

[By Michael McAuliff](#)

President Barack Obama's oblique references in his State of the Union address to America's targeted killings and drone strikes was a welcome sign, but must be followed up with steps that open the nation's clandestine attacks to scrutiny, a leading progressive Democrat argued.

"A policy on drones is overdue. We've got to maintain checks and balances," Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) told The Huffington Post immediately after Obama's Tuesday night speech. "We have to have transparency -- the president acknowledged that. But we're several years into the use of drones, so this is something we've got to get on yesterday, not tomorrow."

According to one estimate from the New American Foundation, nearly 300 drone strikes since 2009 have killed more than 1,000 people, including some Americans.

In his speech, Obama insisted such killings are part of a balanced, legal response to global terrorism.

"My administration has worked tirelessly to forge a durable legal and policy framework to guide our counterterrorism efforts," Obama said. "We have kept Congress fully informed of our efforts," although frustrated members of Congress have often complained of secrecy.

Obama seemed to acknowledge that frustration.

"I recognize that in our democracy, no one should just take my word for it that we're doing things the right way," Obama said. "So in the months ahead, I will continue to engage Congress to ensure not only that our targeting, detention and prosecution of terrorists remains consistent with our laws and system of checks and balances, but that our efforts are even more transparent to the American people and to the world."

Welch, for one, appreciated the offer, arguing that an evaluation of such tactics is overdue.

"We're in a whole new world. When we have enemies that want to do us harm, we have a right to self-defense," he said. "But [terrorists are] not a nation-state, so it has invited use of tactics like the use of drones or special forces in countries where we're not in a state of war with those countries.

"It raises significant questions about, for instance, a target list," Welch added, referring to a list of suspected enemies who can be killed without trial or independent review, including Americans. "Can you have one person be the judge, jury and executioner? What are the collateral consequences? What is the role of Congress? These are all things that need to be addressed vigorously.

"I was pleased that the president made it quite clear he was concerned with as well, that he wants to have Congress involved, that he wants to make certain that what we do is consistent with constitutional requirements, the checks and balances. But now we've got to do it," Welch said.

"In the name of a just cause, you can't have one person, whether it's a Republican or Democratic chief executive, have all the power," he added.