of armed drones overseas if it gives details of a specific strike or discusses the tangible effects of US drone strikes in general. Articles dealing with other government's use of armed drones, or the use of armed drones by terrorist actors were not included in the sample. Articles dealing with the domestic use of government drones, commercial drones, or recreational drones were also excluded.

4) Articles where the discussion of drone use was primarily abstract such as coverage of Senator Rand Paul's 13-hour anti-drone filibuster or references to 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney's general position on the use of armed drones were excluded from the sample, as were articles that consisted primarily of speculation about the use of armed drones in the future.

5) Duplicate articles were removed from the sample, except in cases where publication of the duplicated articles was more than two days apart.

Every article meeting the selection criteria was copied into a WORD document, stripped of all byline information, and re-copied into a second WORD document (both documents were retained). Articles were collated by year and then analyzed at that level.[19] Limiting the sample to articles that include the word drone at least twice

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[19] Due to the small number of articles for 2006, 2007, and 2008, these years were combined for analysis.

was a concession towards making the sample size manageable. The rationale for excluding book and movie reviews is that most of these articles review works of fiction. Since the focus of this analysis is *media* framing, letters to the editor were excluded because they represent the opinions of media consumers, not media producers. The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were selected as sources because they represent two large, reputable, nationally circulated newspapers with a significant online presence, and are generally viewed as having differing ideological perspectives.

Analysis and Coding

To test for the prevalence of messages that communicate the idea that operating a combat drone is like playing a video game, I created the keyword category *videogame,* which included the words *video, game[s], joystick[s],* and *PlayStation.*[20] To test for the prevalence of messages that communicate the idea that the victims of drone strikes are terrorists and messages that communicate the idea that victims of drone strikes are civilians, I created two contrasting keyword categories: *targets* and *victims.* Words included in the *targets* category were *terrorist[s], militant[s], insurgent[s], Qaeda,* and *Taliban*. Words included in the *victims* category were *civilian[s], woman, women, child, children, grandchildren,* and *schoolchildren*.[21] Importantly, the word *wedding[s]* was considered for inclusion in this category. However, the concept captured by wedding(s) is

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[20] The words "button(s)", "Xbox", and "Nintendo" were also considered for this category but were excluded based on an extremely low-level of occurrence; button(s) occurs only 12 times in the entire sample, and Xbox and Nintendo occur only once each.

[21] The word "elderly" was also considered for this category but was excluded based on an extremely low-level of occurrence; the word elderly occurs only five times in the entire sample. Additionally, the concept captured by wedding(s) is a bit problematic as it refers to an event and not people. While it is likely that a reference to a drone strike directed against a wedding would suggest the killing of innocent civilians, it is also likely that those killed would be more directly referenced in other sections of the article. Such references could potentially lead to double-counting.

a bit problematic as it refers to an event and not people. While it is likely that a reference to a drone strike directed against a wedding would strongly suggest the killing of innocent civilians, it is also likely that those killed would be more directly referenced in other sections of the article. So while the salience of the word wedding(s) is likely quite strong in regards to public perceptions of who is being killed in drone strikes, the inclusion of it in a category designed to measure the repetition of the concept would potentially equate to double-counting.[22] Additionally, there were only 30 occurrences of the word wedding(s) in the entire sample, and the majority of these occurrences appear to be in reference to a strike occurring in Yemen in December of 2013.

A control keyword category consisting of the word *people*, was also included in this part of the analysis, as were two keyword categories designed to test the validity of the article selection process. These *validity* categories included the words *drone[s], airstrike[s], strike[s],* and *missile[s]* (V1), and *kill[s], killed, killing, death[s],* and *dead* (V2). Using *RapidMiner* data science software, I examined the entire sample (1,286 articles totaling 1,125, 284 words) for relative and absolute word-usage in all keyword categories.

The words chosen for each keyword category were based on my best assessment of the words most likely to indicate the presence of frames representing the key concepts of the narratives discussed in Chapter Two. Prior to data-mining the text, I created word-

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[22] For example, the following is an excerpt from a 2013 NYT article reporting on a drone strike conducted in Yemen against vehicles that were part of a wedding convoy, "Most of the dead appeared to be people suspected of being militants linked to Al Qaeda, according to tribal leaders in the area, but there were also reports that several civilians had been killed"
https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/world/middleeast/drone-strike-in-yemen-hits-wedding-convoy-killing-11.html

clouds of each year's data using *WordItOut* word-cloud creation software.[23] These word-clouds provided a general sense of which terms were being used most frequently in the sample of articles, allowing me to refine my categories and select the most relevant terms. The reasoning behind the keyword categories *targets* and *victims* is the assumption that if my sample does indeed represent reports and discussions of the US government's use of armed drones to conduct lethal operations overseas, then those being killed by these strikes should be referenced in one of two ways: either as legitimate *targets* of aggressive action or as unintended *victims*. The inclusion of the category *people* was to test this assumption that those being killed in drone strikes were likely being referred to as either *targets* or *victims* and not a more neutral term. The creation of the *validity* categories was to insure the articles selected were actually discussing drones and military strikes and not just counter-terrorism in general (V1), and that these strikes were referencing lethal outcomes (V2).

Results

Sample Validity

For the articles collected from the *New York Times* (N=758), the word frequency rates[24] for the validity categories were .0122 for V1 (*drone[s], airstrike[s], strike[s], missile[s]*) and .0061 for V2 (*kills[s], killed, killing, death[s], and dead*). When compared to the word frequency rate for the category *targets* (*terrorist[s], militant[s], insurgent[s], Qaeda,* and *Taliban*) which was .0109, this suggests that the articles selected from the *New York Times* are as much about drones and drone strikes as they are

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[23] free at https://worditout.com/

[24] Derived by dividing the total occurrences of all words in the category combined by the total number of words in the sample.

about terrorism in general, and that the lethal consequences of drone strikes are being frequently discussed. For the articles collected from the *Wall Street Journal,* the word frequency rates for the validity categories were .0141 for V1, .0066 for V2, and .0131 for *targets*. These frequency rates suggest that the articles selected from the *Wall Street Journal* for this analysis are also as much about drones and drone strikes as they are about terrorism in general, and that the lethal consequences of drone strikes are being frequently discussed.

Drones are Like Video Games

When the entire sample was examined the word *joystick[s]* appeared only 11 times (*NYT*=9, *WSJ*=2) and the word *PlayStation* only three (*NYT*=3, *WSJ*=0). With 369 total occurrences the word *video* appeared significantly more (*NYT*=281, *WSJ*=88), but considering that in order to communicate the essence of the narrative being examined it would need to be used in concert with the word *game[s],* the maximum number of times a reference to a "video game" or "video games" could have appeared in the sample is 78 (*NYT*=57, *WSJ*=21). Taken as a whole, the words in this category constitute, at best, 92 references to the use of an armed drone being somehow similar to playing a video game. Even if one assumes that every use does indeed represent such a reference, *and* that each reference occurs in a separate article, articles containing such a reference would still represent only 7% of the entire sample. This indicates that neither the *New York Times* nor the *Wall Street Journal* often framed the US government's use of armed drones as being similar to playing video games. For that reason, no further analysis was conducted on this keyword category.

Legitimate Targets vs. Innocent Victims

When articles collected from the *New York Times* (N=758) were examined for references to victims being either terrorists or civilians, the category *targets* had a word frequency rate of .0109, while the categories of *victim* and *people* had word frequency rates of .0023 and .0015, respectively. In relative terms, this translates into a usage ratio of more than 4:1 in favor of *targets* over *victims*. This indicates that those killed by US government drone strikes are far more likely to be described in news media coverage as legitimate targets than as innocent civilians. Additionally, since the word frequency rate of the category *people* is lower than the word frequency rate for either *targets* or *victims,* this indicates that journalists are not often defaulting to a neutral term to describe those killed in drone strikes.

When articles collected from the *Wall Street Journal* (N=528) were examined for references to victims being either terrorists or civilians, the category *targets* had a word frequency rate of .0131, while the categories of *victim* and *people* had word frequency rates of .0015 and .0013, respectively. In relative terms, this translates into a usage ratio of more than 8:1 in favor of *targets* over *victims,* again indicating that those killed by US government drone strikes are far more likely to be described in news media coverage as legitimate targets than as innocent civilians. Additionally, since the word frequency rate of the category *people* is once again the lowest of the three categories, this indicates that journalists writing for the *Wall Street Journal* are also not defaulting to a neutral term to describe those killed in drone strikes. Graphic representations of these results are depicted in Figures 2.4 and 2.5.
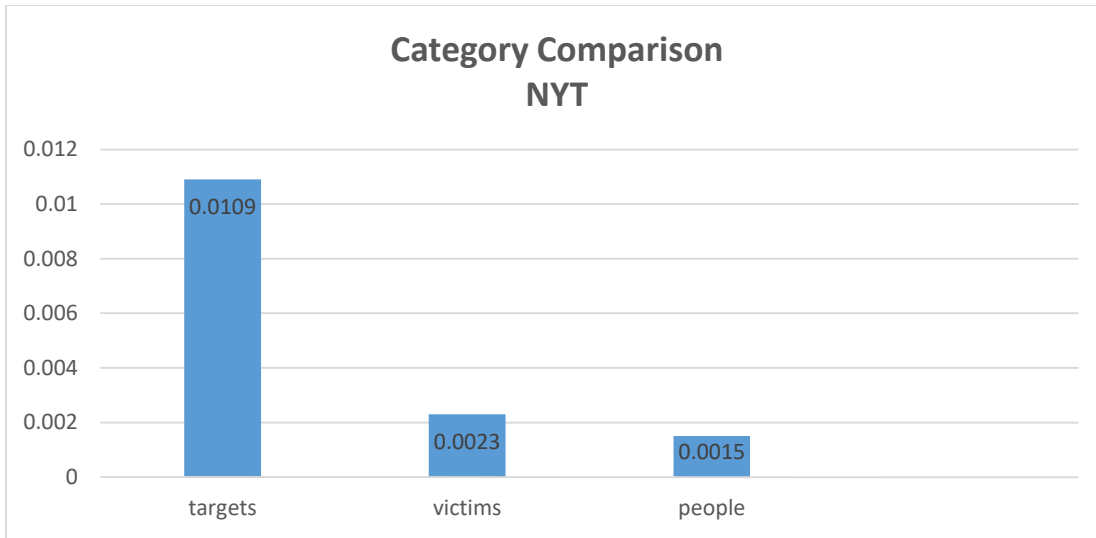
Figure 2.4. Category Comparison NYT
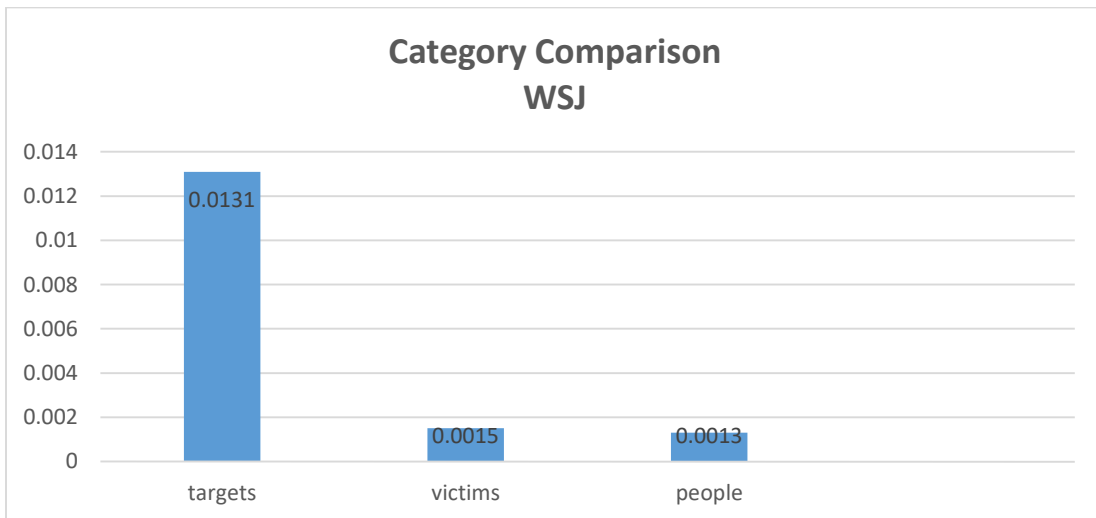
Figure 2.5. Category Comparison WSJ

Additionally, the difference in the word frequency rates between the categories does not vary significantly over time. So not only do both outlets overwhelmingly use words associated with the *targets* category more than they do words associated with the *victims*

category, they do so consistently. Graphic representations of these results are depicted in Figures 2.6 and 2.7.

When expressed as relative percentages, the gap between the keyword category *targets* and the keyword category *victims* never drops below 40 percentage points for the *New York Times*. For the *Wall Street Journal,* this gap never drops below 58 percentage points. Year after year, the majority of articles in this analysis appear to portray those killed in drone strikes as legitimate targets and not innocent victims. This indicates that, at least in terms of who is killed, drone strikes are not generally being framed by the media in a negative manner. According to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal,* drones kill terrorists.
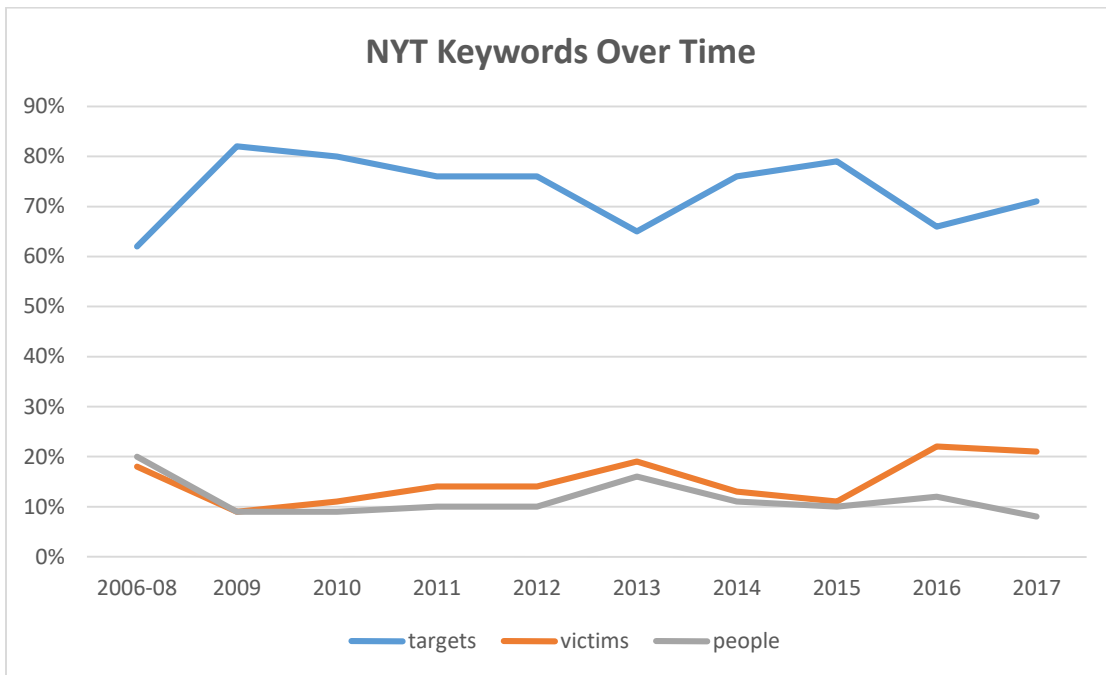
Figure 2.6. NYT Keywords Over Time
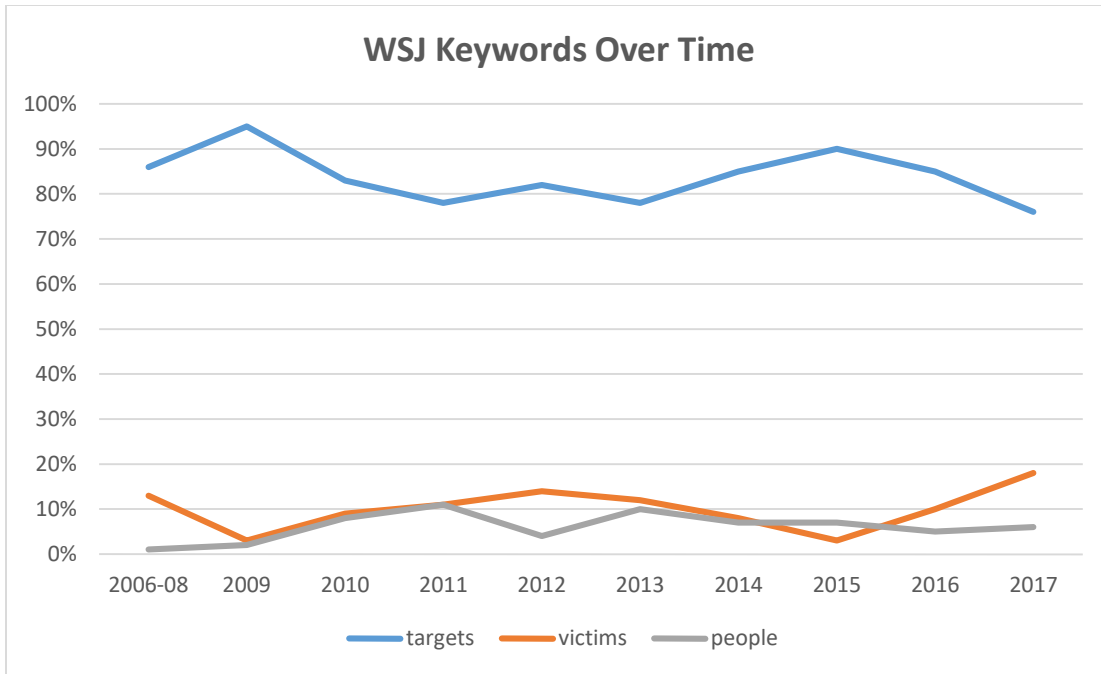
Figure 2.7. WSJ Keywords Over Time

In Chapter 1, I presented evidence that concerns over terrorism and a desire to protect

US military personnel motivate public support for drone strikes, but that these

motivations can be overridden by concern for the lives of foreign civilians. If frames

provide issue context, and repetition is the primary way the media communicates what is

important to the public, then the predominant message being sent to the public by the

New York Times and the *Wall Street Journal* between 2006 and 2017 was that drone

strikes are an effective means of killing terrorists and collateral damage in the form of

civilian casualties is relatively rare. This suggests that the average American reading the

news receives the message that drones are weapons being effectively used against

terrorists, not instruments of civilian death. In effect, the messages being delivered to the

American public by the US news media regarding the US government's use of armed

drones are largely messages that should encourage public support.

