

Drone Dread

July 8, 2013



I admire Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the activist group CODE PINK, which has staged anti-war protests and promoted victims' rights all over the world. Her recently published book, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*, focuses specifically on the relatively new phenomenon in military history of weaponized unmanned aerial vehicles or UAVs, the most common of which is the Predator drone. Having conducted a thorough—and dangerous—fact-finding mission to learn how U.S. military practices affect civilians on the ground, Benjamin explores a wide range of ethical and legal issues raised by the use of such machines to execute summarily without trial persons suspected of crimes or complicity in crimes. The picture is not a pretty one, but it's a story which every taxpaying American needs to read, since the fact that the administration ignores or perfunctorily dismisses the reality at the receiving end of U.S. missiles does not thereby render it fiction.

More than a decade has elapsed since the first American was killed in a drone strike abroad on November 3, 2002, in Yemen. At the time of that strike, it was apparently unrecognized that one of its victims was a U.S. citizen, Ahmed Hijazi, who was traveling with the target, Abu Ali al-Harithi, suspected of having masterminded the October, 2000 attack on the USS Cole. By November, 2011, the U.S. government had crossed over the line demarcating foreign enemies from U.S. citizens by knowingly and deliberately targeting and assassinating Anwar al-Awlaki, whose name was on the U.S. hit list, and Samir Khan, who was with the target at the time of the strike. Two weeks later, the son of Anwar al-Awlaki, also a U.S. citizen, was killed in a strike intended to take out another target. The slaughter of the sixteen-year-old son of al-Awlaki, Benjamin rightly observes, was a public relations disaster of epic proportion, offering further proof to the minds of burgeoning terrorists the world over that the U.S. Empire is truly evil and must be stopped at all costs.

Many Americans appear nonetheless to support the use of drones to “neutralize” enemies abroad, having bought into the prevailing rationalization that the use of this precision technology spares the lives of U.S. troops and minimizes collateral damage, making war somehow cleaner and more clinical. Some supporters of the drone program, in an unexpected albeit arguably confused expression of cosmopolitanism, have even denied that U.S. citizenship is relevant to whether a suspect may be stripped of his life without being so much as charged with a crime, much less tried before being effectively sentenced to death. Or, rather, we might say that the process has been streamlined, with the executive branch of the U.S. government now serving as the police, the judge, the jury, and the executioner.

Back in the twentieth century, targeted assassination of enemies was widely considered, if not exactly taboo, at least unmentionable. A radical change in official policy—from opposition to full-fledged support of the practice of summary execution—arose out of what was claimed to be a just war waged in response to the mass killings of September 11, 2001. In the process, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), an institution established for the purpose of ascertaining and analyzing facts so that the president could make informed policy decisions, has become the primary executor of the drone program, killing rather than extracting information from persons suspected of wrongdoing. The CIA covertly assassinated perceived enemies in the twentieth century, too, especially during the Cold War, but today such practices are no longer hidden from public view.¹

Instead, they are vaunted.

Benjamin incisively illuminates what to many war opponents has been the inscrutable and perplexing proliferation of the drone assassination program under President Obama. In 2008, the antiwar bloc mobilized like never before in a show of enthusiastic support for Obama's consistent and persistent denunciation on the campaign trail of many of the misguided Bush administration initiatives. From the violation of *habeas corpus*, to the practice of "extraordinary rendition," to the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques," and the very existence of the prison at Guantánamo Bay, the "peace candidate" made it clear that the objectionable Bush policies would not stand in an Obama administration. What was the new president's solution to all of the Bush-era indiscretions? asks Benjamin wryly. A new doctrine, the Obama doctrine: *Kill-don't-capture*. No more embarrassing problems of innocent persons detained for years without being charged with a crime. No more accusations by meddlesome attorneys of human rights abuses. Obama's much more swift version of justice has been summarily to execute anyone suspected of terrorist activities, broadly construed. Clean and clinical, yes, in some sense.

