To the Editor:

Re "U.S. Debates Drone Strike on American" (front page, Feb. 11):

The so-called war on terror has become a pre-emptive war. We are not punishing people who have attacked us. Instead, we are seeking out people we view as bad guys and who, we think, might one day try to harm us.

Reasonable people can disagree on the wisdom of this strategy, but reasonable people cannot dispute that the government may not lawfully punish or kill United States citizens before they have done something illegal unless they pose an immediate and significant threat, nor can United States citizens be punished for past acts without adhering to the legal standards of due process.

If we have learned anything since 9/11, it is that the president is often wrong, despite being certain. We saw this in the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Although the Obama administration insists that it is adhering to a careful process in deciding whether to assassinate United States citizens overseas, no amount of legalese can obscure the central fact that this process is entirely nonjudicial and ultimately comes down to the decision of a single man.

Nobody knows whether extrajudicial assassinations save American lives, but any student of American constitutional history knows that the Obama administration's policy of killing United States citizens is utterly lawless.

DAVID R. DOW

Houston, Feb. 11, 2014

The writer is a law professor at the University of Houston.