While these findings coincide with previous research, considering the changes in public support discussed in the last chapter, they are also a bit puzzling. If the US news media has consistently, and by a wide margin, framed those killed in drone strikes as terrorists and not innocent civilians then why has support for drone strikes steadily declined, while opposition for drone strikes steadily increased? If public support for drone strikes is largely based on concerns over terrorism and avoiding US military casualties, and opposition is based on concern for the lethal effects of drone strikes on foreign civilians, then we should not be seeing this trend.

There are of course a few obvious explanations. First it may simply be that despite corresponding well with previous research, my method of examining how the US news media frames the effects of drone strikes is fundamentally flawed. A word-count analysis differs in some very significant ways from traditional framing-analysis procedures. It may be that my analysis is fine, but that in reality, coverage of an issue by the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* is just not that relevant in the formation of public opinion. A recent report from the Pew Research Center states that fully 68 percent of American adults get at least *some* of their news from social media (Matsa and Shearer, 2018). And while 57 percent of these people say they expect this news to be largely inaccurate, this still raises questions as to what role traditional news sources now play in the formation of public opinion. However, it could also be that repetition of a frame is not as important as the salience of a frame. It may be that there is a distinct difference in how the message that drone strikes target and kill terrorists, and the message that drone strikes lead to the death of innocent civilians are being presented to the public. Each of these explanations will be examined and discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Discussion and Further Analysis

The primary assumption made in any word count analysis is that the words which are mentioned most often reflect the greatest concern. While this assumption is often valid, there are pitfalls in this approach that must be accounted for. The use of synonyms may lead to the underestimation of an important concept. Similarly, the problem of *multiple meanings* can also create an obstacle to correct interpretation (Stemler, 2001). The primary assumption of my analysis goes slightly beyond reflections of greatest concern and predicts that certain word choices indicate specific informational frames. This makes the problems presented by synonyms and multiple meanings especially relevant. As previously discussed, I have attempted to compensate for the complication of synonyms by using categories of words as units of analysis, and by creating word-clouds to help guide my choice of words to be placed into each specific category. As for the complications multiple meanings might present, one of my validity categories includes the word "strike." While the word strike can refer to a violent kinetic action, it can also mean an organized protest in which employees refuse to work, or a baseball pitch that is swung at and missed, fouled off, or allowed to pass through the "strike zone" uncontested. Considering the article selection criteria used and the relative frequency with which the word strike appears in relation to other words used in this analysis such as drone and missile, it is unlikely that many of the uses of the word strike refer to either baseball or organized labor. Again, the careful selection of data and keyword categories helps mitigate this concern. It is important to understand however, that when a word count methodology is used problems such as these cannot be completely eliminated, only alleviated.

Another potential pitfall of word count analysis that is much harder to overcome than either synonyms or multiple meanings is context. Again, my analysis assumes that every use of the word civilian occurs in the context of claims of civilian casualties. A complete reading of a 2010 article from *The New York Times* focusing on the C.I.A.'s involvement in US drone strikes shows that this is not the case.

> *The strikes, carried out from a secret base in Pakistan and controlled by satellite link from C.I.A. headquarters in Virginia, have been expanded by President Obama and praised by both parties in Congress as a potent weapon against terrorism that puts no American lives at risk. That calculation must be revised in light of the Khost bombing, which revealed the critical presence of C.I.A. officers in dangerous territory to direct the strikes. Some legal scholars have questioned the legitimacy under international law of killings by a civilian agency in a country where the United States is not officially at war (Shane and Schmitt, 2010)*

While the reference here is clearly not a positive framing of US drone strikes, it also is clearly not a reference to drones causing civilian casualties. In this case, the word civilian will be taken out of context by a word count analysis. Other instances of faulty interpretation due to context occur when the reference to the concept being assumed is a negative one. For example, a 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article contained the following passage…

> *Mr. Obama recently defended the secretive drone program, saying "drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties" (Lee and Entous, 2012).*

Here, the denial of civilian casualties acts to negate the frame and leads to the faulty assumption that the reference is to drone strikes killing civilians. Similarly, even when the use of a word does appear in the predicted context, the text surrounding the word can dampen or even negate the valence of the framing.

> *By emphasizing drone strikes, Mr. Obama need not bother with the tricky issues of detention and interrogation because terrorists tracked down on his watch are generally incinerated from the sky, not captured and questioned (Baker, 2013).*

Here, while the context is correct, and the use of the word "terrorists" is being used to represent the idea that drone strikes kill terrorists, the discourse regarding President Obama's motivations for using drones for this purpose makes the reference negative. Since my word count analysis assumes that references to terrorists, militants, insurgents, etc. will frame drone strikes in a positive light, passages such as these, where the frame is negated and/or valence reversed, can lead to the over- or underestimation of critical concepts. Ideally however, such instances of missed context will, in the end, even out, and a largely accurate picture will emerge. Denials of civilian casualties will approximately equal denials of terrorist activity, as will criticisms that skew context. Considering the large disparity found between the use of the words in the "target" and "victim" categories, I feel confident that the results of my analysis accurately represent how drone strikes are most often framed by the US media. However, in order to better address concerns of context, I performed a more traditional framing analysis on a randomly selected sub-sample of articles.

I selected 10 percent of the articles published in 2013 from both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* (15 articles from the NYT, 10 articles from the WSJ).[25] I examined each article for references to those being targeted and/or killed by drone strikes and found that approximately 62 percent of the time, those being referred to were described using words from the *target* category used in my analysis. Thirty-four percent of the time those being referenced as targeted and/or killed by drone strikes were referred to using words from the *victim* category, and four percent of the time they were referred to as *people*. While the disparity of references to drone strikes killing terrorists vs. drone strikes killing civilians is not as high in this sample as the overall word count analysis suggests, it still represents a nearly two-to-one ratio and therefore supports the basic conclusion that drones are usually being framed as a weapon used against terrorists, not a killer of women and children.

In regards to context, there were ten instances of frame negation (seven for the idea that drones kill terrorists and three for the idea that drones kill civilians) and three out of context uses of the word civilian (civilian court, civilian aircraft, civilians killed by militants). Interestingly, two somewhat common framings found in this sample were the idea that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism (11 references), and the idea of a need for greater transparency regarding drone strikes (8 references). There were no framings of drones as a means of protecting pilots, and only one framing that referenced any element of the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative. Considering that both the idea that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism and the idea that the US government is not forthcoming in regards to who is actually being targeted and killed in drone strikes

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[25] 2013 was chosen because in addition to being the year the most articles were published by each news outlet it was also the year GOOGLE trends indicated the most public interest in drone strikes.

are negative framings, it is possible that overall, US news media coverage of drone strikes is much more balanced (at least for 2013) than my word count analysis indicates. However, considering that out of the 25 articles examined six focused almost entirely on strikes that killed specific terrorists or targeted specific terrorist groups and only one focused exclusively on civilians killed in drone strikes, it seems that while negative framing is certainly present, drones are most often presented as effective weapons against terror.

Considering the relatively small number of people who have any first-hand knowledge of the US government's drone program it is highly unlikely that public opinion is being driven by relevant personal experience, or through conversations with people who have first-hand knowledge or experience. Again, public opinion formation is a communicative process, so this still leaves the mass media as the most likely medium through which people receive information about drone strikes. It may be that public opinion *is* being largely driven by messages communicated through the media, just not through the news media. As stated earlier, 68 percent of American adults now get at least some of their news from social media, and while more than half are skeptical of the accuracy of the news they receive, the reason most often cited for using this medium to gather information is "convenience" (Matsa and Shearer, 2018).

Without knowing how large the presence is of traditional news sources on social media platforms and/or how frequently these platforms are used to connect to traditional media sources, it is extremely difficult to estimate what impact publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* may actually be having on the formation of public opinion. Additionally, drones are frequently featured in film and television, quite

often in a less than favorable light. Self-styled documentaries like *National Bird* (2016), *Drone* (2014), and *Dirty Wars* (2013) present a decidedly negative view of US drone strikes, as do feature films such as *Drones* (2013), *Good Kill* (2014), and *London Has Fallen* (2016). The fourth season of the popular TV series *Homeland* begins with a "successful" drone strike that, in addition to its intended target, also kills 40 innocents at a wedding. Therefore, it is possible that drone strikes are being framed far more negatively by other forms of mass media.

Finally, although repetition has generally been considered as one of the most important ways the media communicates what is important, framing is more than repetition. Framing is a way of promoting a particular "problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, pg.52). If civilian deaths caused by drone strikes are being framed in a way that presents a moral evaluation that is significantly negative and significantly salient, these frames may be more influential on public opinion, than frames which simply describe terrorists being killed in a very straightforward and objective fashion. Compare the following.

This excerpt from the *New York Times* describes a drone strike conducted against Taliban leader Wali ur-Rehman.

> *Two Pakistani security officials, one speaking from Peshawar, the regional*
> *capital, said that Mr. Rehman was among five people killed when missiles fired*
> *from a drone struck a house outside Miram Shah, the main town in the tribal*
> *district of North Waziristan, about 3 a.m. Wednesday. A local resident, reached*
> *by phone, said that shortly after the strikes, three pickup trucks carrying fighters*

rushed to the site to retrieve bodies and look for wounded militants. Two Uzbek

militants were also killed, Pakistani officials said (Mazzatti and Walsh, 2013).

The coverage of this strike makes it clear that Mr. Rehman was a Taliban commander,

and strongly suggests that those killed along with him were Taliban fighters. This excerpt

is typical of how the US news media communicates the message that drones kill

terrorists. Contrast this with an excerpt from opinion editorial published a week earlier by

The New York Times denouncing the President Obama's use of drone strikes in the war

on terror.

When Barack Obama ran for president of the United States in 2008, his

message of hope and change gave us, the citizens of lesser republics, hope that

he would close Guantánamo and shut down programs where extrajudicial

killing or bribing foreign heads of state with American taxpayer dollars had

become standard practice.

Instead, a few days after his inaugural address, a C.I.A.-operated drone

dropped Hellfire missiles on Fahim Qureishi's home in North Waziristan, killing

seven of his family members and severely injuring Fahim. He was just 13 years

old and left with only one eye, and shrapnel in his stomach. There was no

militant present. A recent book revealed that Mr. Obama was informed about

the erroneous target but still did not offer any form of redress, because in 2009,

the United States did not acknowledge the existence of its own drone program in

Pakistan.

Sadaullah Wazir was another victim of hope and change. His house in North

Waziristan was targeted on Sept. 7, 2009. The strike killed four members of his

family. Sadaullah was 14 years old when it happened. A few days after the

attack, he woke up in a Peshawar hospital to the news that both of his legs had

to be amputated and he would never be able to walk again. He died last year,

without receiving justice or even an apology. Once again, no militant was

present or killed (Akbar, 2013).

Here, the message is much more detailed and graphic. Those killed are clearly innocent, and those who survive are children, left broken and disfigured. When deaths of innocent civilians are framed in this manner, the images created are far more vivid than those created by a standard new report. This makes the frame much more salient and, I believe, much more likely to influence public opinion.

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Zaller's RAS model of public opinion formation. In explaining his model, Zaller argues that the messages people *receive* from the popular media, originate with *political* elites. He defines political elites as, "politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists" ((1992, pg.6). In the next chapter I examine the discourse of elites involved in the debate over drone strikes. I believe that the messages which ultimately influence public opinion the most on this issue, are communicated to the public in the form of narratives. In the next chapter, I derive three distinct transitive narratives from the elite discourse surrounding drone strikes and test the effectiveness of each narratives central message on influencing public opinion.

CHAPTER 3

DRONE DISCOURSE: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING

PUBLIC OPINION AND DRONE STRIKES

In the preceding chapter, I introduced Zaller's RAS model of public opinion

formation. The RAS model argues that people first *receive* messages about a political

issue, then *accept* those messages based on how well they conform with prior beliefs, and

finally *sample* from the messages they have accepted based on which of those messages

are currently salient. The model further asserts that the messages which ultimately

influence public opinion are produced by the discourse of political elites and

disseminated to the public by the popular media.

Zaller defines political elites as, "politicians, higher-level government officials,

journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists" (1992, pg.

6). As discussed in the previous two chapters, journalists have tended to frame public

support for drone strikes as high and explain this support as the result of concerns over

terrorism and avoiding US military casualties. Additionally, the US news media tends to

report that those killed in drone strikes are terrorists and militants, not women and

children. Since the viewpoints presented by journalists have already been explored, the

viewpoints examined in this chapter will be the viewpoints of other political elites.

Narrative Communication

A narrative is a spoken or written account of connected events. Narratives differ from

frames in that whereas frames communicate certain aspects of an issue, narratives

communicate a complete and encompassing story about an issue. An act of *narrative

communication* however, involves a bit more than just telling a story. The defining

feature of narrative communication is that it produces messages which impart a transitive view of the world (Coste, 1989). A transitive relationship is one where, if A is equal to B, and B is equal to C, then A must also be equal to C. In the case of drone strikes, if *drone strikes = killing terrorists,* and *killing terrorists = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks,* then *drone strikes = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks.* I believe that in regards to the issue of drone strikes, it is this type of narrative that characterizes the effect of elite discourse on public opinion.

Writing in the context of war policy, Kubiak (2014) argues that narratives tell stories that construct the political environment, define actors, and cast roles. While drone strikes do not qualify as war policy as Kubiak defines it, they are a part of the US "War on Terror" and as such we might expect that the narratives surrounding drone strikes serve similar functions. Narratives designed to increase support for drone strikes construct a political environment where the United States is under the constant threat of terrorist attack. Those being killed by drone strikes are "bad guys" who want to kill as many Americans as they can, while those who operate the drones are the "good guys" who protect the nation and its citizens. Narratives designed to increase opposition to drone strikes construct a political environment where foreign civilians live in constant fear and danger. Those killed by drone strikes are innocents, and those doing the killing are cowards. These narratives represent two distinct stories, constructed with the goal of influencing opinion. The factor that decides which of these stories resonates is, I argue, individual moral attitudes.

In this chapter I derive three distinct transitive narratives from the elite discourse surrounding drone strikes; the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative, the "Drones Kill

Civilians" narrative, and the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative. These narratives represent my attempt to organize the elite discourse surrounding the issue of drone strikes. With the exception of the "PlayStation Mentality" the names of these narratives are my own creation. The substance of the narratives is extracted directly from elite discourse surrounding drone strikes, and to the best of my knowledge, the suite of beliefs that each of these narratives represent have never been grouped and categorized as transitive narratives before.

The purpose of creating these narratives, is to allow for the operationalization and testing of the effect of elite discourse on public opinion. I believe that the narratives I have created encapsulate the messages that have the greatest impact on the shaping of public opinion on drone strikes. While the individual effects of these messages will be examined in a later chapter, the focus in this chapter is on evaluating the effectiveness of each narrative at communicating its primary message.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows: first, I examine the elite discourse surrounding the issue of drone strikes and derive the three narratives to be tested. Next, I develop a series of hypotheses based on the idea that the best way to observe the effectiveness of each narrative is to test its ability to create an implicit association between drone strikes and the narratives primary element. Finally, I test these hypotheses using a survey-experiment.

Elite Discourse and the Creation of Three Drone Strike Narratives

Although the large-scale use of weaponized drones is a relatively recent development, a spirited, and at times contentious, debate has arisen over their use. Disagreements between politicians, activists, academics, government officials and others over the

legality, morality, and effectiveness of using armed drones to further US security interests has led to a number of claims and counter-claims varying widely in validity and coherence. While many claims about drone strikes do not hold up under serious scrutiny, there are legitimate concerns regarding the use of armed drones that are both relevant and unique. Unfortunately, a dispassionate discussion of these legitimate concerns is something that rarely characterizes these debates. Instead, elite discourse regarding the use of armed drones has traditionally taken the form of competing narratives, and while the back-and-forth over the use of armed drones among elites has not devolved into a purely zero-sum competition of advocacy, a clear division of opinion exists between those who support drone strikes and those who oppose them.

Those who support drone strikes, point to the fact that drones reduce the risk to US military personnel by eliminating the need to send pilots and aircrew into harm's way. They argue that drones are extremely precise in their targeting and represent an efficient and effective method of combatting terrorism. Opponents dispute these claims, arguing that drone strikes are imprecise, and have caused the death of hundreds of innocent civilians while killing only a handful of high-level terrorists. They further argue that the ill-will created by drone strikes generates support for the groups being targeted, increasing their ability to recruit new members. Opponents of drone strikes also contend that despite the benefit of reducing potential risks to US military personnel, the fact that drone operators face no real danger, could make leaders too quick to resort to force, and drone operators too callous about killing.

The discourse created by these differences of opinion often takes the form of *narrative communication*. An act of narrative communication imparts a transitive view of the world

through the use of connected elements (Coste, 1989). Not every narrative involved in the elite discourse surrounding drone strikes is, in this sense, narrative communication. The argument that using drones to strike terrorist targets protects the lives of pilots and aircrew is a narrative, but it does not promote a transitive view of the world. Instead this narrative is very direct. Because drones do not require pilots and aircrew, pilots and aircrew are not placed at risk. The relationship described here is a simple A = B relationship. There are no transitive elements in this narrative.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the concern for avoiding military casualties does appear be a motivating factor for those who support drone strikes This indicates that a narrative does not have to be transitive in nature in order to have an effect on public opinion. As such, I will be including this narrative along with the three narratives discussed below in my empirical testing.

