**UNHINGED: Drone Assassination – American Suicide**

**By Robert David Steele**

Calhoun, Laurie (2016). *We Kill Because We Can: From Soldiering to Assassination in the Drone Age* (London, UK: Zed Books), Pp. 400, US$15.95, ISBN 978 178360547 7.

Cortright, David, Rachel Fairhurst, and Kristen Wall (2015). *Drones and the Future of Armed Conflict: Ethical, Legal, and Strategic Implications*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press). Pp. 288, US$27.50, ISBN 978 022647836 4.

Woods, Chris (2015). *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), Pp. 416, US$17.87, ISBN 978 019020259 0.

All three of these excellent books – one an edited work – agree on the fundamentals. Drone assassination is against both international law and also the US Constitution, in the latter instance because the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the US Air Force (USAF) as well as elements of the Joint Special Operations Group (JSOG) are committing thousands of acts of war all over the world without a Congressional declaration of war. Drone assassination is murdering thousands, only 2% of whom are designated targets (the balance being “collateral damage”), while creating tens of thousands if not more enemies among those that bear witness to the never-ending attacks without warning, without due process, and indeed without just cause or imminent danger to US lives and property and interests as a valid rationale. Drones are very expensive, technically deficient tools (they cannot, for example, distinguish between a rifle and a shovel). The US intelligence community cannot provide the intelligence needed to be effective with drones, to the point that we are getting it wrong almost all the time, at every level from tactical to strategic.

*Sudden Justice* by Chris Woods is the one book to read if only one can be read, but readers should note that two other books are not reviewed here that may be superior: Andrew Cockburn’s *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins*, and Jeremy Scahill’s *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government’s Secret Drone Warfare Program*.

This book by Chris Woods, an investigative journalist, is helpful in providing the historical context for the emergence of the drone program (“Made in Israel”) and the original opposition of both the CIA that initially did not want to have anything to do with armed drones and the choice of targets, and the USAF that viscerally rejected any aviation platform not requiring a live pilot. As the book documents, time and money overcame those objections, to the point that assassination by drone has become the centralaccomplishment of both CIA and the USAF in this time of permanent elective world war, not so much in the shadows, as in the clouds. The banality – the routinization of unconstitutional activities that are without question crimes against humanity by any standard – is well-documented in this book. It does not, however, answer the question that is at the root of all illegal activities by the US Government (USG): the loss of integrity within the US Congress and among US flag officers in the military and senior executive officers across all services and agencies. Drone assassination represents the total loss of integrity by all serving US intelligence and national security officials.

Among the most important points documented by this useful product of investigative journalism are these:

a) The American government is murdering people without due process based on their “pattern of life,” doing what is called signature kills. An example of an unwarranted “pattern of life” kill is the all too frequent execution of a truck driver squatting by the side of the road to relieve himself, a “signature” associated with the planting of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED);

b) Under the Administration of George W. Bushthe original mandate — that no kill shot would be taken unless it had a 90% probability of success — was lowered to 50%. Thousands of people’s lives are being taken, illegally, because the White House decided that a flip of a coin could decide their fate;

c) It was the Administration of Barack Obama that first authorized the use of drones to assassinate US citizens, and then other Westerners including Germans, with impunity;

d) The government lies over 80% of the time — from every aspect of the drone program to the actual casualty rates (according to varied other sources, 98% innocents) — were the government in fact accountable to Congress, the Courts, and the public, such a depth of perfidy would appear to warrant the abolishment of that government;

e) Iranian Press TV has successfully fabricated over 50 alleged drone strikes as a means of angering the global Muslim population and casting aspersions on the integrity of the USG —this point makes it clear just how foolish the American government is to be engaged in an activity that is so actively against all laws, against all common sense, and so easily magnified and used to deepen Muslim animosities toward the United States of America;

f) The human toll on the operators of these killing machines is considerable. “Prolonged Virtual Combat Stress” or PVCS, is a real mental illness that the global drone assassination program has imposed on many good people trapped in a bad system. One of whom, upon retirement, was awarded a certificate of merit for killing over 1,300 people by actual count, never mind that over 1,270 of them were outright innocents or in US military terms: “collateral damage.”

There is a wealth of contextual information in this book, *Sudden Justice*, by Chris Woods. The book does not address the actual financial costs of the program, and the author does not seem to recognize that Syria and Yemen are wars funded by Saudi Arabia in which Hillary Clinton was “bought and paid for” by Saudi Arabian donations to the Clinton Foundation.

