

# REMOTE DRONE WARFARE: Robots Kill, But The Blood Is on Our Hands

By [David Swanson](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),  
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*In her spare time, between nonstop peace activism and leading international exchanges, Medea Benjamin has somehow managed to write the best book yet on the most inhuman form of war yet. The book is called "Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control." The foreword by Barbara Ehrenreich and a form to pre-order the book [are here](#).*

Even if you've been reading everything you could about drones, attending peace conferences, and protesting in the lobbies of drone companies like General Atomics, you will learn a great deal from this book. In fact, I'm willing to bet that even if you "pilot" drones from a desk for a living you will learn a great deal from this book. And if you have not been paying attention to drones, then you really need to read this book.

Many Americans first heard about "unmanned aerial vehicles" as weapons when Colin Powell told the United Nations in 2003 that Iraq might use them to attack the United States. This turned out to be a projection as well as a lie. It was, of course, the United States that used drones, among other weapons, to attack Iraq for nine years, and the U.S. drones are still in the skies of Iraq today, as well in the skies of many other countries.

Killing individuals (and whoever is near them) has become the primary substitute in U.S. public policy for capture/imprisonment/torture. Torturing someone to death is not what former CIA General Counsel John Rizzo calls "clean." Blowing them and anyone near them into little bits is "clean." As Medea Benjamin documents, the United States has avoided detaining people, only to murder them with a drone days later. And, as with other innovations in lawlessness, it didn't take long for this one to come back and bite U.S. citizens. Obama has now used drones to kill Americans in Yemen, including a drone strike on Anwar al-Awlaki, and a later strike that killed his teenage son. Neither of them was ever charged with a crime, and neither was holding a weapon on a battlefield. Yet, somehow, as Eric Holder explained at Northwestern University Law School this month, through an alchemical combination of law enforcement and war it is perfectly OK for a president to kill anyone anywhere. And drones allow a president to do this without any supposed risk to what U.S. newspapers treat as constituting the complete category of human beings, namely members of the U.S. military. Benjamin's book establishes that drones do not live up to their advertising.

Drones turn out to have been falsely marketed as a humanly cheap way to make war. In February 2002, a drone pilot thought he'd killed Osama bin Laden, but it turned out to be an innocent man. Expert observers, including Shahzad Akbar, a Pakistani lawyer representing drone victims, believe the vast majority of drone victims are not the individuals who were targeted — which is not to suggest any moral or legal case for killing those who are

targeted. Often victims are not counted as “civilians” because they were carrying guns, but in some areas all men carry guns. Noor Behram, who photographs drone victims, says, “For every 10 to 15 people, maybe they get one militant.” Benjamin tells some of the stories of the families shattered by drones and the hatred created by the constant buzzing sound that the drones make in the skies above the homes of people who know that at any instant they can be killed. President Obama has instructed the government of Yemen to keep a reporter locked up whose crime appears to be having reported on the victims of a U.S. drone strike. When the drones strike in Pakistan, local death squads swoop down on the area to grab anyone whom they suspect of having collaborated with the Americans. Families live in fear of both the drones and the raids that follow. Over a million people, by Amnesty International’s estimate, have fled the areas of heavy drone bombing.

Drones have killed Americans in “friendly fire,” including on April 6, 2011, in Afghanistan. Afghans have killed CIA drone pilots and other U.S. officials inside their offices. Even drone “pilots” working in the United States can commit suicide. They are suffering extremely high rates of stress and burnout, according to the Air Force. Pilots who actually fly in planes often do not see what they kill. Drone pilots sometimes watch a family for days, feel like they’ve gotten to know the people, and then blow them all up, and watch the suffering. A Pakistani who tried to blow up a car in Times Square in 2010 said it was revenge for drone attacks. In the fall of 2011, a Massachusetts man, Rezwan Ferdaus, was arrested and accused of plotting to attack the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol with drones that would crash themselves into the buildings. The Obama Administration claims to have limited its drone strikes in Somalia so as to avoid turning a regional threat into a group with the determination to attack the United States. As Benjamin points out, this shows awareness that there is not a current threat to the United States. Ironically, such a threat could come from drones. U.S. companies sell drones to democracies and dictatorships alike. Al Qaeda stole a crashed U.S. drone from Yemeni police in February 2011. And in December 2011, Iran captured a U.S. drone a decade after the CIA had given Iran plans to build a nuclear bomb, any possible progress on which the drone was no doubt supposed to be spying on.