The War on Terror and the "Drones Kill Terrorists" Narrative

The "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative encourages public support for drone strikes by linking the use of armed drones to the ongoing "War on Terror". In this narrative drone strikes are not only extremely effective for targeting terrorists, they are *necessary* for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. The primary messages communicated by this narrative are that those targeted by drone strikes are terrorists, that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, and that drone strikes are precise. The transitive relationship expressed by the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative is, if *drone strikes = killing terrorists,* and *killing terrorists = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks,* then *drone strikes = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks.* The message that drone strikes are precise works to support the idea that

those killed by drone strikes are terrorists and refute the idea that drone strikes kill civilians. Effectively, the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative is a sub-narrative of the "War on Terror" narrative which began under the presidency of George W. Bush. Therefore, to understand how the transitive relationship expressed in this narrative was created, we need to look back at President Bush's response to the attacks of 9/11.

Following the events of September 11th, 2001, Americans needed a way to make sense of what had occurred. They needed to know who had attacked and why, as well as how to feel and what to do. Most importantly, Americans needed a way to feel safe and in control again. The "War on Terror" narrative, filled those needs. In a speech given nine-days after the attack, President George W. Bush began helping Americans make sense of the tragedy that had occurred.

> *On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack. Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking, ``Who attacked our country?''*
> (Washington Post, 2001).

The President answered his rhetorical question by informing Americans that those responsible for the attacks had been members of a loosely affiliated terrorist organization known as al Qaeda. He went on to inform the American public that in addition to hating

democracy and freedom, the terrorists who attacked the United States wanted to drive Israel out of the Middle East and Christians and Jews out of parts of Asia and Africa. According to President Bush, al Qaeda's goal was not only to end lives, but disrupt a way of life. In the end, al Qaeda stands against America because America stands in its way.

President Bush ended his speech by asking Americans to continue to live their lives just as they had before the attacks. The President acknowledged Americans fears and instructed them to "hug your children." He urged Americans to uphold their values and warned that the United States was in a fight for its principles. Importantly, the President insisted that no one should be "singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith. In short, although the United States had been attacked by a network of religiously motivated terrorists, who hate America for the freedoms it represents, the United States was not at war with Muslims, it was at war with terrorists. President Bush then promised to, "…direct every resource at our command-- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war--to the destruction and to the defeat of the global terror network" (Washington Post, 2001). The United States was now at war, the objective of which was nothing less than the complete destruction of those who attacked us.

President Bush would repeat these themes many times over the course of the next seven years of his presidency. Although every bit as metaphorical as the "War on Drugs" or the "War on Poverty", the "War on Terror" differed in that there was an actual armed enemy force to be dealt with. While the concept of "terror" may have been an abstraction, al Qaeda and the Taliban were real, and destroying them meant applying large-scale

military force. A narrative that portrayed the enemy not just as evil and unjust, but also as an existential threat to the American way of life, ensured continued public support for military operations.[26] Even today 73 percent of Americans continue to view combatting terrorism as a "top priority" for the President and Congress (Pew, 2018a).

Upon taking office President Barack Obama would continue the "War on Terror" narrative and explicitly link it to the use of armed drones. In a May 23, 2013 address to the National Defense University, President Obama directly defended the use of armed drones against terrorist organizations.

> *So it is in this context that the United States has taken lethal, targeted action against al Qaeda and its associated forces, including with remotely piloted aircraft commonly referred to as drones. As was true in previous armed conflicts, this new technology raises profound questions — about who is targeted, and why; about civilian casualties, and the risk of creating new enemies; about the legality of such strikes under U.S. and international law; about accountability and morality. So let me address these questions.*
>
> *To begin with, our actions are effective. Don't take my word for it. In the intelligence gathered at bin Laden's compound, we found that he wrote, "We could lose the reserves to enemy's air strikes. We cannot fight air strikes with explosives." Other communications from al Qaeda operatives confirm this as well. Dozens of highly skilled al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives have been taken off the battlefield. Plots have been disrupted that*

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[26] Including the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq which 72% of Americans originally supported. http://news.gallup.com/poll/8038/seventytwo-percent-americans-support-war-against-iraq.aspx

would have targeted international aviation, U.S. transit systems, European cities

and our troops in Afghanistan. Simply put, these strikes have saved lives.

Moreover, America's actions are legal. We were attacked on 9/11. Within a

week, Congress overwhelmingly authorized the use of force. Under domestic

law, and international law, the United States is at war with al Qaeda, the

Taliban, and their associated forces. We are at war with an organization that

right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them

first. So this is a just war — a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in

self-defense (New York Times, 2013).

While the president's one-hour address was a speech on US counter-terrorism efforts

and covered much more than just drone strikes (including the terrorist detention center at

Guantanamo Bay), it was the President's comments on the use of armed drones that, for

many, seemed to define the speech. *The New York Times* headlined its publication of the

speech transcripts, "Obama's Speech on Drone Policy", with writers for, *the Atlantic,*

Human Rights Watch, and the Council on Foreign Relations all following suit (Reeve,

2013; Prasow, 2014; Zenko, 2014).

Given the timing of the speech, it is somewhat understandable why many would

choose this characterization. As presented in the last chapter, 2013 was the height of both

media and public interest in drone strikes. So while the President's speech may have

ostensibly been about counter-terrorism in general, the overall effect was not only to link

drones strikes to the "War on Terror" but also to endorse the idea that by killing

terrorists, drone strikes have been extremely effective at preventing further attacks

against the United States. These are two of the key messages promoted by the "Drones

Kill Terrorists" narrative, and when presented together in the context of the greater "War on Terror" they create a transitive connection between drone strikes and protecting the United States from future terrorist attack.

President Obama is not the only high-level government official to endorse the primary messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative. White House counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan (NPR, 2012) characterized drone strikes as a matter of "national self-defense" and described the ability of drones to precisely target enemy combatants and minimize "collateral damage" as "unprecedented." White House Press Secretary Jay Carney argued that drone strikes were both "precise" and "lawful" (Mali, 2013). And in 2016, while addressing members of the U.S. Senate Armed Service Committee, General Herbert J. Carlisle, Commander of the US Air Force Air Combat Command, described drone strikes as being, "instrumental" to protecting national security. Here again we see key elements of the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative being expressed in elite discourse.

Outside of those speaking for the government, the ability of drones to limit collateral damage, and the effectiveness of drone strikes at protecting the United States from terrorist attacks are the two messages most often communicated. Byman notes that, even the most unfavorable estimates of the number of civilians killed in drone strikes are lower than what one would expect from other forms of strikes, and that drones can "…keep Taliban leaders on the run and hinder al Qaeda's ability to plot another 9/11" (Byman, 2013, pg.43). Stern writes that drones are, "…significantly more discriminating than any other weapon fired from afar" (2015, pg.64). And both Jordan (2014) and Johnston and

Sarbahi (2015) argue that drone strikes have hampered terrorists' abilities to carry out attacks on the West.

The key messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative can all be found in the discourse above and in discourse like this. Drone strikes are precise, they kill terrorists, and they are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. These are the messages government officials, academics, and policy experts communicate when they seek to encourage support for drone strikes. When communicated together, these messages create a transitive relationship between drone strikes and protecting the United States from terrorist attack.

Blowback, Distinction and the "Drones Kill Civilians" Narrative

The "Drones Kill Children" narrative encourages public opposition to drone strikes by focusing on the impact of drone strikes on civilian populations. This narrative provides a direct counter to the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative, and claims that large numbers of civilians, many of them women and children, are being killed due to the inaccurate nature and/or indiscriminate use of "drone" technology. Additionally, this narrative argues that drone strikes kill relatively few terrorists and, because of the ill-will they engender, drone strikes make the United States less safe by increasing terrorist recruitment and encouraging retaliation. This narrative promotes the perception that dead civilians are the inevitable outcome of drone strikes, and that these deaths are random, pointless, and frequent. The primary messages communicated by this narrative are that drone strikes are inaccurate, that many more civilians than terrorists are killed by drone strikes, and that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. The transitive relationship expressed by this narrative is, if *drone strikes = killing civilians,* and *killing civilians = an immoral*

act, then *drone strikes = an immoral act.* While the messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative are rarely communicated by high-level government officials, they are frequently communicated by policy experts, academics (especially those involved with international law), and activists.

In an editorial for the *New York Times,* policy experts David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum made the claim that for every terrorist leader killed by a "drone", fifty civilians also die. Citing "press reports" and Pakistani news sources, Kilcullen and Exum allege that between 2006 and 2009 approximately 700 civilians died from drone strikes while only 14 terrorist leaders were killed. According to Kilcullen and Exum, every noncombatant killed, "…represents an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased." Arguing that the use of drones to separate violent extremists from the population has been ineffective, Kilcullen and Exum conclude that al Qaeda and its Taliban allies must be defeated by "indigenous forces", not forces from the United States (2009).

This short editorial represents one of the earliest employments of the "Drone Kill Civilians" narrative, and although Kilcullen and Exum's argument was more about the strategic effectiveness of US drone strikes in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), than about how many innocent civilians actually die in drone strikes, two of the key messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative are present. The message that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism (also known as "blowback"), and the message that drone strikes kill large numbers of innocent civilians. Kilcullen and Exum's claim of a 50 to 1 civilian/terrorist death ratio *strongly* promotes

the idea that most of those killed by drone strikes are civilians.[27] Additionally, the

"blowback" argument counters the idea that drone strikes protect the United States from

terrorist attacks, undermining one of the key messages promoted by the "Drones Kill

Terrorists" narrative.

One significant area of debate surrounding drone strikes is their legality. O'Connell

concedes to the legality of drone strikes in areas of recognized armed conflict (2010a,

pg.1 and 2014, pg.522), but denounces US drone strikes occurring in Pakistan and

Yemen as violations of international law. O'Connell contends that in addition to violating

Pakistani and Yemeni sovereignty, US drone strikes violate the *jus in bello* principles of

distinction and proportionality (2010b, 2011, 2014).

The principle of distinction stipulates that, "The parties to a conflict must at all times

distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks may only be directed against

combatants. Attacks must not be directed against civilians" (ICRC, 2019)**.** According

to O'Connell, drone strikes violate this customary rule of International Humanitarian

Law (IHL) because of the inherently unreliable nature of drone cameras and missile

guidance systems. O'Connell also claims that drone pilots often defer targeting

judgments to the "computer" (2010b).

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[27] This 50 to 1 ratio is not only unconscionable, it is logically and empirically unsustainable. Estimates from both the New America Foundation and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism put civilian to terrorist death ratios during this time much lower, with the number of terrorists killed outstripping the number of civilians by at least a factor of 3. Additionally, by limiting their definition of terrorists to only high-level leaders, Kilcullen and Exum are being disingenuous. Limiting the definition of terrorist to only high-level leaders is the equivalent of limiting the definition of soldier to only Generals. High-level Taliban and al Qaeda leaders are the commanders of irregular military forces. Those they command to fight government forces and carry out attacks on the local population are lawful combatants, and as such can be legally targeted by drone strikes. Leaving these combatants out of the equation allows Kilcullen and Exum to create a sensationalistic statistic, that bolsters their primary argument.

Considering O'Connell's testimony before Congress in which she declared drones to be, "…more protective of civilian lives than high aerial bombing or long-range artillery" adding that drone cameras "can pick up details about the presence of civilians" and that "[d]rones can fly low and target more precisely using this information" (2010a) her subsequent claims regarding how drone strikes violate the principle of distinction are perplexing. Additionally, deferring targeting decisions to the drone's "computer" is not something that is not technologically possible.[28] Regardless, the majority of O'Connell's discourse on the issue of drone strikes (and it is extensive) communicates two key messages of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative. The first is, of course, that drone strikes kill civilians, the second is that these civilians die because drones cannot hit what they are aiming at, and/or, because of glitches in the technology, often make invalid targeting decisions. The communication of this message directly rebuts the message promoted by the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative that drone strikes are accurate.

While both policy experts and academics routinely communicate key messages of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, those who communicate this narrative most effectively are human rights activists. In 2012, the *International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic* at Stanford Law School and the *Global Justice Clinic* at New York School of Law jointly published a report titled, *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan.* Drawing on interviews with the victims of three alleged drone attacks, as well as other "corroborating evidence" the report concludes that US drone strikes are "damaging and

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[28] Judging from her footnotes, O'Connell appears to draw her erroneous conclusion regarding pilots deferring to the RPA computer from a discussion by Peter W. Singer of the Aegis weapons systems found on US Navy warships.

counterproductive." The report argues directly against the key messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative, by referring to these beliefs as the US government's narrative and stating simply, "[t]his narrative is false" (pg. v.).

Although the stories related in this report are quite detailed in the accounts of the injuries sustained and the hardships endured, they are fairly sparse in terms of evidence indicating that the strikes in question were the result of US drone strikes, and/or that those killed were actually civilians. For the most part "corroborating evidence" of the authors' conclusions take the form of US government denials that those killed in the strikes in question were civilians (proof that the strike did occur) and claims from those interviewed that those killed were civilians (proof that those killed were civilians). In effect, US government accounts will be believed only insofar as they confirm that a strike did occur. What type of aircraft delivered the strike, and the civilian status of those who are killed and injured, are details left to be affirmed by those residing in Pakistan.

In 2013 Amnesty International published a similar report titled, *Will I Be Next? US Drone Strikes in Pakistan.* On the cover is a picture of a young, sad-eyed Pakistani girl, and inside the report is the heart-breaking story of Manama Bibi, a 68-year-old grandmother who was allegedly killed by a drone strike as her grandchildren watched in horror. A second anecdote relates the tale of 18 laborers who were also allegedly killed by drone strikes, as they returned from a day working in the chromite mines. Twenty-two others were reported to have been wounded in these strikes, but only an 8-year-old girl (Shehrbano) was identified by name.

Using women and children as proxies for all civilian victims of drone strikes activates the normative assumption that women and children are innocent and vulnerable, creating

a victim frame that resonates with the "moral language" of donors, belligerents, and the media (Carpenter, 2005). It is this activation of people's moral objection to the harming of innocents, that makes activists' communication of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative so effective. In addition to directly rebutting every message communicated by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, activist discourse goes beyond just the primary connection of *drone strikes = killing civilians* and creates the transitive relationship of *drone strikes = an immoral act.*

Drone Operators as Cowards: The "PlayStation Mentality"

A second narrative designed to encourage public opposition to drone strikes is the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative. This narrative equates the operation of a combat drone to playing a video game and claims that because operators sit far removed from the battlefield, drone strikes are unfair to those being targeted. It calls into question the military ethics and personal courage of drone operators. The key messages promoted by this narrative are that operating a drone is like playing a video game, and that because of the distance drone operators sit from the battlefield they 1) cannot comprehend the serious nature of their actions and 2) are cowards. The transitive relationship created by this narrative is, if *drone strikes = being removed from the battlefield,* and *being removed from the battlefield = detachment and cowardice,* then *drone strikes = detachment and cowardice.*

In a 2010 report to the UN General Assembly, UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur Philip Alston stated, "…because (RPA) operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audiofeed, there is a risk of developing a "PlayStation" mentality to

killing" (pg.25). While negative attitudes toward the use of drones in combat certainly precede Alston's statement to the UN General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur's use of the term "PlayStation mentality" seems to have struck a harmonious chord among many major media outlets. Within a week the *New York Times,* the BBC, Reuters, and the *Guardian* all ran stories citing Alston's remarks, apparently attempting to embed the idea among the general public that killing with a "drone" is more like a playing a game than fighting a war (Savage, 2010; BBC, 2010; Nebehay, 2010; Walsh, 2010).

Although some might argue that Alston's comments constitute only a few lines of a much larger report intended to assess the legality of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan and therefore should not be seen as a serious concern but rather as a tertiary musing, that argument is undermined by comments Alston made nearly six months earlier in an opinion piece featured in the *Guardian.* In this piece Alston made similar remarks regarding the "PlayStation mentality" asking how, "[y]oung military personnel raised on a diet of video games" could possibly understand the consequences of their actions. Alston also makes several references to "killer drones" and called for greater transparency on the part of governments who use drones in combat situations (Alston and Shamsi, 2010).

While Alston appears to have been the originator of the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative, the promotion of this narrative by those working for the United Nations did not end with Alston's departure from his post. Christof Heyns, Alston's successor, states that the issue is still one of relevance. "The concern here is that many of those operating drones are many thousands of miles away from the battlefield, outside harm's way, and so they are removed from the realities of violence and war on the ground and often in

situations where there is not an appropriate emphasis on international humanitarian law" (Jepson, 2010). While the primary focus of both Alston and Heyns in their role as UN Special Rapporteurs was the investigation of the legality of U.S. and British drone strikes, both also demonstrated a willingness to speculate about mental effects of killing from a remotely operated platform. In doing so these high-level government officials communicated all but one of the messages promoted by the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative. Despite the intense focus of Alston and Heyns discourse on the detachment drone operators may develop, neither Alston or Heyns make any reference to cowardice.

Perhaps the most cited (and improperly cited) author when it comes to "drone warfare" is Peter W. Singer. Anti-drone activist Madea Benjamin cites Singer, arguing that those "deeply involved in the military's UAV programs" explicitly attempt to appeal to the youth gaming culture by designing drone controls to simulate those of a PlayStation (2013). However, if one examines the passage Benjamin cites, it is clear that Singer is not referring to combat drones, but rather a portable ground unit used by the Marines called the *Dragon Runner* (Singer, 2009, pg. 68). Dragon Runners are small, tracked vehicles used for surveillance and counter-IED (improvised explosive device) operations. They weigh between 10 and 20 pounds and *do not* carry any type of weapon or offensive ordnance (QinetiQ, 2018). So while the Marines operating the Dragon-Runner may be doing so with a control interface modeled after PlayStation controllers, they are not using it to kill people. Therefore, the "PlayStation mentality" that Alston and Heyns have speculated about, and that Benjamin seems eager to endorse, could hardly apply in this situation.