*Drones and the Future of Armed Conflict* by David Cortright *et al*, is an edited work focused primarily on ethical, legal, and strategic implications. It is the most academic of the three books and the most focused on international law as well as domestic law and constitutional processes. As each contributing author documents, from the perspective of both domestic law (including constitutional law) as well as international law, the US drone assassination program is unethical, illegal in every possible respect, and a massive persistent broad violation of international law and the rights of citizens as well as the sovereign jurisdictions of every country in which drone assassination are being carried out — including those where US forces ostensibly have permission to kill from the host government.

The opening chapter, “Assessing the Debate on Drone Warfare” by David Cortright and Rachel Fairburst, is the best possible summary of the book as a whole and the ethical-legal discussion about drone assassination over-all. This is the chapter professors should use to provoke student reflection on the matter. Across the book it is clear that the drone assassination program is completely unjustified (apart from being illegal). There is no clear and present danger to the USA or even to US persons from all of these people US forces are killing (98% of whom, according to multiple other sources, are complete innocents or “collateral damage”); there is no due process within the USA — any oversight from Congress or the courts — with respect to how US forcesgo about killing people who more often than not are killed because they are a military-aged male living in a target area.

The various authors contributing to this edited work, in the aggregate, merit great regard for demonstrating that the US drone assassination program lacks unity of command, coherence, strategy, or any semblance of justification. This is wanton killing “because we can.” Rafia Zakaria’s chapter, “The Myth of Precision: Human Rights, Drones, and the Case of Pakistan,” is another chapter recommended for use with students. Drones are over-sold. Like the F-35 and other US Air Force platforms that claim they can win wars without armor or infantry, drones are largely worthless when it comes to real precision — not only can the CIA not provide accurate intelligence that is actionable in time and place, but the drones are a very expensive ($70K per missile, probably $1 million per day of flight) way of killing single individuals and they miss a lot – both the technology and the remote piloting skills are “off.”

A unique insight within this book was its focus on the “right to home” of those being assassinated without due process. This applies not only to the foreign publics upon whom US forces are raining down indiscriminate, illegal, wanton, and utterly despicable death and destruction, but on the US public and perhaps the UK public one day soon. It is quite certain, reading across these varied contributions, that the militarization of the US police will be followed by the use of drones to kill specific individuals in and out of vehicles, in and out of their homes, under the pretense of avoiding risk to law enforcement personnel but in fact reflecting the impunity that characterizes a government too long divorced from ethics and the public interest.

This second book, *Drones and the Future of Armed Conflict*, over-sells drones across most chapters — people who are good at legal ideas are generally poor at technical evaluations — and fails to offer a chapter on the actual financial cost of an individual assassination by drone as well as the total financial costs – including opportunity costs – of the total drone program.

*We Kill Because We Can* by Laurie Calhoun is the best but also the densest of the three books, providing a deep cultural and philosophical perspective. It is overly long – twice as long as necessary – but absolutely worth a patient reading. Among the key points in this book as distinct from the other two books, are these:

a) The US is assassinating people all over the world, in countries against which the US hasno Congressional declaration of war;

b) Nineteen countries are at various stages of acquiring armed drones therefore, this is a plague that is about to spiral out of control and it will assuredly exact a toll on the West;

c) Deciding to kill rather than capture someone removes all forms of quality control, all checks and balances. Congress and the Courts have explicitly abdicated their role in controlling an imperial executive. To that abdication we can add another – US military officers are violating their Oath to defend and support the Constitution against all enemies, domestic and foreign because they accepting orders to kill abroad without Congressional authorization;

d) Drones are a form of stalking against which there is no defense, no recourse. Targeted killing is the ultimate crime against humanity, the micro-manifestation of a form of genocide. Drone assassination is without question an atrocity;

e) CIA “intelligence” used to target drones is pathetic — it is unreliable, incomplete, and absolutely not a proper foundation for military self-defense, much less pre-emptive assassination; and

f) Drones are expensive — over 200 people are engaged in each drone operations — and they represent the failure of – or the deliberate choice to ignore – all other possible alternative measures including the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) warrants of arrest and CIA clandestine assassination (one man, one bullet).

The author provides an eclectic and even engrossing cultural, ethical, legal, and philosophical potpourri, including her equation of a US drone assassination with a “hit” by a Mafia assassin. Assassination in any form – whether by drone with White House authority (but lacking Congressional authority) or by hand of a criminal assassin – is far outside all prevailing cultural, ethical, and legal standards.

