Evan Lupton  

Thesis Summary  

Prejudice and Support for US Drone Strikes Targeting Americans Abroad  

In the years following the 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil the use of drones has become a critical tool in the war against terrorist networks abroad. The United States has used these weapons in order to weaken the leadership of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, and seriously interfere with the activities of other militant groups. The United States has at times used these weapons to target and kill United States citizens suspected of being associated with terrorist networks abroad. As the scope, location, and frequency of these attacks increases, it is important to take into account the American public’s opinion on the targeting of American citizens. Conversely, it is also important to take into account an underlying prejudice that may exist within public opinion as a result of the 9/11 attacks. The purpose of this thesis is to ascertain whether prejudice towards a perceived Muslim or Arab status has generated differing attitudes on the acceptability of using drone strikes to target American terrorists who have moved abroad. Does the perceived nationality or religious group of an individual sway public attitudes toward a higher acceptability of targeting U.S. citizens?  

Subjects will be randomly assigned to one of two hypothetical news conditions. Both conditions provide the same news story describing a CIA summary of a drone strike that has killed a US citizen associated with al Qaeda. Elements of each module such as the threat to the United States, the location, the age of the subject, and the associated terrorist organization are identical in the two conditions. In the control condition, the target is given a typical Christian name; in the treatment, the target has a typical Islamic name. The news story in the control
condition is accompanied by a photo of the target with short hair and no beard. The news story in the treatment is accompanied by a photo of the same person with a beard and wearing headdress.

I hypothesize that the perceived Muslim or Arab status will elicit more positive attitudes towards the target of the strike. The test could indicate that there is a greater support for strikes and a greater perception of threat against American citizens perceived to be Muslim or Arab. The test could show that there is greater support for an increased oversight for drones used against Caucasian targets.

The advantages of the use of drones are clear. Drones are capable of surveying an area from afar and, should the opportunity present itself, perform an attack – all without putting an American pilot at risk. Drones have provided the United States with the unique opportunity to target high profile terrorists abroad without ever putting boots on the ground. However, as the use of these weapons increases it is critical that their use is justified impartially. This study has the potential to expose a prejudice that has infiltrated American society and call for a more close scrutiny of existing drone principles that allow the U.S. government to target U.S. citizens.