Civil libertarians, allies of Benjamin on this front, are understandably troubled by the U.S. government's adoption of a practice—the summary execution without trial of suspects—once the standard operating procedure only of tyrants. If a democratic government is by, for, and of the people, then how can it be used to strip those very people of their most fundamental rights? The answer appears to be that some people are more equal than others, but we cannot be sure, since who is and is not fair game for summary execution is essentially decreed by anonymous analysts at the culmination of secret proceedings carried out behind closed doors and not subject to judicial review. The problems with the drone program, however, far transcend the vexing execution of innocent persons erroneously believed to be guilty, what has been one of the primary grounds for the abolition of capital punishment in most civilized nations of the world.

On June 29, 2011, the head of Obama's drone program, John Brennan (who has since been appointed the director of the CIA), publicly stated that there had been no civilian casualties from the use of drones during the previous year. Zero. Benjamin, who has traveled to sites where drone strikes have been carried out to speak with survivors about the after-effects of this new form of warfare, reveals the truth: thousands of innocent people have been annihilated or maimed, and many more have stood helplessly by as their friends, family members, and homes have been erased from the face of the earth. Because the collateral damage of drone strikes is not even acknowledged by the U.S. administration, the survivors have received no compensation for their losses, and some have been reduced to refugees. Benjamin also reports on the harmful impact on the psychological state of the persons forced to live with the constant humming of drones above their heads, never knowing whether this omnipresent threat of death might target them next—or one of their neighbors, with the very same effect.

One of the less-acknowledged consequences of the drone program has been the moral turmoil generated in target-studded communities as a result of the means by which "actionable intelligence" is obtained. Benjamin explains how immediately subsequent to a strike (invariably painted as a victory by the U.S. media), local terrorist groups mobilize to identify the persons who provided the information used to locate and ultimately effect the deaths of their comrades. Destitute people who have accepted irresistible bribes for providing "actionable intelligence" are rounded up and executed, often on videotape, to deter further "traitors" from collaborating with the enemy. As a result of this situation, ordinary people inhabiting forsaken places such as the northwestern territories of Pakistan labor under a constant state of fear. From the sky, they fear death by drone; on the ground, they fear death by local terrorist groups in response to drone strikes.

If there were no chance that drones would be coming their way soon, Americans might blithely

brush all of these negative consequences aside, as they do with “collateral damage” more generally. Benjamin’s presentation of the psychological effects on the persons currently being terrorized in Pakistan and elsewhere forces the U.S. citizens paying for drones to imagine what it would be like to have to face such dangers themselves on a day-to-day basis. Of the many different arguments presented by Benjamin, the most persuasive to average Americans is bound to be the specter of such drones operating in their own neighborhoods, hovering over their very own homes. The facts that Obama has intentionally assassinated U.S. citizens using drones and that this swiftly proliferating technology will be used more and more domestically as a result of the drone industry boom (well documented by Benjamin) raise immediate questions about both privacy and due process in critical minds. A second line of reasoning, a version of “we reap what we sow,” is that other nations may opt to emulate the U.S. government and use the new technology to target their designated enemies—wherever they may reside. Together these concerns point to the need to rein in drones through regulation.

Throughout *Drone Warfare*, Benjamin demonstrates her understanding of the perspectives of those who support the use of drones. However, because she repeatedly characterizes drone killings as *murder*, the persons in most need of reconsidering their views may close the book before reaching its most persuasive arguments. Benjamin’s operative assumption is in no way unsound: that the pre-meditated, intentional destruction of human life is murder. What her adversaries deny is that any malicious intent is involved when a drone operator targets a person thousands of miles away. Clearly death by drone is not a crime of passion. Is it an act of murder, or is it a “smarter” way to execute war in the twenty-first century?

Benjamin correctly observes that the Bush administration was quick—and wrong—to characterize the crimes of September 11, 2001, as acts of war, and the rest is history. She is also right that the loss of human life incurred by the decision to pursue the perpetrators of those crimes as warriors rather than criminals is inexcusable. Despite the considerable toll of innocent lives in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and beyond, supporters of the U.S. “war on terror” continue to fall prey to the fallacious line of reasoning according to which the absence of further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil since 9/11 evidences the efficacy of the government’s various anti-terror initiatives. Obama was elected in 2008 as the anti-Bush peace candidate, but in 2012, many voters appear to have supported him because he had succeeded in hunting down and killing Osama bin Laden, a mission in which drones, used for surveillance in that case, played a key role.