Still, Benjamin's claim that the U.S. Air Force explicitly targets "gamers" in its recruitment of drone operators has become a common and accepted part of the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative. In addition to communicating the message that operating a military drone is like playing a video game, this image of drone operators as "gamers" contributes to creation of the transitive relationship between drone strikes and cowardice. By communicating the message that drone operators are kids recruited for their skills at playing video games and implying that many of them may view killing as nothing more than an extension of those games, an image of drone operators is created that is in direct contrast to the image most Americans hold of the military members they admire and respect. Others go even farther in communicating the message that drone strikes are cowardly

Retired USAF fighter pilot Shane Riza argues that drones represent a serious challenge to the "warrior ethos." According to Riza, the immunity from retaliation that drone operators enjoy takes the "heart" out of killing and in doing so discounts the "awful complexity" of war. This total "impunity" from the risks associated with war negatively impacts the "…conversation among combatants engaged in the game of mortal combat," and threatens to destroy the moral foundations of warfare (Riza, 2013, pg. xiv). This message communicated by Riza's discourse is similar to the discourse of activists promoting the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative in that it makes a transitive connection between drone strikes and an immoral act. What is different however is that in the case, the focus is not on the act, but on those committing it. Just as the in the *Iliad* where the Greeks mocked Paris' courage due to his reliance on a bow, so too is Riza questioning the courage of drone operators. They face no risk, they kill without "heart" and they

"destroy the moral foundations of warfare." Although Riza never uses the word, his message is clear. Drone operators are cowards.

By emphasizing the fact that drone operators sit far-removed from the battlefield and conflating the operation of a military drone with the playing of video games, the PlayStation Mentality narrative creates an image of drone operators that is in direct contrast to the image most Americans hold of the military members drones are supposed to protect. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 depict cartoons taken from the internet that vividly illustrate this contrast. While these cartoons may not make direct reference to cowardice, they make a clear distinction between "heroes" and drone operators. The message communicated by illustrations such as these is clear: drone operators are not *real* members of the military, and deserve ridicule not respect.
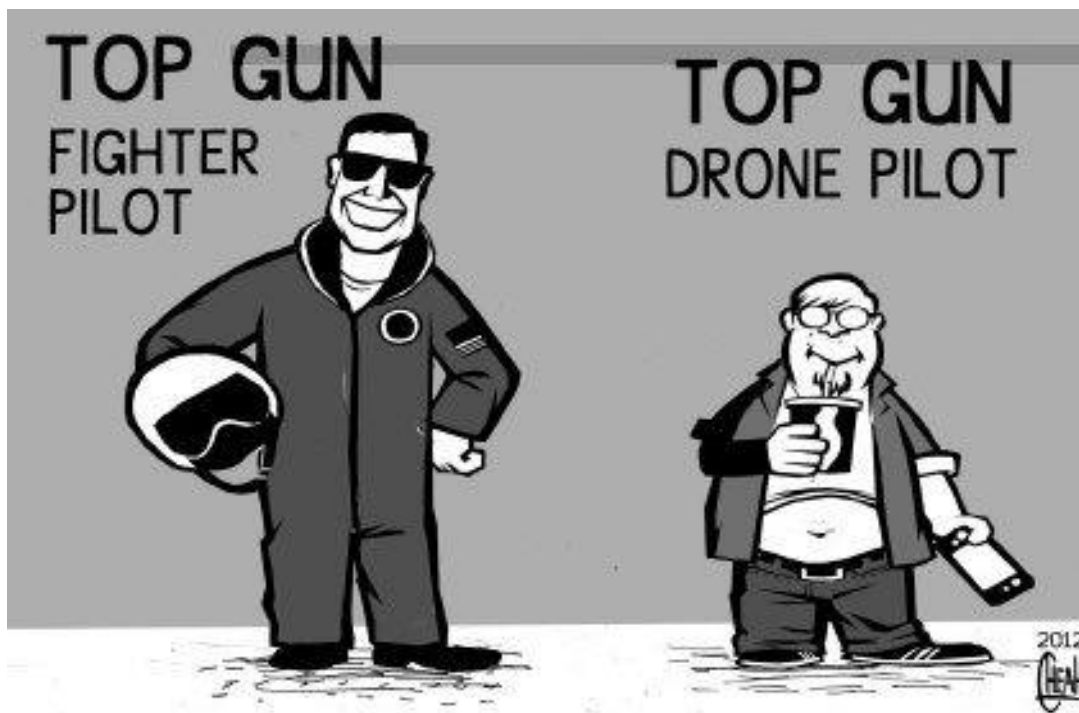
Figure 3.1. Fighter Pilot vs. Drone Pilot (by sinann @ *from toonpool.com*)

Figure 3.2. War Heroes (assets.amuniversal.com)

Testing the Effectiveness of Drone Strike Discourse

As discussed in Chapter 1, public opinion is the aggregation individual opinions.

Individuals form their opinions through a process of collective discourse, facilitated by

the popular media. By supplying people with a variety of competing and complementing

viewpoints, the media provides the primary framework on which individual opinions are

constructed. These competing and complementary viewpoints are derived from the

discourse of elites. From this discourse I have identified three distinct lines of argument,

each communicating a related set of messages designed to encourage either support or

opposition to drone strikes. From these lines of argument, I have constructed three

transitive narratives which I argue significantly influence public opinion.

The "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative encourages public support for drone strikes by linking the use of armed drones to the ongoing "War on Terror". This narrative creates a transitive relationship between drone strikes and keeping the United States safe from terrorist attack. The messages communicated by this narrative are that those targeted by drone strikes are terrorists, that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, and that drone strikes are precise.

The "Drones Kill Children" narrative encourages public opposition to drone strikes by focusing on the impact of drone strikes on civilian populations. This narrative creates a transitive relationship between drone strikes and the commission of an immoral act. The messages communicated by this narrative are that drone strikes are inaccurate, many more civilians than terrorists are killed by drone strikes, and drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. The "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative serves as a direct counter to the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative.

The "PlayStation Mentality" narrative also encourages public opposition to drone strikes. This narrative equates the operation of a military drone to playing a video game and claims that because operators sit far removed from the battlefield, drone strikes are unfair to those being targeted, and calls into question the military ethics and personal courage of drone operators. The "PlayStation Mentality" narrative creates a transitive relationship between drone strikes and the detachment and cowardice of drone operators. The messages promoted by this narrative are that operating a drone is like playing a video game, and that because of the distance drone operators sit from the battlefield they 1) cannot comprehend the serious nature of their actions and 2) are cowards.

In this section, I test the effectiveness of these three narratives using a survey experiment designed to measure how successful each of these narratives has been at communicating its central message to the public. To be clear, the central message of these narratives *are not* the transitive relationships they create, but rather the initial *explicit* connection they use to create the transitive relationship. For example, fully diagrammed, the transitive relationship for the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative is, if *drone strikes = killing terrorists,* and *killing terrorists = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks,* then *drone strikes = keeping the United States safe from terrorist attacks.* Here the initial explicit connection is that drone strikes kill terrorists. Therefore, this is the central element of the narrative. Similarly, the central element of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative is that drone strikes kill civilians, and the central element of the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative is that conducting a drone strike is like playing a video game. I argue the effectiveness of a narrative can be judged by how successful it has been at turning *explicit* communication into *implicit* association.

Implicit Associations and the Effectiveness of Narrative

Implicit associations are mental connections between concepts that lie outside of conscious awareness (Gawronski and De Houwer, 2014). Implicit associations are the result of implicit social cognition, more commonly referred to as implicit bias. Implicit bias is an attitude or stereotype that affects a person's understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Since they reside in the subconscious, implicit biases, and the associations they create, are not accessible to introspection. Implicit associations do not necessarily align with declared beliefs or reflect stances a person

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explicitly endorses. Implicit associations are believed to be the result of early life experiences and/or *popular media and news programming* (Kirwan Institute, 2019).

Since implicit associations affect people's decisions in an unconscious manner, I believe any narrative that can establish its central element as an implicit association, is more effective at influencing public opinion than a narrative that must rely on the explicit communication of its central element to produce an effect. For example, the central element of the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative is the message that drone strikes kill terrorists, and the desired effect of the explicit communication of this message is to increase public support for drone strikes. If support for drone strikes can be increased by simply communicating the message of terrorist threat, with no reference to drones or drone strikes, then this suggests that an implicit association has been established between drone strikes and terrorist threat.

Because previous research has shown that the introduction of the potential for foreign civilian casualties into scenarios designed to measure support for drone strikes tends to reduce support (Kreps, 2014; Schneider and Macdonald, 2016), I predict that the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been more effective than the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative at establishing its central element as an implicit association. This prediction leads to my first two formal hypotheses.

H1: The "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been successful at establishing its central element as an implicit association. As such, exposure to a stimulus making conflict-related civilian death salient, *but not mentioning drones or drone strikes,* will elicit an increase in opposition to drone strikes.

H2: The "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative has not been successful at establishing its central element as an implicit association. As such, exposure to a stimulus making terrorist threat salient, *but not mentioning drones or drone strikes,* will not elicit a decrease in opposition to drone strikes.

Because the results of the content analysis conducted for Chapter 2 indicated that the messages promoted by the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative are very rarely communicated to the public by the US news media, I predict that the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative has not been successful in establishing its central element as an implicit association. This prediction leads to my third formal hypothesis.

H3: The "PlayStation Mentality" narrative has not been successful at establishing its central element as an implicit association. As such, exposure to a stimulus making a link between military operations and video games salient, *but not mentioning drones or drone strikes,* will not elicit an increase in opposition to drone strikes.

As discussed earlier, not every narrative that has the potential to influence public opinion on drone strikes is a transitive narrative. The narrative that drone strikes protect pilots and aircrew is a direct narrative consisting of only one element. However, that element is an explicit message and the communication of it could create an implicit association between drone strikes and avoiding US military casualties. As such, I include this direct narrative in my testing as an experimental condition. I do not however, make any predictions as to the effectiveness of this narrative to establish its central element as an implicit association.

Experimental Design

Method

To test the narratives above for the ability to establish the central element of the narrative as an implicit association, I conducted a survey-experiment using subjects recruited from Arizona State University's School of Politics and Global Studies student subject pool. Like an experiment, survey experiments compare a "treatment" condition with a "control" condition. Subjects in the treatment condition receive a specific stimulus that those in the control condition do not. The outcomes are measured and differences between the two groups are noted. Because of random assignment, any differences in outcomes can be attributed to the application of the treatment. In most cases, survey experiments provide "the best of both worlds" in that they combine the generalizability and external validity of a survey with the valid causal inference and internal validity of an experiment (Nock and Guterbock, 2010).

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics survey software. Subjects were first asked to complete a short demographics questionnaire, followed by a 30 question moral attitudes inventory (the reason for this inventory will be discussed in the next chapter). Next, subjects were randomly sorted into either one of four treatment conditions or the control condition. In each condition subjects read a short news report (approximately 500 words) that served as the treatment stimulus.[29] Finally, subjects were asked to answer a series of questions designed to measure their opposition to various uses of military force (including drone strikes), and beliefs about the use of armed drones. All

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[29] The CONTROL group read a news report of approximately equal length describing the awarding of the 2028 Summer Olympics. This news report also did not contain the word "drone."

news reports were stripped of any source identification and edited for length. Each subject group consisted of approximately 100 subjects.

To test the effectiveness of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, a treatment condition (CIVCAS) was created to make the idea of civilian deaths due to military action immediately salient. The treatment stimulus for this condition is a news report focusing on civilian deaths caused by the ongoing civil war in Syria. Importantly, the civilian deaths in this condition are not attributed to drone strikes, nor is there any mention of drones anywhere in news report.

To test the effectiveness of the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative, a treatment condition (TERRORIST) was created which primes subjects with a news report discussing ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks and detailing several recent terrorist attacks that have occurred on US soil. As in the CIVCAS condition, the news report in this condition makes no mention of drones or drone strikes.

To test the effectiveness of the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative, a treatment condition (VIDEOGAME) was created which primes subjects with a news report detailing the US military's use of video games to train military personnel. As in the two above conditions, no mention of drones or drone strikes appeared in the treatment stimulus. And finally, to test the effectiveness of the message that drone strikes protect pilots and aircrew, a treatment condition (MILCAS) was created which primes subjects with the idea of military casualties. In this treatment condition subjects read a news report describing the deaths of four US soldiers killed in a fire-fight with ISIS-backed militants in Niger. As in all other conditions, the news report made no mention of drones or drone strikes.

Results and Discussion

To test hypotheses H1-H3, subjects were asked…

> *Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?*

Response options for this question were "strongly support", "support", "somewhat support", "somewhat oppose", "oppose", and "strongly oppose." Responses were coded 1 through 6 in the order listed for analysis. When comparisons of mean opposition were conducted between the treatment conditions and the control condition, only the CIVCAS condition elicited an increase in opposition to drone strikes. Therefore, all three hypotheses were supported. The results of this analysis are displayed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Opposition to US Drone Strikes

Experimental Conditions	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
CONTROL	98	3.00	1.143	
CIVCAS**	101	3.47	1.566	0.031
VIDEOGAME	98	3.15	1.608	0.484
TERRORIST	101	3.22	1.635	0.321
MILCAS	99	3.24	1.546	0.257

$*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01$

When primed with a news report detailing civilian casualties in Syria (CIVCAS), respondents were significantly more likely to oppose the use of armed drones to target extremists in other countries. This sustains H1 and supports the conclusion that the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been effective in creating an implicit connection

between conflict-induced civilian casualties and drone strikes. Additionally, as part of the post-treatment questionnaire, subjects were asked if they support or oppose, 1) US-led efforts to fight terrorism, 2) deploying large numbers of conventional military forces to target terrorists in other countries, 3) using military special operations forces to target terrorists in other countries, 4) using manned aircraft to target terrorists in other countries, and 5) using long range missiles to target terrorists in other countries. While increased opposition to "US-led efforts to fight terrorism" was somewhat significant (p =.053), an increase in opposition to the use of other types of the military force was not observed (see appendix B).

Again, the civilian casualties described in the treatment stimulus were not attributed to drone strikes, so the effects of the treatment stimulus appear to be drone specific. This indicates there is a connection being drawn between civilian deaths and drone strikes that is not being drawn between civilian deaths and the use of other types of military force. This provides support for the conclusion that the effect observed is indicative of an implicit association between civilian casualties and drone strikes, and not simply a negative association between civilian casualties and all uses of military force.

The terrorist threat (TERRORIST) condition did not significantly decrease opposition to drone strikes. This sustains H2 and suggests that the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative has not been effective at establishing its central element an implicit association. In fact, while the change in opposition was not significant, respondents appear to be slightly *more* opposed to drone strikes in this condition. This may suggest that the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has also been effective at establishing the connection between drone strikes and terrorist recruitment/retaliation. Again, this increase in opposition was not

statistically significant. However, it does raise questions regarding the effectiveness of narratives designed to maintain support for the use of armed drones against terrorists.

The video game (VIDEOGAME) condition produced no significant increase in opposition to drone strikes. This sustains H3 and suggests that the "PlayStation Mentality" narrative has not been effective at establishing its central element as an implicit association. Since implicit associations are believed to be the result of early life experiences and/or popular media and news programming, this narrative's lack of effectiveness may be due to the fact that it is not often promoted in the US news media's coverage of drone strikes.

The military casualty (MILCAS) condition did not significantly decrease opposition. While I made no predictions regarding this treatment condition, if an implicit association had been created between drone strikes and avoiding military casualties, the logical conclusion would be that opposition to drone strikes would be decreased. However, it may be that the connection between drone strikes and protecting pilots and aircrew is so intuitive, the association between the two is already implicit. In effect, the ability of drones to protect pilots and aircrew is understood as a feature of drone strikes. As such, this association is already "baked in" to individual decisions on support or opposition.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the elite discourse surrounding the debate over drone strikes. I identified three distinct lines of argument, each communicating a related set of messages designed to encourage either support or opposition to drone strikes. From these lines of argument, I constructed three transitive narratives and tested those narratives for the ability to establish the narrative's central element as an implicit assumption.

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The results of this testing indicate that only the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been effective at establishing its central element—that drone strikes kill civilians—as an implicit association. Since implicit associations reside in the subconscious, they are not accessible to introspection, and do not necessarily align with a person's declared beliefs. The implicit association created between drone strikes and civilian casualties by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, appears to be capable of reducing support for drone strikes even among those who otherwise would be inclined to support drone strikes.

Zaller argues that it is the messages produced by elite discourse that drives public opinion. If this is the case, I argue that public opinion on drone strikes is driven by the messages promoted by the narratives examined above. Here I have presented evidence that the "Drone Kill Civilians" narrative has been much more effective at promoting its central message than have other narratives. This, I believe, establishes the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative as the most effective narrative in the debate over drone strikes, and indicates that the discourse of opposition is resonating more with the American public than the discourse of support.