Drones turn out to have been falsely marketed as a financially cheap way to make war. While initially cheaper than manned planes, unmanned drones of the sort used now tend to require many more personnel: 168 people to keep a Predator drone in the air for 24 hours, plus 19 analysts to process the videos created by a drone. Drones and their related technologies are increasing in price rapidly. And to make matters worse, they tend to crash. They even “go rogue,” lose contact with their “pilots” and fly off on their own. The U.S. Navy has a drone that self-destructs if you accidentally touch the space bar on the computer keyboard. Drones also tend to supply so-called enemies with information, including the endless hours of video they record, and to infect U.S. military computers with viruses. But these are the sorts of SNAFUs that come with any project lacking oversight, accountability, or cost controls. The companies with the biggest drone contracts did not invest in developing the best technologies but in paying off the most Congress members.

Drones turn out to have the power to eliminate the Fourth Amendment. The way this works, of course, is that first people who don’t look or talk like us lose their rights, and then we do too. “From 8,000 miles away in Nevada,” writes Benjamin, “a drone pilot can watch an Afghan as he lights up cigarettes, sits talking to friends on a park bench, or goes to the bathroom, never imagining that anyone is watching him.” Meanwhile, Congress has approved 30,000 drones for U.S. skies. So, we’ll be able to hide inside as the NSA records our phone calls and emails, or get offline but have our actions videotaped by drones. What a

choice!

Drones turn out to be very costly to the rule of law. My only quibble with Medea's book, other than an occasional use of the term "defense" for things that aren't defensive, is the sort of language used in the early chapters to distinguish between targeted victims of drones and victims who were in the wrong place: "[W]hen the target is falsely identified, even the most accurate bombs will result in tragedy." Only when the target is falsely identified? Of course, not. Killing is always a tragedy, even if the victim is guilty of something. But none of these victims are being given trials. The person choosing to use the drone is judge, jury, and executioner. As Benjamin points out, just two months before September 11, 2001, the U.S. ambassador to Israel said, "The United States government is very clearly on record against targeted assassinations. They are extrajudicial killings, and we do not support that." Benjamin also points out that the majority of strikes are not even meant to be targeted at known individuals. Rather, they are targeted at unknown people whose "pattern of life" appears to fit that of "militants" in the eyes of the drone operator. And, as Benjamin further notes, even actual militants are usually trying to drive foreign forces out of their countries, not launching attacks abroad.

Obama claimed that air war on Libya was not war, and was not even "hostilities," because U.S. troops were not on the ground in large numbers. But murder on a larger and more haphazard scale is not more legal than "targeted" killings. The CIA, the Joint Special Operations Command, and Blackwater (or whatever that mercenary company calls itself this month) are used to keep drone wars more secretive and less accountable. But do we really need all the details to know that wars are illegal? War violates Kellogg-Briand, in most cases the U.N. Charter, and when not declared by Congress the U.S. Constitution. War is not made legal by making it resemble assassination. And assassination is not made legal by calling it war. Nor is killing a legal alternative to law enforcement. Should we ban, as some propose be done before it's too late, the creation or use of automated drones that kill on their own without human interference? Or should we ban all drones that kill? Or should we ban all drones that kill or spy? Should we seek to treat drones that kill as a particularly offensive and unfair type of weapon, along the lines of land mines or cluster bombs? But the rest of the world has banned those weapons; the United States has not. The United States has also refused to ban weapons in space or to work for the elimination of its nuclear arsenal. How far does getting the rest of the world to turn against a type of weaponry get us?

I think what's needed is a campaign that seizes on the particular horror of life under a sky of drones and pivots from there to enforcing the ban on war that was put in place among mostly wealthy nations in 1928 and violated by World War II. That ban needs to be applied to wars waged against poor nations. As long as it is not, we go on losing morality, becoming less human, less empathetic, more violent, and more bigoted. Back on September 4, 1804, as John Feffer points out in his excellent new book "Crusade 2.0," suicide bombing was introduced to the world of warfare, and it was the United States that came up with it. Commodore Edward Preble sent the USS Intrepid into the bay at Tripoli with 10,000 pounds of gunpowder, 150 shells, and U.S. sailors who died in the explosion. Now the U.S. military is busy creating suicide-bombing drones, with full awareness that people enraged by the crimes of the U.S. military will inevitably possess that same technology shortly after the United States does.

The cycle of violence can become a spiral of violence. As Dr. King said, there is such a thing as being too late. There is an urgency to acting now. Medea's book documents the activism that is underway. Join it.

David Swanson's books include "[War Is A Lie](#)." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works for the online activist organization <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#)

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