

2015

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Recommended Citation

Frost, Manley (2015) "Book Review: Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control," *Global Security and Intelligence Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/gsis/vol1/iss1/9>

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Review of *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*

Medea Benjamin. *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*. New York and London: Verso, first published by New York and London: OR Books. 2013 (first published in 2012). ISBN: 9781781680773 1781680779. 246 pages. \$16.95.

At first glance, Medea Benjamin's book, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*, appears to be a well-researched, even comprehensive study of the modern use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). However, a critical review of her work shows that the author's political worldview drives both her research and her conclusions, impacting both her book's merit and its contribution to the growing body of literature on the topic of drone warfare. At a time when drones are constantly in the headlines—whether for their role in modern warfare or for their potential to expedite the shipping of online orders—Benjamin attempts to shape the discussion of their use with no aim of contributing to the disciplines of intelligence or national security.

Rather than achieving the goal she sets for herself in the introduction, "... [to promote] international dialogue about the direction, ethics, and legality of high-tech warfare (Benjamin 2013, 9)," Benjamin's work merely satisfies her agenda as set forth in her conclusion. In an effort to resist "...the normalization of drones as a military and law enforcement tool," Benjamin puts drones, their operators, and their developers squarely in her crosshairs (Benjamin 2013, 219). To this outspoken antiwar activist, drones are as inhumane as cluster bombs and land mines are their operators are murderers and their targets are victims (Benjamin 2013, 10).

Like the authors of *Living Under Drones* (a joint study by Stanford and New York University law schools of the impact of drones on Waziristan near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan), Benjamin argues that even the dull drone of unmanned aircraft terrorizes innocent civilians. Her position fails to consider what that same noise might mean for would-be victims of genocide pleading for liberation from ruthless terrorists like those comprising the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). She opens chapter one by vindicating the failed Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, who cited U.S. drone strikes as his motivation (Benjamin 2013, 12). After laying out a brief, but interesting history of drone usage, Benjamin closes that chapter bemused by the irony of a vehicle designed to help fight terrorism functioning, instead, as a powerful recruiting tool for terrorists (Benjamin 2013, 29).

Throughout the book, Benjamin paints the picture of the modern use of drones much as Picasso depicted the Spanish Civil War in *Guernica*. Both portray the horrors that befell hapless human targets at the hands of technologically advanced aggressors. The weeping mother clinging tightly to her dying child at the close of chapter five is an especially poignant parallel between this painting and Benjamin's book (Benjamin 2013, 124). But while Picasso's black-and-white rendering of the

subject matter is tragically poetic, Benjamin's use of imagery to discredit drones is simply tragic.

Far from a masterpiece, *Drone Warfare* is a classic example of research bias that runs the gamut of scholarly sins. More than 25 percent of Benjamin's citations come from five sources—the *Guardian*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and Wikipedia—and only studies portraying the use of drones in a negative light round out her list of referenced studies. She even concludes chapter six, “Murder by Drones: Is It Legal?” with a quote from satirist Stephen Colbert to sum up an argument that focuses more on the legality of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) than on that of drones themselves (Benjamin 2013, 148).

Throughout the book, Benjamin's blog-like prose is rife with political barbs and questionable conclusions. She states as fact that former President George Bush (she does not specify which) and Vice President Dick Cheney are war criminals (Benjamin 2013, 171). And she concludes, after failing to obtain information for her book from a single source (the Veterans Affairs National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), that “there is no official governmental expert who can speak about it” (Benjamin 2013, 99). Her conclusion not only discounts the availability of resiliency counselors and psychologists throughout the armed forces, but also is too premature to account for recent studies that find drone operators are less likely to suffer from PTSD than military members returning from deployments and combat aircraft pilots (Otto and Webber 2013; Chappelle et al. 2014). Benjamin liberally spackles personal opinion into any gap left between easily retrievable information and that which requires a library card or security clearance to access. Finally, rather than provide context to the reader for referenced interview excerpts, Benjamin wantonly misrepresents the intent of those interviewed in keeping with her alarmist portrayal of drone use.