I believe however, that in order to fully understand how people's opinions develop on the issue of drone strikes, we must move beyond the narrative level and attempt to study the opinion formation process at the message level. Zaller's RAS model of public opinion formation is predicated on the effects of messages, so I will use the RAS model as the basis for my investigation. However, the RAS model characterizes opinion formation as a highly cognitive process. In the case of public opinion formation on the issue of drone strikes, I believe the process is largely an affective one. I argue that the key step in the process of opinion formation is the *acceptance* of messages. Once a message is accepted,

it becomes a belief. Beliefs are what drive people's understanding and opinion. Therefore, the best way to predict a person's opinion is to understand what he or she believes, and to understand why he or she believes it. I argue that the way people decide what they believe about drone strikes, is by filtering the messages they *receive* from the popular media through their individual moral predispositions. Messages that are discordant with these moral predispositions will not be *accepted*, and therefore will not become beliefs. Since only accepted messages, are *sampled* from in the final step of the RAS process, only beliefs influence individual opinion. In the following chapters, I expand more fully on this idea, and test its validity.

CHAPTER 4

EXPLAINING OPPOSITION TO US DRONE STRIKES

As discussed in Chapter 1, while the reasons most often given to explain public

support for drone strikes would seem to predict that a majority of Americans *should*

support drone strikes, many journalists treat majority support for drone strikes as

something both puzzling and troubling. For example, Cillizza attributes public support

for drone strikes to the *perception* that drone strikes are effective at targeting terrorists

without placing US military lives at danger. He then goes on to write "To be sure the

average American isn't paying close attention to the issue of drones and how they are

being used," and that the debate over what the government can and cannot do using

drones, as well as what it should be required to tell the public, is a "worthy" one. Cillizza

concludes by asserting that, "making policy decisions based on what the public wants (or

thinks it wants) is a dangerous game" (2013). Implicit in this commentary, is the idea that

if the American public was paying closer attention, its perceptions would change. That

there are things about drones and drone strikes that the public is unaware of which, if

brought to its attention, would dampen public enthusiasm for drone strikes.

Similarly, while both Fuller and LaFranchi attribute public support for drone strikes to

the average American's desire to fight terrorism and keep US military personnel safe

while doing so,   when Fuller writes, "Drone airstrikes look a lot different when you are

exporting the strikes instead of expecting them" (2014), and LaFranchi refers to President

Obama's use of drones to target terrorist leaders as an "aggressive campaign" that has

"generated controversy overseas and among counterterrorism experts" (2013), both are

attempting to give the public information about drone strikes that they feel are reasons

Americans should reconsider their support. Overall, one gets the sense that these journalists aren't so much surprised that a majority of Americans support drone strikes, but rather disheartened.

What comments such as these suggest, is that journalists have a different set of beliefs about drone strikes than do most members of the public. Whereas a majority of the American public seem to believe that drones strikes are effective at combatting terrorism, the above comments from journalists suggest that this conclusion should, at the very least, be questioned. These comments also suggest that there is much that the public is unaware of regarding drone strikes. This raises the question as to what it is these journalists believe they know about drone strikes that the general public does not?

In this chapter I argue that the beliefs which lead journalists and others to characterize support for drone strikes as high, are the same beliefs that encourage public opposition to drone strikes, namely the belief that drone strikes are not effective at combatting terrorism, and relatedly, that drone strikes kill an inordinate number of innocent civilians. As discussed in Chapter 3, the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative is a narrative promoted by those opposed to drone strikes which argues that drone strikes lead to the deaths of large numbers of innocent civilians, and as a result contributes to the growth of terrorism by enhancing terrorist recruitment. I argue it is the salience of this narrative that explains opposition to drone strikes. As discussed in earlier chapters, research on public opinion and drone strikes has tended to focus exclusively on explaining support. No attempts have been made to explain opposition. Whether this unitary focus on support is the result of how public opinion polls have been framed in the media, or because researchers have tended to share the same set of beliefs about drone strikes as those reporting on these

polls is a point for speculation and will not be addressed here. Instead I will simply attempt to fill the gap in the small body of research dealing with public opinion and drone strikes, by putting forth and testing a theory that explains both support and opposition.

Why Explain Opposition?

Support among the American public for the US government's use of armed drones against terrorists in other countries has been explained as the effect of biased poll questions (Kreps, 2014), the result of a lack of effective criticism from international organizations and non-governmental organizations (Kreps and Wallace, 2016), a desire to keep military pilots and aircrew out of harm's way (Walsh, 2015; Schneider and Macdonald, 2016), and as an anger response to the threat of terrorist attack (Fisk, Merolla, and Ramos, 2018). To the best of my knowledge, no attempts have been made at explaining opposition. As discussed in Chapter 1, considering the reasons most often given for supporting drone strikes—that they keep the United States safe from terrorist attack and protect the lives of US military pilots and aircrew while doing so—the question which needs to be answered is not why a majority of Americans support drone strikes, but rather why such a large minority oppose them?

It is not methodologically sound to assume that what explains opposition to drone strikes is simply the opposite of whatever explains support. Although it could be argued that in the context of public opinion, support and opposition are distinct opposites, and that if "X" explains support for drone strikes the absence of "X" explains opposition, at the causal level such assumptions are unlikely to hold. For example, while a desire to avoid US military casualties may explain support for drone strikes, ambivalence regarding US military casualties is almost certainly not the reason people oppose drone

strikes. In short, opposition is not the reciprocal of support, or a default position. Just as

people have specific reasons for supporting drone strikes, they have specific reasons for

opposing them. If the purpose of studying public opinion on drone strikes is to

understand how opinions are formed on this issue, then explaining support represents

only half the puzzle.

The RAS Model of Public Opinion Formation

Since public opinion is an aggregated outcome of individual processes, the key to

understanding public opinion regarding the use of armed drones to attack terrorist

overseas is to focus on this process. Zaller's *Receive-Accept-Sample* (RAS) model is

designed to help examine the process of political opinion formation. According to Zaller

individuals *receive* messages about a political issue, *accept* those messages based on how

well they conform with prior beliefs, and then *sample* from the messages they have

accepted based on which of those messages are currently salient (1992). Building on

earlier work by Converse (1962) and McGuire (1968), Zaller takes the position that

messages transmitted by the mass media have powerful effects on the formation of public

opinion. "To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are

dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the

larger world in which they live" (Zaller, 1992, pg.6). As discussed in Chapter 3, these

"others", according to Zaller, are *political elites,* and they include politicians, high-level

government officials, various experts and policy specialists. Even when an individual

learns about an issue from a friend or family member, he or she is most likely receiving

second-hand information that originated with an elite. According to Zaller, elite discourse

is "never pure" but rather is an attempt to create messages that are, "sufficiently simple and vivid" for ordinary people to grasp (1992, pg.13).

The first step of the RAS model is the reception of messages. This step is governed by the *Reception Axiom* which states…

> *The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue (Zaller, 1992, pg.42).*

As discussed above, messages are generated by the discourse of elites, and disseminated to the public via the popular media. To *receive* a message an individual must be both exposed to the message and understand the message.

The second axiom of the RAS model is the *Resistance Axiom* and it states…

> *People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.*

This axiom deals with the acceptance of received messages. While an individual may *receive* a message (i.e. be exposed to and understand it), he or she may not *accept* it. When a person resists a message it does not get considered (i.e. *sampled*) when he or she is later tasked with formulating an opinion.

The third axiom is the *Accessibility Axiom* and it asserts…

> *The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related consideration from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.*

This axiom is essentially a description of the "priming effect", where exposure to an initial stimulus influences the response to a subsequent stimulus. This axiom is most often applied to the study of public opinion through the use of a survey-experiment, which compares a treatment group to a control group. In this type of experiment, the treatment group receives a stimulus designed to make certain "considerations," or messages, salient. The control group does not receive this stimulus. Since individuals are randomly assigned to each group, any observed differences between the groups can be attributed to the stimulus "bringing" those messages to the "tops of the heads" of survey respondents.

The fourth and final axiom of the RAS model is the *Response Axiom* and it states…

Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.

This axiom is tied closely to the Accessibility Axiom, but goes beyond the idea of priming, in that it considers individuals may have numerous messages accessible to them at the same time. The Response Axiom allows for the "averaging" of received messages, and would be applied if one wished to test the varying strength of beliefs directly against one another.

Which Messages Matter?

While every step in the RAS model is critical for the process of opinion formation, I believe that the second step is the most important. The second step of the RAS process is the *acceptance* of received messages, and this step is governed by the *Resistance Axiom,* which states…

People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

So while people may *receive* messages (i.e. be exposed to and comprehend them), they may not necessarily *accept* them. If a message is inconsistent with their predispositions, and they understand it to be inconsistent, then that message will be resisted, and therefore unlikely to influence opinion.

Zaller refers to the discourse produced by elites as "messages" or "considerations" throughout the RAS process. Messages are created by elites, disseminated to the public by the popular media, then accepted or resisted by the public on an individual level. Only accepted messages play a significant role in the opinion formation process. I argue that once a message has been accepted, it should be considered a *belief*. No matter how well something may accord with an individual's "political predispositions", people tend to resist (or outright reject) information they believe to be false. This isn't to say that people only accept messages that are true. Many people believe things that are demonstrably false. Rather, I am arguing that once a message is accepted, it becomes a *belief,* regardless of its veracity. Once a message is accepted, the person accepting it *believes* it to be true. Since only accepted messages factor into the end-product of the RAS model, opinions are ultimately formed based on beliefs.

Knowledge, and Belief

Knowledge, is the combination of truth and belief (Zagzebski, 2017). Truth accords with reality. Beliefs on the other hand, may or may not accord with reality. When

someone believes something that is true, that belief constitutes knowledge. When

someone believes something that is not true, that belief does not constitute knowledge.

Knowledge and belief are not synonymous. It is perfectly possible for a person to believe

something that is not true. From the perspective of the individual however, belief *is* truth.

As such, when a person acts in accordance with a belief, they are acting in accordance

with reality as they know it.

Belief Without Knowledge

The RAS model is designed to explain the formation of *political* opinion, and presents

the opinion making process as a process of cognitive engagement. According to Zaller,

affective engagement is likely to affect opinion formation only when it leads to

intellectual engagement. While people tend to resist the acceptance of messages that are

inconsistent with their political predispositions, they do so only when they possess the

necessary information to perceive a relationship between those messages and their

predispositions (1992, pg.44). That is, while emotion and/or intuitions may play a role in

the opinion formation process, its role is secondary at best. In the RAS model, deciding

what to believe is an intellectual endeavor, dependent on individual knowledge.

Importantly, Zaller's operational measure of cognitive engagement (which he

alternately refers to as *political awareness*) is a test of *general* public affairs knowledge,

and not an individual's direct knowledge of any particular issue. Zaller acknowledges

that this measurement strategy is "less than ideal", and that the use of issue specific

measures of knowledge would be better suited as a measure of cognitive engagement.

Out of practical concerns however, Zaller proceeds with the assumption that people who

are knowledgeable about politics in general (i.e. politically aware), will also be attentive

and informed about specific issues as well (1992, pg.42-43). In the case of public opinion and US drone strikes, there is good reason to question this assumption.

Previous research has shown that the US public has a very weak understanding of the capabilities and uses of armed drones. In a survey designed to measure the US public's knowledge of the differences between drones and manned aircraft, researchers found that more than half (54%) of respondents were unable to correctly identify either the MQ-1 Predator, or the MQ-9 Reaper as a drone aircraft. Additionally, over a quarter of the respondents (26%) expressed the belief that the Global Hawk, an unmanned, high-altitude surveillance drone, is capable of launching airstrikes. A slightly smaller percentage (21%) believed that the F-16 fighter jet is a drone, and nearly one-third (32%) of respondents were misinformed regarding the ordnance payloads of drones, believing that drones drop much larger bombs than they are actually capable of delivering. A significant number of respondents (31%) were under the impression that drones used guns to attack their targets. In terms of how drones are used, a majority (60%) of respondents indicated that they believe drones are more likely to launch airstrikes than manned aircraft, and half (50%) believed that drones are governed by different rules of engagement than manned aircraft (Schneider and Macdonald, 2016).

Since none of these beliefs are true, and since there is no good reason to assume that those responding to Schneider and Macdonald's surveys were any less likely to be politically aware than the average American, this would seem to indicate that overall the US public is not very well informed regarding even the most basic facts related to US drone strikes. If a significant portion of the public is ill-informed about the specifics of drone strikes, then it is unclear how a cognitive process such as the one the RAS model

stipulates can be driving opinion. Knowledge-based deliberation on drone strikes, requires an understanding of the basic capabilities and operational standards of armed drones. For this reason, I suggest that, at least when it comes to forming opinions on the use of armed drones, we should rethink subordinating affective processes to cognitive ones. While general political knowledge may be useful in forming opinions on traditional political issues, it is unlikely that knowledge regarding how government works or who is currently in political office will be useful in deciding whether or not one should support drone strikes. The issue of drone strikes is a relatively new point of contention in American politics, and when this novelty is coupled with a lack of knowledge regarding the most basic facts, any cognitive engagement that follows will likely be driven by heuristic thinking not deductive reasoning.

Beliefs About the Use of Armed Drones that Correlate with Opposition

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, simply priming subjects with a news report about conflict-induced civilian casualties is enough to increase opposition to drone strikes. This, along with previous research, strongly suggests that the messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative have been accepted (i.e. internalized as beliefs) by a significant number of Americans. Three of the messages communicated by the Drones Kill Civilians" narrative will be tested here. The first is that drone strikes kill far more civilians than terrorists (Kilcullen and Exum, 2009). The second is that drones are inherently inaccurate. Even when those targeted are terrorists, the unreliability of the drone's cameras and targeting systems (O'Connell, 2010b) and/or the distance from which drone strikes occur (Holewinski, 2015), places civilians at high risk. The third

message is that because of the civilian casualties they cause (or are reported to cause) drone strikes lead to an increase in terrorist recruitment (Cronin, 2015).

I argue that once accepted, these three messages become beliefs, and these beliefs are the key predictors of opposition to US drone strikes. These beliefs are the *messages* that individuals *sample* from when they choose to oppose drone strikes. Those who have *accepted* these beliefs will oppose drone strikes, those who haven't accepted these beliefs will not. Stated as a formal hypothesis…

H1: *Opposition to drone strikes will be positively correlated with the belief that (A) drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than do strikes from manned aircraft, and (B) drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism, but negatively correlated with the belief that (C) drones are more precise in hitting their intended targets than are manned aircraft.*

Additionally, since the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative serves as a direct rebuttal to the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative I also predict that those who oppose drone strikes will have rejected the message that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. Stated as a formal hypothesis…

H2: *Opposition to drone strikes will be negatively correlated with the belief that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack.*

Experimental Design

Method

To test the arguments above, as well as the arguments that follow in the next chapter, I conducted a survey-experiment. Like an experiment, survey experiments compare a "treatment" condition with a "control" condition. Subjects in the treatment condition

receive a specific stimulus that those in the control condition do not. The outcomes are measured and differences between the two groups are noted. Because of random assignment, any differences in outcomes can be attributed to the application of the treatment. In most cases, survey experiments provide "the best of both worlds" in that they combine the generalizability and external validity of a survey with the valid causal inference and internal validity of an experiment (Nock and Guterbock, 2010).

Subjects for this experiment were recruited from Arizona State University's School of Politics and Global Studies student subject pool. The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics survey software. Subjects were first asked to complete a short demographics questionnaire, followed by a 30 question moral attitudes inventory (the reason for this inventory will be discussed in Chapter 5). Next, subjects were randomly sorted into either one of four treatment conditions or the control condition. In each condition subjects read a short news report (approximately 500 words) that served as the treatment stimulus.[30] Finally, subjects were asked to answer a series of questions designed to measure their opposition to various uses of military force (including drone strikes), and beliefs about the use of armed drones. All news reports were stripped of any source identification and edited for length. Each subject group consisted of approximately 100 subjects.

In order to test the above hypotheses and assess the effect of beliefs on opposition to US drone strikes, subjects were asked if they believed the following statements were "true", "mostly true", "somewhat true" "somewhat false" "mostly false" or "false."

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[30] The CONTROL group read a news report of approximately equal length describing the awarding of the 2028 Summer Olympics. This news report also did not contain the word "drone."

1) The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of

manned aircraft in similar situations

2) Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks.

3) When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than

manned aircraft.

4) The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging

people to join terrorist organizations.

Responses were scored on a scale of 1 to 6, and reverse-coded for analysis. Additionally,

subjects were asked about their opposition to drone strikes.[31] Regression analysis was

conducted using opposition to drone strikes as the dependent variable[32] and the questions

regarding the beliefs about drones strikes as independent variables. Because these

questions were presented post-treatment, the four treatment conditions were entered into

the regression model as controls. Since sex and political ideology have been strongly

correlated with opposition to the US drone strikes, these two variables were also entered

into the regression as controls. The results of the regression analysis are displayed in

Table 4.1.

Results and Discussion

In regards to support for drone strikes, 59 percent of respondents expressed support

and 41 percent expressed opposition.[33] Fifty-seven percent of respondents endorsed the

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[31] Subjects were asked, "*Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?* Response options for this question were "strongly support", "support", "somewhat support", "somewhat oppose", "oppose", and "strongly oppose." Responses were coded 1 through 6 in the order listed.

[32] Subjects were asked, "Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?"

[33] The response categories "strongly support", "support", and "somewhat support" were collapsed, as were the response categories "strongly oppose", "oppose", and "somewhat oppose."

belief that drone strikes kill more civilians than do strikes from manned aircraft, and 45 percent endorsed the belief that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. Conversely, 69 percent of respondents endorsed the belief that drone strikes are more precise than strikes from manned aircraft, and 63 percent endorsed the belief that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. Overall, these numbers are not surprising in that the percentage of respondents endorsing beliefs associated with support is higher than the percentage of respondents endorsing beliefs associated with opposition. However, since the percentages of respondents endorsing beliefs associated to support and opposition are in all cases respectively higher than the percentage of respondents expressing support or opposition, this suggests that many respondents endorse what appear to be contradictory beliefs. This accords with Zaller's *Response Axiom* which states that individuals average across the messages that are "immediately salient or accessible to them." If individuals did not hold competing beliefs, then there would be nothing to average across, and immediate salience would almost certainly have no effect.