It seems to be a matter of common sense to military supporters that if “we are at war,” and if there are technologies which, all other things being equal, will save soldiers’ lives, then naturally they should be used. The strongest part of Benjamin’s critique is her presentation of plenty of evidence that drones do not in fact limit the awfulness of war. Through her careful documentation of the effects of the escalated drone killing program in Pakistan, and a similarly disturbing use by the Israeli government of drones in Gaza Strip, Benjamin succeeds in illustrating that the use of drones has altered the initial conflict. All other things are not equal, first, because the drone program has stoked the fires of terrorist groups, directly causing the number of enemy sympathizers to swell. Second, the very nature of the technology itself increases a leader’s propensity to deploy deadly force, since there are fewer repercussions for the citizens back home paying for the war, and therefore little or no political downside to the practice. This is how and why President Obama succeeded in effecting regime change in Libya without first going to Congress for the approval of a new war, as is required by the U.S. Constitution. Drones have generated what might be termed an “actionable ambiguity” for the executive branch. The ever-expanding assassination program has been rationalized as a part of the “war on terror,” but drones can also be deployed without first putting boots on the ground, and this has permitted the President to sidestep congressional

approval, and to cast the net of “wartime” assassination well beyond Afghanistan and Iraq.

Benjamin thoroughly unravels the faulty “all other things being equal” logic underlying support of the drone program, exposing many of the most common misconceptions, including that using drones spares our own soldiers. Their job may sound like playing a video game, but the persons effectively enlisted to serve as executioners at a distance often have difficulties reconciling what they do at the office with what they do when they return home, interacting with their family after having spent the work day destroying other families abroad. One unfortunate omission from Benjamin’s otherwise excellent account of the effects upon those who kill by remote control—and witness the consequences of their actions in high-definition technicolor—is any discussion of the increasingly common practice of medicating soldiers with a variety of chemical substances known to lower the threshold to violence. It is arguable that, through the prescription of mind-altering drugs to active-duty soldiers, some troops are being shaped into functional sociopaths.²

When Benjamin conjures up apocalyptic scenarios of robot-controlled drones with the capacity to do the whole job—from target selection to execution—the cogency of her account wanes a bit, and some of her concerns will strike pro-technology readers as Luddite. If human error is an ineradicable given, then how, exactly, are robots supposed to be worse than flesh-and-blood operators? Benjamin acknowledges that her adversaries can turn her concern about drone operator PTSD on its head, maintaining that the use of fully robotized drones would circumvent even psychological effects to the soldiers taken completely “out of the loop” of killing. In one disturbing example, drone operator Matt Martin had already pushed the launch button when a couple of children rode up to the target on bicycles. The soldier watched in horror as the children were obliterated, as it was impossible to stop the missile once set in motion. Such examples, of drone operators who have had to live with the knowledge that they killed innocent civilians, would seem to be grist for the robo-drone advocate’s mill.

The question remains: is assassination by drone morally distinct from other forms of killing in warfare? Benjamin rehearses many of the standard anti-war arguments, applying them specifically to the case of drones, but she does not succeed in showing that death by drone is inherently more evil than death by any other modern implement of homicide. In fact, some proponents of the drone program may even consider such killing to be more humane, because the victims do not hear the missile coming before it destroys them.

Some among those who oppose specifically the use of unmanned aerial vehicles to kill people in lands far away point to what they take to be an essential difference between the two types of killing: if human pilots are on board, and they are being targeted from the ground, then they can construe their own acts as forms of self-defense. Drone killings are obviously not acts of legitimate self-defense, for the people who sit in offices in Nevada and take out targets by remote control are not in any danger and therefore are not defending their own lives by doing so. There is no imminent threat whatsoever involved when an unarmed suspect located thousands of miles away is “stopped” in his home (in some cases surrounded by his family) by a missile traveling faster than the speed of sound. This is assassination, *tout court*.

However, the pilots flying thousands of miles away to lands where their planes are targeted by the enemy on the ground only find themselves in a situation comprehensible as “self-defense” because they have followed the orders of their leaders to place themselves in harm’s way. Were the pilots to refuse to fly to the enemy land, then no self-defense scenario could be said to arise. The moral problem, then, is not with the use of drones, in particular, but with the just war paradigm which has been assumed now for centuries to serve as a sound basis for wars fought

abroad—whether by soldiers or drones. Modern wars fought abroad are never wars of self-defense, no matter how they are carried out. The use of drones merely represents the most extreme logical implication of the blithe acceptance by war supporters and the populace more generally that somehow traveling to another part of the world to kill people designated as the enemy is perfectly permissible.