For example, in chapter four, Benjamin recounts a Spiegel Online interview with Major Bryan Callahan in which he describes the challenges of remotely piloting drones in general. He responds, in particular, to the question: “is it not difficult to switch back and forth from war to civilian life everyday” (Pitzke 2010)? Benjamin prefaces Callahan's response on the importance of compartmentalization in her own words, “When it comes to witnessing murder...” (Benjamin 2013, 91). At no point in the 675 word interview does Callahan suggest that his work is illegal or shameful. On the contrary, he is decidedly defensive of the interviewer's final question concerning the parallel between drone-based warfare and video games—hence the subtitle of the article “It is Not a Video Game” (Pitzke 2010). That Benjamin refuses to acknowledge Callahan's position elsewhere in the book when discussing the risk of a “... ‘Playstation’ mentality to killing” (Benjamin 2013, 86) is but one indication of the author's bias. Her diction provides another, less-subtle example.

Consistent with her framing of “robotic warfare” as the sinister brainchild of the military-industrial complex, Benjamin inserts disparaging descriptors when quoting statements made by executives and government officials to describe drones. The CEO of General Atomics, James Blue, does not share that his company benefits

from political capital—he “boasts” this observation (Benjamin 2013, 34). Managing editor of *Jane’s Missiles and Rockets* likewise “gush[es]” when describing the more capable variant of the Hellfire missile (Benjamin 2013, 44). And the Iranian government “gleefully” announc[es] its development of a long-range surveillance drone (Benjamin 2013, 52). Had Benjamin conducted the interviews herself, one might expect these judgments to have come from her own estimation of the interviewee’s countenance. As it happens, the first two quotes come from external interviews, while the third lacks a citation—making it difficult to say how, exactly, Benjamin gauges the level of enthusiasm that she finds between the lines of quoted text.

Although *Drone Warfare* spends a disproportionate amount of time decrying the use of drones, the book does occasionally contribute to the current debate. For instance, Benjamin claims that the kill-capture program in general lacks adequate government oversight and that CIA involvement in lethal strikes violates international law. She also questions the blurred line that exists between International Humanitarian Law and the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), although she fails to reference either directly. Stripped of bias, Benjamin’s arguments comprise an important insight: both United States and international regulations have failed to keep pace with technology—a point of concern that transcends any personal position on the morality of war.

In the two years since Benjamin first published *Drone Warfare*, U.S. troop commitments in warzones have been on a decline even as the popularity and practical use of drones have grown. Once low-hanging fruit for antiwar activists, the U.S. involvement in Iraq went from substantial to virtually nonexistent—only recently returning to the fore of public consciousness as terrorist group ISIL filled the security vacuum and began committing humanitarian atrocities throughout much of Iraq. All the while, drones, their developers and their operators were gaining invaluable experience in the name of national security that postured each to accommodate the recent request of the Iraqi government to turn back an evil greater than war itself.

Benjamin’s recent outburst at a Senate hearing to authorize the U.S expansion of support to counter the ISIL threat in Iraq and Syria supports a single insight about *Drone Warfare* that belies its stated intent. *Drone Warfare* is not a comprehensive look into the morality and legality of “robotic warfare” as its jacket indicates. Rather, it is an opinion on the morality of war itself that benefits from the salience of drones but does little to improve the related literature.

While the vast majority of humans will agree that peace is favorable to war, among dissenters are bands of terrorists intent on achieving their political ends by any means necessary as ISIL has so vividly demonstrated in recent months. The proliferation of drones in modern warfare is a testament to their promise to stop these terrorists and to safeguard humanity, not proof of conspiracy. While there are many moral and legal issues to sort out regarding the use of drones domestically and abroad, Benjamin’s book is a poor introduction to them. Instead, it serves to discredit the efforts of the proud men and women who work around the clock to protect the very human rights she has made it her life’s work to ensure. Men and women who work tirelessly to design and employ technology that is more accurate,

more capable, and less prone to collateral damage. Men and women who, with drones, helped liberate ethnic minorities on a mountain in Sinjar and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to those besieged in Amerli, Iraq. And yes, men and women who sometimes target terrorists kinetically—after much deliberation, according to strict rules designed to mitigate casualties, and at the behest of sovereign states.

While the imperfection of man and machine makes all joint endeavors likewise imperfect, generations of antiwar activists before her no doubt would have killed to have been on Benjamin's side of history.

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