The results of the regression analysis sustain H1(A), as the belief that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than do manned aircraft is positively correlated with opposition to US drone strikes. H1(B) is also sustained as the belief that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism is positively correlated with opposition. H1(C) is sustained in that there is a significant negative correlation between beliefs about the accuracy of armed drones and opposition to drone strikes. However, this correlation is at the absolute lowest level of significance. H2 is sustained as the belief that drones are

necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack is negatively correlated

with opposition to drone strikes.

Table 4.1. Beliefs and Opposition to US Drone Strikes

Dependent Variable: *Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?*[34]

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			.235**	.027
ideology			-.185***	.000
CIVCAS	.304*	.059	.336**	.037
VIDEOGAME	.245	.131	.239	.139
TERRORIST	.179	.264	.189	.241
MILCAS	.370**	.023	.354**	.029
More Civilian Casualties	.310***	.000	.237***	.000
Necessary	-.618***	.000	-.565***	.000
More Precise	-.073*	.100	-.049	.274
More Terrorism	.211***	.000	.184***	.000

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Interestingly, although the means comparison presented in the previous chapter

indicated that only the CIVCAS condition differed from the CONTROL condition in

terms of opposition to drone strikes, regression analysis indicates that both the CIVCAS

and MILCAS conditions are predictors of opposition. This result is theoretically

unexpected. If concern for avoiding US military casualties is a primary motivator for

supporting drone strikes, then the salience of US military casualties *should* lead to the

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[34] Measured on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being "strongly support" and 6 being "strongly oppose"

sampling of beliefs connecting drone strikes and the avoidance of military casualties. This *immediate* salience effect should increase support for drone strikes. That it instead increases opposition is somewhat puzzling.

When a second regression model is constructed including sex and ideology as control variables, the correlations between beliefs and opposition are essentially unchanged, indicating that beliefs are strong predictors of opposition to drone strikes. The one exception being the negative correlation between accuracy and opposition. As noted above this correlation was significant at the absolute lowest level, and when sex and ideology are added to the model this correlation disappears. Additionally, since *Sex* was coded "0" for male and "1" for female, and *ideology* was scored on a scale from 1-7 beginning with "extremely liberal" and extending to "extremely conservative", these results indicates that being female, and being liberal, are both positively correlated with opposition to drone strikes. These findings align with public opinion polls which show females and those identifying as politically liberal being more opposed to drone strikes than males and those identifying as politically conservative (Pew Research Center, 2013b).

Conclusion

Previous research into public opinion and support for the US government's use of armed drones to attack terrorists overseas has focused almost exclusively on explaining support. This chapter has attempted to explain opposition. The results of the above analysis indicate that opposition to drone strikes is significantly correlated with beliefs promoted by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative. Opposition is positively correlated with the belief that drone strikes kill more civilians than do strikes from manned aircraft, and the belief that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. Opposition is

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negatively correlated with the belief that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. The results of this analysis align with those of the previous chapter, in suggesting that the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative is effective in creating opposition to drone strikes. It appears that the messages promoted by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative have been *received* and *accepted,* by a significant portion of those who oppose drone strikes.

As discussed in Chapter 2 the US news media tends to frame drone strikes as an effective means of combatting terrorism, and my analysis of drone strike coverage by the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* indicates that those killed in drone strikes are predominantly described as terrorists, militants, or insurgents, not civilians. In light of this treatment of drone strikes by the US news media, as well as the fact that over 68 percent of my respondents endorsed the belief that drone strikes were more precise than strikes from manned aircraft, how is it that 57 percent of my respondents believe that drone strikes kill more civilians than do strikes from manned aircraft? Additionally, how can almost 55 percent of my respondents believe that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism, when nearly 63 percent believe that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack? Looked at from a purely cognitive perspective, these beliefs are expressly incongruent.

While it is certainly possible for a person to hold conflicting beliefs (the concept of cognitive dissonance), according to Zaller, opinion formation is a predominantly cognitive process. People are exposed to messages, assess the value and validity of those messages, and then store those messages away in their minds. When later tasked with forming an opinion, people base that opinion on the messages that are currently most

salient. While this explains the increase in opposition to drone strikes observed in the CIVCAS treatment condition, it doesn't explain how the messages communicated by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative, and other narratives as well, come to be part of a person's mental inventory.

The analysis above indicates there are strong correlations between messages communicated by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative and opposition to drone strikes. Again, I argue that the most important part of the RAS process is the acceptance of messages. Once accepted, a message becomes a belief. So why do some people accept the messages of the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative and subsequently endorse the beliefs associated with these messages while others do not?

Again, the second axiom of the RAS model is the *Resistance Axiom* and it states that people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions. Haidt argues that when it comes to opinion formation, "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (2012, pg.1). Haidt also argues that intuition frequently takes the form of moral judgments. In the next chapter, I argue that the "political predispositions" that matter when it comes to forming an opinion on drone strikes, are moral in nature.

CHAPTER 5

WHY CONSERVATIVES SUPPORT DRONE STRIKES AND LIBERALS DON'T

The RAS model predicts that once a message is *received*, it is either accepted or resisted. Only messages that are *accepted* are later available to be *sampled* from and incorporated into the opinion formation process. I contend that only messages that are believed will be accepted. Messages that individuals find to be untrue, will not simply be resisted, but rejected. Therefore, only messages which a person *believes* to be true will factor into their opinion. When a person is tasked to form an opinion on an issue, what they are sampling from, is their beliefs. So, if you want to understand how a person came to hold a particular opinion on an issue, you first need to understand how they came to hold their beliefs on that issue.

In the last chapter I presented evidence that opposition to the US government's use of armed drones to attack terrorists in other countries is significantly correlated with the acceptance of messages communicated by the "Drones Kill Children" narrative discussed in Chapter 3. In this chapter I go beyond just the beliefs communicated by the "Drones Kill Civilians" and examine how beliefs associated with other narratives correlate with the decision to support or oppose drone strikes.

The second axiom of Zaller's RAS model is the *Resistance Axiom* and with it he argues that people will resist arguments that do not accord with their political predispositions, but that they do so, "…*only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions*" (1992, pg.44). According to this axiom, a person may *receive* a message (i.e. be exposed to and understand it), but he or she may not *accept* it. As discussed in the

preceding chapter, previous research has shown that the average American has a very poor understanding of the basic capabilities and employment of armed drones. Therefore, what "contextual information" are people are using to decide which messages to *accept* and which messages to *resist*? If a large portion of the public is ill-informed about the factual details of drone strikes, it is unclear how cognitive processes can be driving the opinion formation process on this issue.

Knowledge is the combination of truth and belief (Zagzebski, 2017). Truth accords with reality. Beliefs on the other hand, may or may not accord with reality. When someone believes something that is true, that belief constitutes knowledge. When someone believes something that is not true, that belief does not constitute knowledge. Knowledge and belief are not synonymous. It is perfectly possible for a person to believe something that is not true. From the perspective of the individual however, belief *is* truth. As such, when a person acts in accordance with a belief, they are acting in accordance with reality as they know it. However, since not everything people believe is actually true, it must be the case that believing is not dependent on the acquisition of knowledge. In effect, people do not form their opinions based on what is true, but rather on what they *believe* to be true. Since the average American has a very poor understanding of the facts surrounding the issue of drone strikes, I argue when people *choose* what to believe about drone strikes, they choose based on their moral predispositions. Whereas Zaller's RAS model stipulates that public opinion formation is a predominantly cognitive process, I contend that, at least in the case of public opinion and drone strikes, the process is largely an affective one.

Morals as a Substitute for Information

The RAS model is designed to explain the formation of political opinion, and frames the opinion making process as a process of *cognitive engagement*. According to Zaller, affective engagement is likely to affect opinion formation only when it leads to intellectual engagement. While people tend to resist the acceptance of messages that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, they do so only when they possess the necessary information to perceive a relationship between those messages and their predispositions. That is, while emotion and/or intuitions may play a role in the opinion formation process, its role is secondary at best. In the RAS model, deciding what to believe is an intellectual endeavor, dependent on individual knowledge.

Importantly, Zaller's operational measure of cognitive engagement (which he alternately refers to as *political awareness*) is a test of *general* public affairs knowledge, and not an individual's direct knowledge of any particular issue. While Zaller acknowledges that this measurement strategy is "less than ideal", and that the use of issue specific measures of knowledge would be better suited as a measure of cognitive engagement, out of practical concerns Zaller proceeds on the assumption that people who are knowledgeable about politics in general (i.e. politically aware), will also be attentive and informed about specific issues as well (1992, pg.42-43). As previously discussed, in the case of public opinion and US drone strikes, there is good reason to question this assumption.

However, political awareness is only one of two key individual level variables in Zaller's model, the other is *political values.* According to Zaller, political values are general and enduring standards in a person's belief systems that hold a more central

position than do attitudes, and that lead people to take to take particular positions on social issues (1992, pg.23). In an earlier work, Zaller stated that, "Values may be rooted in personality, philosophy, ideology, gender, experience, religion, ethnicity, occupation, or interest (among other things)" (1991, pg.1216). While Zaller does not specifically mention morality, moral values would certainly seem to fit within the boundaries of political values.

Zaller further argues that when elites divide and take up clear and differing positions on an issue, "…members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition" (1992, pg.9). In regards to the issue of US drone strikes, elites have divided and created two distinct positions, with those who support drone strikes championing the idea that drones are an effective weapon for killing terrorists, and those in opposition countering with the assertion that drone strikes kill large numbers of civilians. Since few Americans are predisposed to oppose killing terrorists or support killing civilians, the pertinent question becomes exactly what predispositions are Americans appealing to when they form an opinion on US drone strikes.

Partisanship and Political Ideology

In the *Resistance Axiom* of the RAS model, Zaller indicates that people will "resist" messages that do not accord with their political predispositions. Polls measuring US public opinion on drone strikes have consistently indicated that there is a sizable gap between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrats being far more likely to express opposition to drone strikes than Republicans (Brown and Frank, 2013; Pew, 2013b; Pew, 2015). Large differences between political liberals and political conservatives have also

been recorded, with liberals being far more likely to oppose drone strikes than conservatives (Pew, 2013b). In my sample Democrats were significantly more likely to oppose drone strikes (and all other uses of force) than were Republicans, and political ideology was significantly correlated with opposition to drone strikes in the expected directions (i.e. liberals being more opposed, conservatives being less). So perhaps Zaller is correct, and when making the decision of whether or not to oppose drone strikes people are simply deferring to their political proclivities. However, this still leaves unanswered the question of why using armed drones to attack terrorist overseas appeals to Republicans and conservatives, but not to Democrats and liberals.

Drones and Moral Judgment

Jonathan Haidt argues that when it comes to opinion formation, "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (2012, pg.1). In Haidt's *Social Intuitionist Mode,* intuition precedes judgment, and unlike the RAS model, there is no clear distinction made between emotion and cognition. Having an emotional response is a type of information processing, and as such is considered to be cognition. According to Haidt, cognition comes in two forms, intuition and reasoning, with intuition frequently taking the form of moral judgments. Moral judgments are subtler than emotions, in that people do not have to have a noticeable (even to themselves) emotional reaction in order to form an immediate and morally based judgment. Moral judgments are "rapid" and "effortless", and most importantly, generally take the lead in the decision-making process (Haidt, 2012, pg.53).

Moral conviction—the absolute belief that a position is right or wrong (Skitka, 2002; Skitka and Mullen, 2002)—produces a host of effects on people's ability to reason and

deliberate on an issue. When people experience moral conviction, they not only think in terms of absolute right and wrong, they believe their judgments are, "…equally valid everywhere and as objective as 2 + 2 = 4" (Morgan, Skitka, and Lytle, 2014). People experiencing moral conviction tend to display strong negative emotions towards those who disagree with them (Ryan, 2014), and they may also tolerate, or even engage in, *transgressive advocacy,* which is, "advocacy that involves norm-violating means to achieve preferred ends" (Mueller and Skitka, 2017). Moral conviction increases the difficulty of resolving conflicts, and can even lead to increased physical distance between people who disagree, (Bauman and Skitka, 2009).

One way to identify a moral issue is to examine the debate that surrounds it. According to Mooney and Schuldt, a moral issue is one where, at least one side of the debate defines the issue as one that threatens its "core values" (2008, pg.201). Haider-Markel and Meier apply similar criteria, defining a moral issue as one where at least one side *portrays* the issue as one of morality and uses moral arguments to make its case (1996, pg.333). A second approach is to identify a moral issue by the attitudinal responses it elicits. Biggers defines moral issues as ones that elicit attitudes based on values that are "central" to one's primary identity (2011, pg.8).

Many of those opposed to drone strikes have defined the issue as one that threatens core values and principles. Claims of excessively high levels of civilian death and reckless disregard for the lives of innocents (Amnesty International, 2013; Brunstetter and Braun, 2013; Kilcullen and Exum, 2009; O'Connell, 2010b; Scahill, et.al., 2016; Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law, 2012), are obviously claims based on core values. Americans oppose the slaughter of innocents on the grounds of moral

principle. Arguing that drone strikes wantonly kill large numbers of civilians, many of them women and children, is a moral argument. Similarly, aspersions and innuendos regarding the military ethics and personal bravery of drone operators (Cole, Dobbing, and Haliwood, 2010; Contratto, 2011; McCrisken, 2011; O'Connell, 2010b; Riza, 2016) strike a particular chord with most Americans. Honor, duty, courage, and sacrifice are more than just words to many Americans, they are moral precepts. Arguments that drones violate these precepts, are moral arguments.

As for the attitudinal responses these claims tend to evoke, they exhibit several properties that scholars have attributed to morally based beliefs, such as high salience (Grummel, 2008; Haider-Markel, 1998), persistence and simplicity ((Frank, 2005; Tatalovich, Smith and Bobic, 1994), and immunity from evidence and reason (Dye, 1984). While these attitudes are best illustrated by those who actively protest the use of drones, one should expect that as with many issues generally accepted as moral issues (abortion, the death penalty, etc.), not everyone who has strong persistent beliefs, will actively protest. I argue that for many, drone strikes have become a moral issue.

Drone Strikes and Moral Attitudes

Ultimately, the US government's use of armed drones to target terrorists overseas falls under the umbrella of foreign policy. Therefore, some might feel that claiming drone strikes are a moral issue and not a political issue, is going too far. However, moral conviction can be experienced in response to issues that have not traditionally been considered moral issues, such as labor relations laws and Social Security reform (Ryan, 2014). Furthermore, one does not have to appeal to full-blown moral conviction to posit that morality may be having a significant effect on people's opinions regarding drone

strikes. Just as people vary in the certainty of their beliefs, people may also vary in the amount of moral engagement they have with a particular belief.

Haidt and his colleagues posit that there are five "moral foundations" that people appeal to when forming opinions on issues with moral implications, these are: *care/harm*; *fairness/reciprocity*; *in-group/loyalty*; *authority/respect*; *purity/sanctity* (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, 2009). Political ideology correlates strongly with how much moral importance an individual imparts to the different foundations. Specifically, those who are liberal in their politics tend to reason primarily along just two of the foundations; the care/harm foundation and the fairness/reciprocity foundation, with the harm/care foundation generally taking precedence. Those who identify politically as conservatives however, tend to reason along all five of the foundations approximately equally.[35] For liberals, the most sacred moral value is caring for victims of oppression, for conservatives the most sacred moral value is preserving the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community (Haidt, 2012, pgs.351-57).

The correlation between these moral foundations and political ideology (and political partisanship) is extremely robust. Since previous polling has indicated there is a significant divide between liberals, and conservatives in regard to the opposition of drone strikes (Pew 2013b), this ideological divide could be an indication that when people decide to oppose or support US drone strikes, they are making a morally intuitive decision. If this is the case, then opinions on drone strikes should be strongly associated with specific moral foundations.

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[35] Libertarians were also included in Haidt's political categories and they tended to have the most constrained moral reasoning, with the liberty/oppression foundation being essentially the only one that mattered.

Testing the Moral Foundations of Drone Support and Opposition

The diagnostic tool developed by Haidt and his colleagues to measure an individual's moral foundations is a thirty-two question survey which asks respondents to rate on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being "extremely relevant" and 0 being "not at all relevant", how relevant certain considerations are to their thinking when they decide what is "right" and what is "wrong". Respondents are also presented with several statements relating to moral beliefs and asked to what degree they agree with each statement.

The survey includes a set of items to measure the importance of conforming to rules and avoiding acts that cause chaos and disorder. These items are designed to represent the *authority/respect* dimension of morality. People who score high on the *authority/respect* index place moral significance on showing respect to parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority. The survey also includes a set of items to measure the importance of group solidarity and taking pride in one's nation and its accomplishments. These items represent the *in-group/loyalty* dimension of morality. People who score high on the *in-group/loyalty* index tend to place moral significance on being loyal to one's group and protecting the group from outsiders. A third set of items on the survey measures the importance of avoiding causing harm to innocents and providing care for the weak and vulnerable. These items represent the *harm/care* moral dimension, and people who score high on this index tend to be largely unidimensional in their morality. For them, morality is synonymous with avoiding harm and providing care. These individuals also care about fairness, but primarily in the sense that everyone is treated equally, not in the reciprocal sense that people should get what they have earned (Haidt, 2012).