When Benjamin cites the concerns of just war theorists, pointing out that religious thinkers and ethicists have criticized the use of weaponized drones for their failure to satisfy the requirements of *jus in bello* (for the proper conduct of a war), she falls into an all-too-familiar trap. It is unclear whether Benjamin accepts just war theory and, as an anti-war activist, simply denies that its conditions are ever met in the modern world. In any case, anyone who already accepts the practice of military intervention abroad, including the bombing of territories inhabited by innocent civilians (such as children), will likely find the case against the use of weaponized drones, in particular, rather weak. The fundamental problem with this approach is that there is widespread disagreement among just war theorists themselves about how to interpret the “requirements” of *jus in bello*. Adducing the scruples of some of these theorists against the use of drones in particular does not help Benjamin’s case, because for every card-carrying just war theorist who opposes targeted killing by drones, there will be another who is a supporter of the practice. Drones are in no way precluded at the outset by just war theory because it is the prerogative of legitimate authorities themselves to determine which means to deploy in prosecuting what they take to be “just” wars.³

In her discussion of the economics of drone warfare, Benjamin reviews Eisenhower’s famous warnings about the diversion of public funds from positive domestic programs to the production of the means for fighting wars abroad. Taxpayers foot the bill, but in the drone age, many companies are also implicated through contributing parts and labor. With the recent privatization of many different aspects of the military, and the use of contractors specifically in the targeted assassination program, all hope of oversight appears to elude the grasp of the very people for whom drones are said to be deployed. These concerns, carefully documented by Benjamin, would seem to apply equally well to all manned weapons systems and so do not, on their face, single out drones in particular.

However, another common misconception, that drone warfare is more economical than manned warfare, is fully debunked by Benjamin. Doing the math, she reveals that the cost of “taking out” a single hit-list terrorist by drone is staggeringly high. Inured as military supporters are to the Pentagon’s economic excesses, they may facilely deflect such arguments, citing again the absence of attacks on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001. What advocates of the drone program have not correctly calculated—and what Benjamin amply displays—are the effects of enraging countless persons abroad left bereft of their loved ones. It goes without saying that each time innocent children are stripped of their lives, their parents and other family members may become sympathetic to groups such as al Qaeda and the Taliban who decry U.S. war crimes. Eventually, sooner or later, even those who support the summary execution of suspects will have to face the fact: it is mathematically impossible to kill all of the people who rise up against U.S. policy, because each new drone strike generates new enemy sympathizers and future terrorists, who have been formed and are galvanized to act by their direct witness of U.S. war crimes.

Just as it is a mistake to assume that people harboring anti-American sentiments—which were formed and stoked by U.S. military policies—cannot be reasoned with, it is a strategic mistake to begin a dialogue about the use of this technology by characterizing death by drone as “murder.” However, Benjamin has opted in this well-researched and passionate work to focus on mobilizing those who already intuitively grasp that there is something awry with the drone program. The final

chapters of *Drone Warfare* discuss how earlier movements—against the use of landmines and cluster bombs—were successful. The appendix lists an abundance of resources for those who wish to become involved in the anti-drone movement.

Drone advocates enthusiastically support the use of this technology because they accept any means—smart bombs are another example—said to limit the awfulness of war. In *Drone Warfare*, Benjamin has succeeded in undermining the “all other things being equal logic” underlying popular support of the drone program. She effectively argues that a persistent failure to confront the facts about summary execution by drone has not only moral but also strategic implications, demonstrating yet again that anti-war activists are anything but naïve. The solution to the problem of terrorism is emphatically not to turn Pakistan into a parking lot, razing the northwest provinces followed by every successive place to which the hydra-like enemy decides to relocate. There would be no end to such a process, and erecting drone control bases in every country on the map will not solve but only exacerbate the problem. Medea Benjamin deserves praise not only for her courageous activism, but also for her fact-filled and vividly written contribution to the drone debate.