The author excels at her critical commentary on how individuals are bring assassinated based on how old they are, where they live, and who they associate with — this is the equivalent of sentencing you, gentle reader, to death because you live a block away from a pedophile that kills small children from Haiti as part of a Satanic ritual. In London and Washington, D.C., that may well include all of us.

Three quotes from this work are worth noting:

*When no soldier’s life is on the line, then killing by remote control cannot be literally construed as self-defense – certainly not on its face.* (p. 8)

*…the structural parallels between the modern military and organized crime are palpable.* (p. 66)

*A true test for genuine (nor Orwellian) imminence would be to answer this question: What act of murder would immediately ensue if this suspect were not killed? In the vast majority of cases, the answer is: None whatsoever.* (p. 85)

The author of *We Kill Because We Can* takes special care to indict Barack Obama for crimes against humanity, explicitly noting that Barack Obama authorized the use of drones to carry out the extra-judicial assassination of US citizens and then other Westerners including Germans, and that Barack Obama’s logic is resembles Hitler-like reasoning. (p. 140)

All three books in combination are an indictment of “the American way of war” as well as confirmation of the emptiness of American democracy. There is absolutely nothing about the five trillion dollar war on “terrorism” that is in any way *pro publica*. Drones are the epitome of the military-industrial complex and its financial backers – Wall Street and the City of London – being able to make permanent war on everyone, with impunity, a profit center.

Ethics are a form of social convention that serves to pass on across generations those lessons of civilized experience that are not codified in law but have been found to be beneficial to humanity at large. The “Golden Rule” of doing unto others as one would others do unto oneself is a classic example. Will and Ariel Durant, authors of *The Story of Civilization* in eleven volumes, extracted core elements from that much larger work in *The Lessons of History*. Across thirteen short double-spaced chapters covering broad categories including biology, race, character, morals, and religion, they conclude that integrity (including an adherence to a moral code, an embrace of religion as a form of social glue, and a commitment to racial and ethnic purity within specific geographic boundaries) is a major aspect of “fitness” for survival in the face of growing complexity and uncertainty.

Herbert Marcuse and Edgar Morin would both agree. Marcuse’s views on “repressive tolerance” are less well known than Morin’s views on ethics and the role of truth in education as a foundation for saving civilization, but between the two we find a shared perspective: those who behave badly with wanton abandon against others, and do not attend to the education and health – financial, intellectual, moral, and physical – of their populations, are destined for decline and fall.

The readers of these three books should easily conclude that the wanton abandon with which the USG has embraced drone assassination represents a new moral, intellectual, and practical low in national security strategy, policy, and operations.

None of the three books adequately examine how drones are merely the latest tool in an ever growing array of very expensive very toxic military-industrial complex offerings that further Empire for the 1% at the expense of both the tax-paying US public and the victimized foreign publics. There are two aspects to this larger context: the genesis of the US military-industrial complex (including the deliberate salvation by the CIA of fascism in the aftermath of World War II, and the role of rescued Nazis in fabricating the Cold War against communism); and our misbehavior in the half century since.

For insights on the former the reader might consider, as a starting point, books by William Hartung (*Prophets of War*), Mike Lofgren (*The Deep State*), Fletcher Prouty (*The Secret Team*), James Risen (*Pay Any Price*), Peter Dale Scott (*The American Deep State*), Sterling and Peggy Seagrave (*Gold Warriors*), David Talbot (*Devil’s Chessboard*), and Glen Yeadon (*The Nazi Hydra in America*). For insights on the latter readers can choose among many other books, including those by William Blum (*Killing Hope*), Mark Hertsgaard (*Eagle’s Shadow*), Chalmers Johnson (*Sorrows of Empire*), Mark Palmer (*Breaking the Real Axis of Evil*), and Meic Pearse (*Why the Rest Hates the Rest*).

In brief, US forces are killing individuals world-wide with impunity – and betraying the public trust with impunity – “because we can.” The US –CIA and JSOG **--** did precisely the same thing with rendition and torture. The drone assassination program is the latest and most perfect representation of a national intelligence and national security complex that is bureaucratic and imperialist – at any cost. The drone assassination program is the ultimate criminal insanity of an amoral state.

On its present course, the USA is headed for civil war at home and catastrophic losses abroad. The drone assassination program – while representative of America’s pathological dysfunctionality –is the least of America’s problems.

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