

Reality Check President Obama 1-on-1: How does he justify having a "kill list"?

Interview with Ben Swann

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UNOFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

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SWANN: Mr. President first of all thank you for taking the time to talk with us. When you signed the national defense authorization act into law, you issued a signing statement at that time that said you would not use that power for indefinite detention on Americans. You understood the concerns that people had. A judge earlier this year issued that the administration couldn't use those powers because it's [sic] unconstitutional. So why are the government's own lawyers fighting that judge's order, the injunction in particular.

OBAMA: Well look, the basic principle here is number one my first job is to keep the American people safe. Number two we've got to do it in a way that respects our values and our traditions of rule-of-law, that's why I banned torture, that's why I've argued that we should actually close Guantanamo. But I've also said that we've got some bad guys who are down there who we may not be able to try in a traditional court but who have pledged to try to hurt Americans. And so that's something that we inherited, that we're dealing with and it's complicated, on the other hand what I also said was that a U.S. citizen can never be subject to that kind of detention. Congress disagreed with me and I didn't want us not to be able to finance our military and pay our soldiers and our troops. So I signed the bill but what I also said was look, that I'm never going use this power, and what I would suspect is that the courts are going to agree with us over the long term that that is not something you can use when it comes to U.S. citizens.

SWANN: Well let me ask you then also about the so-called presidential "Kill List" that's gotten a lot of attention and this list of folks who have been targeted for assassination. And on that list have been U.S. citizens who have not been afforded a trial, including Anwar al-Aulaqi. How do you as President, or any president for that matter regardless of party or person, utilize that power to assassinate even U.S. citizens.

OBAMA: Well first of all, you're basing this on reports in the news that have never been confirmed by me, and I don't talk about our national security decisions in that way. More broadly though, our goal has been to focus on al-Qa'ida, to focus narrowly on those who would pose an imminent threat to the United States of America. And that's why it's not just Bin Laden

but a whole tier of al-Qa'ida leadership has [sic] been taken off the field. And that's part of what has allowed us to now begin to transition out of Afghanistan, to begin to bring our troops home. We're going to have to be vigilant for the foreseeable future when it comes to terrorists but we have to do so in a way that is consistent with the laws of war, with international law, that's something that we've always abided by, but beyond that I probably can't comment on something as specific as what you just mentioned.

SWANN: Can you comment on – you mentioned al-Qa'ida in your speech, going after al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan, certainly going after them in Yemen as well. And yet there's some concern about the U.S. funding the Syrian opposition when there are a lot of reports that al-Qa'ida is sort of heading up that opposition, how do you justify the two?

OBAMA: Well I share that concern, and so what we've done is to say we will provide non-lethal assistance to Syrian opposition leadership that are committed to political transition, committed to an observance of human rights. We're not going to just dive in and get involved with a civil war that in fact involves some elements of people who are genuinely trying to get a better life but also involve some folks who would over the long term do the United States harm. So Syria is a tough situation but this is an example of a broader foreign policy that I've tried to implement that is practical, that applies common sense, that says we can't solve every problem or throw our troops into harm's way every time there's a situation in the Middle East. What we have to do is selectively say what is that is most important to protect U.S. persons, U.S. property, our bases around the world, and how can we help those forces that care about human rights, those forces that are seeking democracy. We want to encourage them, in some cases like Libya we're able to make a difference. Syria's a more complicated situation and we're trying working with the international community to see if we can bring about Assad leaving and see if we can bring about a more peaceful resolution to the problem.

SWANN: And you did mention – one more – you did mention in the speech as well about Afghanistan, and yet while we do see a drawdown of troops we're talking about at least ten more years there being spent in an advisory role. And yet we continually see these Afghan soldiers and policemen turn their weapons on our soldiers. Is it worth for us to retain American lives there, Americans who are being killed by these Afghans soldiers they're supposed to be training, shouldn't we just bring those troops home or do we stay another ten years?

OBAMA: Well keep in mind we're not planning to stay another ten years, this war will be over in 2014. What we've said is we'll partner with Afghans, just as we partner with a whole bunch of other countries all around the world. The recent spate of what are called “green on blue” attacks, where folks who are at least in Afghan police or military uniforms end up attacking us, is something that's deeply troubling and our Joint Chiefs are spending a lot of time on. Keep in mind though there are three-hundred thousand Afghan soldiers that are partnering with us. Even one attack like this is too many, but it's absolutely not true that what we're seeing is generally antagonism with Afghan forces. In fact they welcome and are very interested in us training them

so they can be responsible for their own security. And the sooner we can accomplish that the better off we are. But my intention is we are going to have our combat troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. And this is a contrast, among many, that I've got with the other party. Governor Romney hasn't been clear about what exactly his plans are when it comes to Afghanistan, he criticized me about ending the war in Iraq as I did. I think the American people understand that after a decade of war, our soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, coastguardsmen, and their families have made enormous sacrifices; they've carried an enormous burden. We need to focus our attention not only on going after al-Qa'ida and terrorists who would attack us, but we've also got to do some nation building here at home. And that's going to be one of my number one priorities is using some of the money we're saving on war to help rebuild Ohio, help rebuild the United States, put people back to work, because we're only going to be as strong militarily as we are economically. And I think the choice in this election for a lot of folks is going to come down to, who's going to be in a better position to strengthen the economy and our middle class, who've been taking it on the chin for the better part of a decade.