

Is Targeted Killing Ever Justified?

Abstract

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This article discusses whether targeted killings can ever be justified. The issue is important because of the extreme tensions it generates between consequentialist and deontological considerations: assassination is intrinsically a very bad act, but it sometimes can lead to highly beneficial consequences, including the prevention of the deaths of high numbers of innocent persons. The article examines these arguments and concludes that political assassination (of which targeted killing is a sub-species) by agents of a liberal state can be morally justified only when a number of stringent conditions obtain. First, the liberal state is engaged in a just war where the just cause is particularly urgent. Second, the assassination prevents the deaths of two groups of innocent persons: those threatened by the targeted villain, and those who predictably will die as an incidental effect of waging conventional war. Third, the target of the assassination must indeed be a villain; he must be morally culpable either of waging an aggressive war, or threatening a large number of innocent persons, or perpetrating mass murder or genocide and the like. Fourth, the liberal state has no feasible alternatives to save the innocent. Even when these stringent conditions are met, targeted killings are problematic for three reasons. First, the assassin can never be really sure that the killing will yield the expected benefits. Second, liberal governments should behave in accordance with the civic virtues that inform the civil society they represent. Assassination seems hardly compatible with political virtue. And finally, on general principles assassination is never permitted if the assassins can capture the targeted person and bring him to justice. I conclude that, for these reasons, it may be a good idea to have a blanket *legal* prohibition of targeted killings. The liberal government could waive this prohibition only in extraordinary circumstances.