Considering two of the most common reasons given to explain support for US drone strikes—that they protect members of the in-group (US military personnel) and kill members of the out-group (terrorists)—I put forth the following hypothesis…

H1: *There is a significant, positive correlation between support for US drone strikes and the in-group/loyalty dimension of morality*

Considering that US drone strikes are actions sanctioned by the authority of the United States federal government aimed at thwarting acts of terror (incidents of extreme chaos and disorder), I put forth the following hypothesis…

H2: *There is a significant, positive correlation between support for US drone strikes and the authority/respect dimension of morality.*

Finally, considering the findings of previous chapters which indicate that opposition to drone strikes is closely associated with the belief that drones cause more civilian casualties than manned aircraft, *and* that opposition to drone strikes can be significantly increased by priming respondents with reports of conflict-induced civilian casualties, I put forth the following hypothesis…

H3: *There is a significant positive correlation between opposition to US drone strikes and the harm/care dimension of morality.*

To test these hypotheses, I draw on data collected from the survey experiment described in Chapter 3. This time however I incorporate data from the diagnostic tool described above (Haidt's moral foundation survey) which was administered to all subjects pre-treatment. Since respondents were queried post-treatment about their opposition/support for the use of armed drones, treatment conditions were added to the regression analysis as a way of insuring that any observed correlations were not treatment

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specific. Since sex and ideology have repeatedly been shown to correlate with opinions

on the use of drones, these variables were also added to the analysis. The results of this

analysis are displayed in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Opposition to US Drone Strikes and Moral Attitudes

Dependent Variable: *Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?*[36]

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			.347**	.013
ideology			-.242***	.000
CIVCAS	.525***	.007	.486**	.015
VIDEOGAME	.143	.461	.152	.439
TERRORIST	.101	.605	.090	.648
MILCAS	.249	.199	.179	.361
harm	.064***	.000	.024	.121
authority	-.074***	.000	-.044**	.015
in-group	-.077***	.000	-.054***	.002

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

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[36] Measured on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being "strongly support" and 6 being "strongly oppose"

Based on the finding that there is a strong positive correlation between the *in-group/loyalty* dimension of morality and the *authority/respect* dimension of morality and support for US drone strikes, I put forth the following hypotheses…

H4: *Individuals who score high on the in-group/loyalty dimension of morality will tend to accept positive beliefs about drone strikes and reject negative beliefs about drone strikes.*

H5*: Individuals who score high on the authority/respect dimension of morality will tend to accept positive beliefs about drone strikes and reject negative beliefs about drone strikes.*

Based on the findings in the previous chapter linking opposition to the use of drones to the salience of civilian casualties, I put forth the following hypothesis…

H6*: Individuals who score high on the harm/care dimension of morality will tend to reject positive beliefs about drone strikes and accept negative beliefs about drone strikes.*

Testing and Results

To test these hypotheses, three items from the post-treatment survey dealing with beliefs about the necessity of using drones to fight terrorism, the superior accuracy of drones, and the ability of drones to limit US military casualties were selected as representative of positive beliefs about armed drones.[37] Four items from the post-treatment survey dealing with beliefs about the number of civilian casualties caused by drones, the potential for drone strikes to encourage people to join terrorist organizations, the similarity of operating drones to playing video games, and the idea that drone strikes

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[37] Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks; Using drones to kill enemy combatants saves the lives of US military personnel; When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than manned aircraft.

are cowardly, were selected as representative of negative beliefs about armed drones.[38]

For each of these seven items, respondents were asked if they believed the statement was "true", "mostly true", "somewhat true" "somewhat false" "mostly false" or "false." Responses were scored on a scale of 1 to 6, and reverse-coded for analysis (i.e. "true" = 6, "mostly true" =5, etc.).

Pearson analysis indicates that individuals scoring high in the *in-group/loyalty* dimension of morality are significantly more likely to believe that drones are necessary to protect the United States from terrorist attack, that the use of drones saves the lives of American military personnel, that drone strikes are more accurate than strikes from manned aircraft, and that operating a combat drone is like playing a video game (p = .000, .000, .011 and .002 respectively). These individuals were significantly less likely to believe that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than strikes from manned aircraft, contribute to the growth of terrorism, and are cowardly (p = .000, .000, and .005 respectively). Beliefs among those scoring high in the *authority/respect* dimension of morality were the same as those in with high scores on the *in-group loyalty* dimension of morality but with mostly stronger significance levels (p = .000 for all beliefs, except the belief that operating a combat drone is like playing a video game, where p = .004). Individuals scoring high in the *harm/care* moral dimension were significantly less likely to believe that drones are necessary to protect the United States from terrorist attack (p = .000), and significantly more likely to believe that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than do strikes from manned aircraft, and that drones contribute to the growth

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[38] The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of manned aircraft in similar situations; The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging people to join terrorist organizations; Operating a drone is like playing a video game; Using drones for combat is cowardly because the operators sit far removed from the battlefield and are in no personal danger.

of terrorism (p = .000 and .000 respectively). There was no significant correlation between high scores on the *harm/care* dimension of morality and beliefs about drones saving the lives of American military personnel, being more accurate, being cowardly, or being similar to playing a video game. The results of this analysis can be viewed in Appendix E.

Because respondents were queried about their beliefs regarding armed drones post-treatment, there is the possibility that these correlations are treatment driven. To test for this possibility, regression analyses were conducted using the four treatment conditions along with sex and ideology as controls. The results of this analysis are displayed in Tables 5.2 through 5.3.

The results on positive beliefs indicate that individuals scoring high on the *in-group/loyalty* index are significantly more likely to believe that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, but not significantly more likely to believe that using drones protects the lives of US military personnel, or that drones are more precise in their targeting than manned aircraft. Individuals scoring high on the *authority/respect* index are significantly more likely to endorse all these beliefs. Individuals scoring high on the *harm/care* index are significantly less likely to believe that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack, but significantly more likely to agree that using drones protects the lives of US military personnel. They were neither more nor less likely to believe drones are more precise than manned aircraft.

Table 5.2. Drone Strikes Are Necessary for Fighting Terrorism

Dependent Variable: *Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks.*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig	B	Sig
Sex			-.076	.537
ideology			.055	.213
CIVCAS	-.236	.160	-.197	.262
VIDEOGAME	.152	.365	.143	.411
TERRORIST	.054	.748	.091	.602
MILCAS	.146	.383	.239	.168
harm	-.061***	.000	-.052***	.000
authority	.060***	.000	.048***	.003
ingroup	.076***	.000	.074***	.000

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5.3. Drone Strikes Protect Pilots and Aircrew

Dependent Variable: *Using drones to kill enemy combatants saves the lives of US military personnel*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			-.326***	.007
ideology			.086**	.048
CIVCAS	-.007	.965	-.050	.772
VIDEOGAME	.178	.281	.134	.431
TERRORIST	.149	.366	.172	.313
MILCAS	.156	.344	.179	.292
harm	.005	.658	.026**	.047
authority	.066***	.000	.061***	.000
ingroup	-.077	.632	-.019	.195

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5.4. Drone Strike Are More Precise Than Strikes from Manned Aircraft

Dependent Variable: *When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than manned aircraft.*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			-.063	.611
ideology			.115***	.010
CIVCAS	-.310	.070	-.212	.230
VIDEOGAME	-.112	.515	-.061	.730
TERRORIST	-.165	.334	-.123	.486
MILCAS	.178	.298	.291	.098
harm	-.013	.229	.003	.834
authority	.057***	.000	.039**	.016
ingroup	-.010	.468	-.015	.319

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

In regards to negative beliefs, individuals scoring high on the *in-group/loyalty* index were not less likely to endorse negative beliefs about drone strikes. Those scoring high on the *authority/respect* index however, were less likely to believe that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than manned aircraft, contribute to the growth of terrorism, or that drone operators are cowards. Conversely, those scoring high on the *harm/care* index were more likely to believe that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than manned aircraft, and that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. They were not however, more likely to believe that drone operators are cowards. Interestingly, the belief that operating a drone is like playing a video game did not correlate significantly with any moral dimension.

Table 5.5. Drone Strikes Kill More Civilians than Strikes from Manned Aircraft

Dependent Variable: *The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of manned aircraft in similar situations*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			.212*	.100
ideology			-.146***	.002
CIVCAS	.135	.449	.095	.606
VIDEOGAME	-.001	.996	.008	.965
TERRORIST	-.077	.663	-.080	.659
MILCAS	.007	.969	-.049	.785
harm	.061***	.000	.034**	.015
authority	-.050***	.001	-.032*	.058
ingroup	.013	.369	.003	.843

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5.6. Drone Strikes Contribute to the Growth of Terrorism

Dependent Variable: *The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging people to join terrorist organizations.*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Sex			-.321**	.023
ideology			-.200***	.000
CIVCAS	.465**	.016	.381	.057
VIDEOGAME	.123	.520	.116	.558
TERRORIST	-.136	.478	-.098	.620
MILCAS	.297	.121	.286	.148
harm	.049***	.000	.037**	.015
authority	-.114***	.000	-.085***	.000
ingroup	.008	.601	.013	.463

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5.7. Operating a Drone is Like Playing a Video Game

Dependent Variable: *Operating a drone is like playing a video game.*

	Model 1		Model 2		
	B	Sig.	B	Sig	.
Sex			-.178	.264	
ideology			.110*	.055	
CIVCAS	-.119	.581	-.164	.469	
VIDEOGAME	.242	.264	.269	.232	
TERRORIST	-.207	.338	-.237	.293	
MILCAS	.013	.953	.022	.923	
harm	-.010	.483	.013	.448	
authority	.021	.271	.012	.549	
ingroup	.026	.148	.020	.302	

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Table 5.8. Drone Operators Are Cowards

Dependent Variable: *Using drones for combat is cowardly because the operators sit far removed from the battlefield and are in no personal danger.*

	Model 1		Model 2		
	B	Sig.	B	Sig	.
Sex			.288*	.075	
ideology			-.068	.236	
CIVCAS	.209	.342	.267	.244	
VIDEOGAME	.096	.661	.201	.376	
TERRORIST	-.146	.506	-.065	.774	
MILCAS	.020	.928	.066	.772	
harm	-.001	.970	-.019	.281	
authority	-.047**	.015	-.039*	.062	
ingroup	-.009	.618	-.001	.966	

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

In regards to hypotheses H4, H5, and H6, H4 is not sustained as only one of the seven beliefs tested conformed to predictions. H5 is mostly sustained in that six of the seven beliefs tested conformed to predictions, and H6 is partially sustained with three of the seven beliefs tested conforming to predictions. These results appear to indicate that the relationship between moral predispositions and beliefs is neither absolute nor straightforward. Despite being strongly correlated with support for drone strikes, scores on the *in-group/loyalty* index were not strong predictors of any of the beliefs tested, with the exception of believing that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. Placing moral significance on being loyal to one's group, and protecting the group from outsiders, seems to have little effect on what a person believes about drone strikes.

High scores on the *harm/care* index seem mostly to affect beliefs related to the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative discussed in Chapter 2. Scoring high on this index is a strong predictor that a person will accept the beliefs that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than do manned aircraft and that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism, and will reject the belief that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. While these correlations all conform to predictions, scoring high on the *harm/care* index was also a good predictor of accepting the belief that using drones saves military lives. This, coupled with the fact that high scores on this index are not correlated with beliefs about drones being similar to video games or drone operators being cowardly, indicates that the relationship between the *harm/care* dimension of morality and beliefs about drone strikes isn't as simple as "accept the negative, reject the positive."

Of the three moral dimensions tested, the *authority/respect* dimension conforms most closely to expectations. High scores on this index were a strong predictor of the acceptance of all positive beliefs, as well the rejection of the belief that drone strikes contribute to the growth of terrorism. Additionally, high scores on the *authority/respect* index were a good indicator that a person would reject the beliefs that drone strikes kill more civilians than do manned aircraft, and that drone operators are cowardly. In the *authority/respect* moral dimension, the relationship between it and beliefs about drone strikes actually does seem to be simple and straightforward. Positive beliefs will be accepted, negative beliefs rejected.

Conclusion

The RAS model characterizes the opinion formation process as one that is largely cognitive. According to Zaller, affective considerations come into play only insofar as they lead to cognitive engagement. In the case of public opinion on US drone strikes, affective considerations seem to be playing a much more significant role than the RAS model predicts. The correspondence between the *in-group/loyalty* and the *authority/respect* dimensions of morality and support for drone strikes is extremely robust. Additionally, the correspondence between the *authority/respect* and the *harm/care* dimensions of morality and several key beliefs about drone strikes is also extremely robust. Those scoring high on the *authority/respect* dimension were much more likely to accept positive beliefs about drone strikes, and reject negative beliefs. Those scoring high on the *harm/care* dimension were much more likely to accept negative beliefs and reject the idea that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. Working off the assumption that all these individuals

are equal in regards to the potential to be exposed to the various messages generated by elite discourse and disseminated by the popular media,[39] it stands to reason that if the process of deciding which messages to accept (i.e. deciding what to believe) is a primarily cognitive process, then these strong correlations would not exist.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, there is a strong correlation between the dimensions of morality and political ideology. This correlation is observed in my analysis, and it is quite strong. Additionally, we know that political partisanship is highly correlated with these dimensions of morality. Therefore, maybe Zaller is correct when he asserts that when faced with conflicting messages people default to their political predispositions. Republicans tend to support drone strikes, while Democrats tend to oppose them. Republicans accept positive beliefs about drones because they are Republicans, do the "cognitive math", and decide to support drone strikes. Democrats do essentially the reverse. The problem with this formulation is that it tells us absolutely nothing about *why* Republicans tend to accept those positive beliefs in the first place. What political *predispositions* are they appealing to? Same with Democrats, what predispositions are they appealing to? When political ideology is controlled for, the effects of the moral dimensions are still present. Additionally, it is unlikely that people choose their political party affiliation based on their support or opposition to drone strikes. It is however likely that a person's moral predispositions affect his or political party preference. In the concluding chapter I will explore some ways in which the relationships between political

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[39] One could argue here that confirmation bias, the act of seeking out information that one already believes, could lead to those with differing moral predispositions to seek out different information, leading to different levels of exposure to certain messages. This is a fair objection, but it fails to explain how the initial belief that is being followed was formed.

ideology, partisanship, moral predispositions, and support/opposition for drone strikes might be better untangled.

Putting the results of this chapter together with the previous chapter presents a picture of opinion formation on drone strikes that could be considered either optimistic or disheartening, depending on one's perspective. Despite the hyperbole, an objective analysis of public polling on drone strikes indicates that drone strikes are, at best, supported only slightly more than the use of other forms of military force against terrorists. Considering that drone strikes are very often portrayed as an effective means of protecting the United States from terrorist attack while keeping US military personnel out of harm's way, the fact that a majority of Americans approve of drone strikes should not be surprising. That the majority is as slim as it is, and the fact that experimental results (mine and others) indicate that support for drone strikes can be significantly reduced by the introduction of concerns for the safety of foreign civilians, suggests that for most Americans the decision to support or oppose drone strikes is not being made frivolously. Americans are weighing the information they receive about drone strikes and deciding accordingly. This is encouraging. What is disheartening is that these decisions seem to be filtered through individual moral attitudes.

The information that people receive regarding drone strikes is the direct product of competing lines of elite discourse. And while my experiments have been designed to measure the effect of moral attitudes on the acceptance of beliefs and the subsequent formation of opinion among the general public, there is little reason to suspect that elites are immune to this process. There is also very little reason to suspect that most elites are significantly better informed about drone operations than are the general public. If the

messages being generated by elite discourse are being guided by individual morality (i.e. journalists, reporters, academics believe stories that accord with their moral predispositions and reject those that conflict), then the emergence of directly competing narratives, and a decidedly divided public, is a foregone conclusion. Worse, if the beliefs of those constructing the narratives are dependent on individual morality, the narratives received by the public are likely to be moral narratives. Moral narratives lead to moral conviction.

Again, when a person acts from moral conviction, he or she is certain in their beliefs. And while they may or may not engage in transgressive advocacy, their acceptance (and promotion) of those beliefs will be steadfast. Therefore, issues characterized by competing moral narratives will not only become divisive, they will become intractable. Even when presented with factual information, people will reject knowledge, and cling to belief.

In this dissertation, I have shown that public opinion on drone strikes is most affected by the beliefs promoted in two competing narratives…the "Drones Kill Terrorists" narrative and the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative. These are moral narratives, and as such the one people choose to accept appears to be the one that resonates most strongly with an their moral predispositions. Importantly however, this study also demonstrates that salience has an effect. Similar to previous research, the introduction of the image of civilians being killed in conflict increased opposition to drone strikes. Unlike previous research however, I was able to elicit this effect with no mention of drones. Therefore, it seems that the connection between drone strikes and civilian death so heavily promoted

by the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been exceptionally effective. This is not surprising.

As discussed earlier, those who are liberal in their politics tend to reason primarily along just two of the five moral foundations; the care/harm foundation and the fairness/reciprocity foundation, with the harm/care foundation generally taking precedence. Those who identify politically as conservatives however, tend to reason along all of the foundations approximately equally. This suggests that both liberals and conservatives view the deaths of innocent civilians as a moral issue. As such, both liberals and conservatives are susceptible to moral narratives centered around the death of civilians.

Importantly, this should not be taken to suggest that liberals are not susceptible to moral narratives centered around the threat of terrorism. Terrorists are generally viewed as people who harm others, including innocents. I suspect that liberals are, by and large, just as opposed to terrorism as are conservatives. However, considering that for liberals, the most sacred moral value is caring for victims of oppression, it is likely that they are able—at least morally—to totally separate opposition to terrorism and support for drone strikes. For liberals, both *feel* wrong. In short, just because liberals tend to accept negative beliefs about drones, does not mean they reject negative beliefs about terrorists. While I was unable to elicit a decrease in opposition to drone strikes by priming my subjects with a news story detailing terrorist attacks, this does not mean that a more direct prime (a news story detailing a drone attack against terrorists) would not elicit such an effect.

Again, the acceptance and rejection of beliefs is not absolute. People are quite capable of holding contradictory beliefs. What morality does is influence how strongly certain beliefs are held. It does not negate the effect of salience it simply mediates it. As such, it is important to understand how individual morality affects public opinion…not just on drone strikes but on other politically divisive issues as well. Examining politically divisive issues in terms of partisanship gives, at best, an incomplete picture. The vast majority of US drone strikes occurred under the presidency of Barack Obama. Despite this, there is a clear divide among Democrats and Republicans on this issue, with Democrats being significantly more opposed to drone strikes than Republicans. This strongly suggests that opinion on drone strikes are not dependent on which party is in office.

However, despite the election of Donald Trump, who has increased drone strikes *and* signed an executive order overturning the Obama administration's commitment to publicly release information detailing the number of civilians killed by US drone strikes (Dilanian and Kube, 2019), public opposition to drone strikes does not appear to have increased. While public interest in drone strikes was significantly waning even before Trump announced his candidacy, it seems that President Trump's increased use of drones and return to secrecy are the least of his political opponents worries. Arguably, President Trump is the most politically divisive figure to be elected to the presidency in American history. And while there has been no shortage of criticism directed at the President (by Democrats and others) much of it has centered around Trump's perceived personal shortcomings, his irregular approach to foreign policy (particularly his embrace of authoritarian leaders), and his policies/proposed policies regarding immigration. So while

drone strikes appear to be more a moral issue than a political issue, it also appears to be an issue that can quickly lose significance in the face of other issues.

This does not mean that the significance of moral attitudes should be discounted as a relevant factor in the formation of public opinion. While the issue of drone strikes may be flying under the radar at this time, this does not mean the underlying attitudes that lead people to oppose or support drone strikes have disappeared, or that the narratives constructed to shape opinion on this issue have ceased to have an effect. If elites once again decide to elevate the issue of drone strikes to one of public importance, we can expect moral narratives to be a primary feature of their discourse.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was twofold: to examine the factor(s) that shape public opposition to drone strikes, and to argue that in the case of drone strikes, where factual information is low and there are directly competing narratives, moral attitudes should be given more weight than cognitive processing in the formation of public opinion. To achieve these goals, this study examined the history and public polling on drone strikes, previous research seeking to explain public support for drone strikes, the media's portrayal of those killed in drone strikes, the elite discourse surrounding the issue of drone strikes, and the relationships between personal belief, moral attitudes, and opposition/support for drone strikes

Findings

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated that despite giving explanations which should suggest significantly higher levels of support among the American public for drone strikes than is actually observed, journalists reporting on polls measuring support for drone strikes have doggedly portrayed public support for drone strikes as unwaveringly high. Additionally, I examined the small number of empirical studies directed at explaining support for drone strikes and concluded that while there is support for the reasons given by journalists to explain public approval of drone strikes, these studies also suggest that support for drone strikes can be significantly reduced by making the potential for civilian casualties salient to survey respondents.

In Chapter 2, I conducted a content analysis of 12 years of drone strike coverage by the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* aimed at determining how these two

major US news media outlets have tended to portray those killed in US drone strikes; as terrorists and insurgents, or as innocent victims. The results of this analysis indicated that, by a wide margin, those killed in US drone strikes are predominantly portrayed as terrorists, insurgents, or militants, not as innocent civilians.

In Chapter 3, I examined the elite discourse surrounding drone strikes and derived three narratives which I argue encapsulate the beliefs that shape public opinion on drone strikes. To test these narratives, I conducted a survey-experiment designed to measure the effectiveness of these narratives at increasing/decreasing opposition to drone strikes. The results of this experiment indicated that the "Drones Kill Civilians" narrative has been effective at creating an *implicit* connection between drone strikes and the deaths of civilians in conflict.

In Chapter 4, I used data collected from this same survey experiment to establish a relationship between certain beliefs about drone strikes and opposition to drone strikes. The results of this analysis indicated that opposition to drone strikes is strongly correlated with the belief that drone strikes cause more civilian casualties than do strikes from manned aircraft, and the *rejection* of the belief that drone strikes are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack. In Chapter 5 I used additional data collected from this survey experiment to demonstrate strong correlations between moral attitudes, beliefs about drone strikes, and opposition *and* support for drone strikes. The results of this analysis indicated that moral attitudes can be strong predictors of what individuals believe about drone strikes, and whether or not they choose to oppose or support them.

Implications

Because this study utilizes a convenience sample, it is unclear how much external validity my experimental findings carry. My subjects were college students, predominantly under the age of 25. Since survey data shows that younger people tend to be more liberal in their politics (Pew 2018b), in an important sense my sample was likely not representative of the American public at large. Still, this study raises a number of implications for both public support for drone strikes and the process of public opinion formation in general. As discussed in Chapter 4, previous research has shown that the US public has a very weak understanding of the capabilities and uses of armed drones. And as demonstrated in Chapter 3, elite discourse surrounding US drone strikes is represented by competing narratives.

In my experiment the presence of these competing narratives appears to combine with a lack of information and produce an opinion formation process which is largely directed by moral attitudes, not a cognitively-based assessment of the facts. Since there is little reason to suspect that college students and the general public are differentially exposed to narratives about drone strikes, it is not unreasonable to assume that the *process* my findings depict occurs among the general public just as it does among college students. However, because of the limited nature of my sample, the possible effects of age and education on this process cannot be tested.

Haidt argues that when it comes to opinion formation, "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (2012, pg.1). He also argues that intuition frequently takes the form of moral judgments. I have argued that because of the way drone strikes have been presented to the public—as either a necessary tool for keeping the United States safe

from terrorist attack or as a wanton and indiscriminate killer of innocent civilians—this issue has, for many Americans, become a moral issue, not a political issue. The findings in this study suggest that in the case of drone strikes, American opinions are significantly impacted by their moral attitudes. These attitudes determine not just whether an individual supports or opposes drone strikes, but also what they believe to be true about drone strikes.

Moral conviction—the absolute belief that a position is right or wrong (Skitka, 2002; Skitka and Mullen, 2002)—produces a host of effects on people's ability to reason and deliberate on an issue. When people experience moral conviction, they not only think in terms of absolute right and wrong, they believe their judgments are, "…equally valid everywhere and as objective as 2 + 2 = 4" (Morgan, Skitka, and Lytle, 2014). People experiencing moral conviction tend to display strong negative emotions towards those who disagree with them (Ryan, 2014), and they may also tolerate, or even engage in, *transgressive advocacy,* which is, "advocacy that involves norm-violating means to achieve preferred ends" (Mueller and Skitka, 2017).

The extremely polarized discourse surrounding many issues that are ostensibly political (global warmings, healthcare, immigration, the minimum wage, etc.) may indicate that like drone strikes, these issues are, at least in the minds of the American public, moral issues. If this is the case, and opinion on these issues are largely driven by moral attitudes, cognitive approaches to influencing opinion are likely to be ineffective. In short, presenting the public with more and better information will not change their beliefs.

Avenues for Further Research

To better understand the effect of moral attitudes on the formation of political opinions several things need to occur. First, more research needs to be directed at uncovering what Americans actually believe about polarized issues. Second, more research needs to be directed at correlating moral attitudes with these beliefs and correlating these beliefs with competing positions on an issue. Just knowing that Republicans or conservatives support and issue while Democrats and liberals oppose it is superficial. Understanding why certain issue narratives resonate with different groups is a necessary first step to understanding how political issues become polarized along partisan lines.

Additionally, more thought needs to be given to how moral attitudes interact with the personal salience of political issues. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the peak of public interest in US drone strikes was 2013. During this year there were more polls taken and news articles written than any other year. After 2013, a steady decline in polling and reporting occurs, along with a drop in public interest. Whether public interest in leading or lagging media coverage is unclear. What does seem to be evident however, is that even during the height of news media coverage, public opinion did not mirror the most often communicated messages. Despite being largely described as an effective weapon against terrorism, public support for drone strikes steadily declined. This suggests that the media's influence on political issues is not entirely (or possibly even largely) the effect of repetition. What may be more important than how many times a person hears a message, is how well that message resonates.

Returning to the idea that narratives construct political environments (Kubiak, 2014), if the resonance of such narratives relies largely on individual moral attitudes, then examining how narratives regarding climate change, immigration, and government spending define political actors and assign roles is necessary first step in understanding why certain narratives resonate with some individuals and not others. All of these issues are characterized by a strong ideological and partisan divide. Is it possible this partisan divide is an artifact of individual moral attitudes?

Among Republicans, discussion of immigration almost always focuses on the legal status of the immigrants. Among Democrats the discussion almost focuses on the conditions the immigrants are fleeing from. Looked at from the standpoint of individual moral attitudes, this difference in rhetoric makes perfect sense. Republicans are far more likely to have what Haidt (2012) describes as a conservative morality. Those with a conservative morality place a significant degree of moral significance on obeying the law. Democrats on the other hand are far more likely to have what Haidt describes as a liberal morality. Those with a liberal morality do not consider obeying the law to be a moral issue. Morality is defined strictly in terms of alleviating human suffering. Therefore, if opinions on immigration are being formed by individual morality, this is exactly the kind of partisan framing we should expect. After all, despite what some cable news network hosts might claim, it is not as if Republicans are heartless or Democrats are anarchists. Rather, it is simply that individuals are seizing on the narratives that resonate with their moral predispositions.

To be clear, my connection between individual moral attitudes and opinions on immigration are purely speculative at this point. Research would have to be conducted to

confirm such a relationship. From a purely political perspective however, it might be advantageous for those in a position to influence public opinion (i.e. elites) to at least consider that those they are opposed to are genuine in their stated concerns and are not just making excuses for their immorality. If the goal of those opposed to immigration really is to insure the sanctity of the rule of law, and the goal of their opponents and detractors really to alleviate human suffering, then a compromise can surely be reached. Again, Republicans are not heartless and Democrats are not anarchists.

In regards to the specific issue of drone strikes, future research should be directed at replicating this study on a larger, more diverse sample. With a larger sample, within condition effects of morality could be assessed, allowing for an examination of possible interaction effects. That is, is it possible that making specific elements of the drone strike debate immediately salient changes reported beliefs on drone strikes? Will those exposed to a scenario describing civilians being killed in conflict be significantly more likely to not only oppose drone strikes (as this study indicated), but also significantly more likely to believe that drones are unnecessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attack? Will those exposed to a scenario describing terrorist threats be more likely to believe that drone strikes kill fewer civilians than manned aircraft? Or are those beliefs largely set in the *acceptance* stage of opinion formation as I have argued here?

While the importance of the issue of drone strikes may be waning, it is a near certainty that as military technology progresses similar issues will arise. Additionally, if the effects demonstrated in this study are generalizable to other politically polarized issues, it may be necessary for scholars to rethink how they approach the study of public opinion formation.

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APPENDIX A

DATA COLLECTED AUGUST 2018

Public Opinion Polling: US Drone Strikes 2011—2015

POLL	SUPPORT	OPPOSE	NO OPINION
Pew ST 2011	68	19	11
Pew RP 2012	55	34	11
Pew GA 2012	62	28	10
Farleigh Dickson 2012	75	13	12
WP/ABC 2012	82	11	6
CBS 2013	71	20	9
FOX News 2013	74	22	4
Economist/YouGov	76	14	10
Pew 2013	56	26	18
Pew GA 2013	61	30	8
NBC/WSJ 2013	64	12	24
NYT/CBS 2013	70	20	10
YouGov 2013	60	18	22
NYT/CBS 2014	51	42	7
Pew GA 2014	52	41	7
Pew PS 2015	58	35	7
AP-GFK 2015	61	13	26
Gallup 2015	65	28	8

APPENDIX B

DATA COLLECTED SEPTEMBER 2018

Opposition to the Use of Military Force

	Experimental Conditions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Which comes closer to describing your view? I support the U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism, OR I oppose the U.S. led efforts to fight terrorism?	Control	98	2.62	1.296	.053
	Civilian Casualties	101	2.97	1.228	
Do you support or oppose the United States deploying large numbers of conventional military ground forces to target terrorists in other countries?	Control	98	3.33	1.441	.371
	Civilian Casualties	100	3.51	1.439	
Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using Special Operations forces (Navy SEALS, Army Rangers, etc.) to target terrorists in other countries?	Control	98	2.76	1.415	.634
	Civilian Casualties	100	2.85	1.388	
Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using conventional manned aircraft (F-16, A-10, Apache Helicopters, etc.) to target terrorists in other countries?	Control	97	3.12	1.467	.380
	Civilian Casualties	101	3.31	1.461	
Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using long-range weapons such as Tomahawk cruise missiles to target terrorists in other countries?	Control	98	3.26	1.501	.328
	Civilian Casualties	100	3.47	1.579	

Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?	Control	98	3.00	1.443	.031
	Civilian Casualties	101	3.47*	1.566	

*p<.05 ; **p<.01: ***p<.001

APPENDIX C

DATA COLLECTED JULY 2018

Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:

[0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong)

[1] = not very relevant

[2] = slightly relevant

[3] = somewhat relevant

[4] = very relevant

[5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong)

_____1. Whether or not someone suffered emotionally

_____2. Whether or not some people were treated differently than others

_____3. Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country

_____4. Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority

_____5. Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency

_____6. Whether or not someone was good at math

_____7. Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable

_____8. Whether or not someone acted unfairly

_____9. Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group

_____10. Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society

_____11. Whether or not someone did something disgusting

_____12. Whether or not someone was cruel

_____13. Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights

_____14. Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty

_____15. Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder

_____16. Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of

Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:

[0]	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]
Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree

_____17. Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.

_____18. When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.

_____19. I am proud of my country's history.

_____20. Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.

_____21. People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.

_____22. It is better to do good than to do bad.

_____23. One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.

_____24. Justice is the most important requirement for a society.

_____25. People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.

_____26. Men and women each have different roles to play in society.

_____27. I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.

_____28. It can never be right to kill a human being.

_____29. I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.

_____30. It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.

_____31. If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.

_____32. Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.

To score the MFQ yourself, you can copy your answers into the grid below. Then add up the 6 numbers in each of the five columns and write each total in the box at the bottom of the column. The box then shows your score on each of 5 psychological "foundations" of morality. Scores run from 0-30 for each foundation. (Questions 6 and 22 are just used to catch people who are not paying attention. They don't count toward your scores).

Question #	Your Response	Question #	Your Response	Question #	Your Response	Question #	Your Response	Question #	Your Response	Question #	Your Response
1		2		3		4		5		6	
7		8		9		10		11			
12		13		14		15		16			
17		18		19		20		21		22	
23		24		25		26		27			
28		29		30		31		32			

Harm / Care	Fairness / Reciprocit	In-group/ Loyalty	Authority / Respect	Purity / Sanctity

The average politically moderate American's scores are: 20.2, 20.5, 16.0, 16.5, and 12.6. Liberals generally score a bit higher than that on Harm/care and Fairness/reciprocity, and much lower than that on the other three foundations. Conservatives generally show the opposite pattern.

The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ-30, July 2008) by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek. For more information about Moral Foundations Theory, scoring this form, or interpreting your scores, see: www.MoralFoundations.org. To take this scale online and see how you compare to others, go to www.YourMorals.org

APPENDIX D

DATA COLLECTED JULY 2018

Use of Force Against Terrorists Questionnaire

1. Which comes closer to describing your view? I support the U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism, OR I oppose the U.S. led efforts to fight terrorism?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

2. Do you support or oppose the United States deploying large numbers of conventional military ground forces to target terrorists in other countries?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

3. Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using Special Operations forces (Navy SEALS, Army Rangers, etc.) to target terrorists in other countries?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

4. Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using conventional manned aircraft (F-16, A-10, Apache Helicopters, etc.) to target terrorists in other countries?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

5. Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes using long range weapons such as Tomahawk cruise missiles to target terrorists in other countries?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

6. Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?

strongly support   support   somewhat support   somewhat oppose   oppose   strongly oppose

In your opinion, are the following statements true, mostly true, somewhat true, somewhat false, mostly false, or false.

7. Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

8. The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of manned aircraft in similar situations.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

9. The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging people to join terrorist organizations.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

10. Using drones to kill enemy combatants saves the lives of US military personnel.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

11. Operating a drone is like playing a video game.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

12. Using drones for combat operations is cheaper than using manned aircraft

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

13. When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than manned aircraft.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

14. Using drones for combat is cowardly because the operators sit far removed from the battlefield and are in no personal danger.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

15. Using drones for combat violates the laws of war.

True   Mostly True   Somewhat True   Somewhat False   Mostly False   False

APPENDIX E

DATA COLLECTED SEPTEMBER 2018

Beliefs About Drone Strikes and Moral Attitudes

Positive Beliefs

		Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?	Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks.	Using drones to kill enemy combatants saves the lives of US military personnel.	When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than manned aircraft.
Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?	Pearson Correlation	1	-.650**	-.446**	-.287**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	497	497	496	493
Drones are necessary for protecting the United States from terrorist attacks.	Pearson Correlation	-.650**	1	.316**	.306**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	497	497	496	493
Using drones to kill enemy combatants saves the lives of US military personnel.	Pearson Correlation	-.446**	.316**	1	.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	496	496	496	492
When it comes to hitting their intended targets, drones are more precise than manned aircraft.	Pearson Correlation	-.287**	.306**	.307**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	493	493	492	493

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

		Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?	The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of manned aircraft in similar situations.	The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging people to join terrorist organizations.	Operating a drone is like playing a video game.	Using drones for combat is cowardly because the operators sit far removed from the battlefield and are in no personal danger.
Do you support or oppose the United States conducting strikes from pilotless aircraft, commonly referred to as drones, to target extremists in other countries?	Pearson Correlation	1	.472**	.464**	-.129**	.362**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.004	.000
	N	497	493	495	494	496
The use of drones causes more civilian casualties than does the use of manned aircraft in similar situations.	Pearson Correlation	.472**	1	.425**	-.012	.352**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.792	.000
	N	493	493	492	492	493
The use of drones contributes to the growth of terrorism by encouraging people to join terrorist organizations.	Pearson Correlation	.464**	.425**	1	-.016	.327**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.727	.000
	N	495	492	495	492	494

Operating a drone is like playing a video game.	Pearson Correlation	-.129**	-.012	-.016	1	.109*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.792	.727		.015
	N	494	492	492	494	494
Using drones for combat is cowardly because the operators sit far removed from the battlefield and are in no personal danger.	Pearson Correlation	.362**	.352**	.327**	.109*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.015	
	N	496	493	494	494	496

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).