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Drones and the Imperial Mind-Set

By Mark Harris
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As a college student in the early 1970s there were a couple of occasions when I hitchhiked home to the Chicago area. It was more than 300 miles from Southern Illinois University (SIU) in Carbondale, six hours by car if you were driving and longer if you were hitching a ride north on Interstate 57.

Once on my way home for spring break, I was on the side of the interstate near an entrance ramp about 40 miles from the campus, having gotten a couple of quick, short rides from local drivers. I waited then about half an hour before a man driving a newer model sedan with Wisconsin license plates stopped to offer a ride.

When the driver said he was going all the way to Chicago, I thought it was my lucky day. The driver looked like a middle-aged businessman and as it turned out was on his way home to Madison, Wisconsin from a trip to Memphis. The man explained he enjoyed the drive, which he did for his work two or three times a year, but it was nice to have some company as the trip got monotonous and in some areas the radio selection was not so great. I thanked him for offering to drive me such a long distance, and offered to chip in for the gas, which he said wasn't necessary.

We chatted casually in the way two strangers together on a stretch of highway might do, just talking about this and that, sports or nothing much at all. I told him I was studying history with a minor in philosophy at SIU and my family lived in the Chicago suburbs. I learned that he and his

wife had lived in the same house in Madison for about 20 years, since shortly after they married. He mentioned they had one son, a boy named Robert.

When I asked how old his son was, the man replied that his son had died three years ago in Vietnam. He was 20 years old and had been drafted by the army, he explained. He said this flatly and without emotion. I was sorry to hear this and told him so. I felt a twinge of awkwardness, as if I'd suddenly been let in on a stranger's most painful family secret.

We were silent then for a moment. It's been a while now, the man finally remarked, perhaps sensing some of my unease. His wife was doing a lot better now, he volunteered. I told him again I was sorry, but I wanted to say more. I wanted to tell him how much I hated the war, how I considered the politicians and generals responsible for perpetrating it war criminals, that this war was a crime against humanity. But not knowing what this man's political views were, I kept silent.

Besides, could I have hated the war more than this man hated what the war had done to his family?

‘Collateral Damage,’ Who Cares?

I found myself recalling that long-ago encounter this past fall. What prompted it initially were the new whistleblower revelations about the weaponized drone programs run by the CIA and U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). In simple terms, I was struck by my memory of one man's palpable sense of loss for a single life next to the sweeping disregard for life embodied in U.S. military drone operations.

As Jeremy Scahill notes in his introduction to *The Drone Papers* for *The Intercept*, the new revelations from a military insider further “lay bare the normalization of assassination as a central component of U.S. counterterrorism policy.” But it is not only assassination that is normalized. The latest expose of drone operations in Somalia, Yemen, and Afghanistan provide new details on how utterly routine is the indiscriminate killing of innocent people in these military assaults.

It's something to ponder in light of the appalling terror attacks this fall on innocent people courtesy of ISIS in Paris and Beirut, the group's alleged bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, and the general hysteria about right-wing “Islamic terrorism.” The latter is rightly widely condemned for what it is—a barbaric affront to humanity. But in this age of endless violence here is a question to ponder: Why is an indiscriminate terror assault with an AK-47 on innocent people more of a moral outrage than an indiscriminate weaponized drone attack on innocent people?

The scope and detail of U.S. drone operations exposed in these new revelations have already been widely commented on. Here we will only note the one five-month period in Afghanistan in 2012-2013 when nearly 90 percent of the people killed in drone airstrikes were not official targets of the operations. Or that in 2012 the White House approved assassinations of 20 people in Somalia and Yemen. As *The Guardian* reported, doing so led to more than 200 more people dying.

In Yemen, according to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's report, drone spy technology was used to launch a cruise missile attack in December 2009 against Al Qaeda that killed 44 civilians, including 22 children. That missile attack was launched from a U.S. Navy ship unleashing 166 exploding cluster sub-munitions with over 200 sharp steel fragments. In Pakistan, "targeted killings" by American drones over the past decade have caused as many as 4,000 deaths, the Bureau further reports. Some 423 to 965 of these deaths involve innocent civilians, including 172 to 207 children. The majority of these killings occurred under sponsorship of the Obama administration.

Questions as Bad as Answers

The reports go on in all their dispiriting savagery. One involves the early 2015 CIA-directed assault against Al Qaeda in Yemen that killed two hostages from the United States and Italy. In response to the deaths of Warren Weinstein and Giovanni Lo Porto, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) courageously reminded us, "This is part of war. You can't have a war without collateral damage."

This is the imperial mind-set of the privileged and the powerful at work, always brave about the deaths of others, whom it is implicitly deigned must be ready for any sacrifice on behalf of their geopolitical objectives. This mind-set was crudely on display at *CNN*'s December 15 Republican presidential debate. "Could you order airstrikes that would kill innocent children by not the scores, but the hundreds and the thousands?" asked right-wing radio host Hugh Hewitt of candidate Ben Carson.

Such is the state of affairs among Republicans that the questions they ask are as bad as the answers they give. But Carson's answer was bad enough, a twisted rumination on this man of medicine's view that the hypothetical mass murder of hundreds or thousands of civilians and children unlucky enough to be born to or live under America's "enemies" would be "merciful," an expression of aspiring tough guy Carson's willingness to "finish the job."

If "finish the job" sounds eerily reminiscent of terms like "final solution," then you're onto something about the sensibilities of these people. But Republican extremism is just the more unpolished expression of the imperial mind-set. The "smart" version comes from Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who as U.S. Secretary of State sought counsel from that architect of Vietnam-era war crimes, Henry Kissinger. No surprise here. Clinton is in full support of drone assassinations. Even Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is on board with global killing, as he made clear in interviews this fall.

In fact, this is one Obama administration program where the White House is holding hands with the majority of Republicans, everyone swaying to *Kumbaya* around the militaristic campfire, mesmerized by those exploding clusters of bomb fragments and their relentless message of American global supremacy.

The normalization of assassination expresses itself not only in destroyed lives and the fear, despair, and anger that hangs like a Sword of Damocles over populations living in targeted regions. Does anyone seriously believe drone killings do not stir popular hostility toward the

United States in the regions under attack? There is also the corrosive impact these policies have on the perpetrators of such violence. As *Democracy Now* reports, military personnel involved in drone operations have been known to refer to targeted images of children on computer screens, prior to being obliterated, as “fun-sized terrorists.”

If we were reading a news story about an individual murderer in our community who talked in this vein, we would rightly find it evidence of their cold inhumanity, of an aberrant mental state. But involve uniforms and government salaries and suddenly the merits of their murderous actions become just another topic for “serious” policy discussion on *Meet the Press* and other mainstream media.

Tellingly, according to *The Drone Papers*, when a drone attack hits its intended target, the individual killed is referred to by personnel as a “jackpot.” The rest of the dead, regardless of who they are, enter eternity labeled EKIA, or “enemy killed in action.” It’s reminiscent of the Vietnam War-era practice in which Vietnamese civilians who ran from U.S. military units or helicopters were often killed, justified by rules of engagement that conveniently classified fleeing civilians as Viet Cong. Accordingly, the U.S. military came up with the concept of the “free fire zone,” a term for the unrestrained killing of civilians by troops taught to consider everyone in the zone a legitimate enemy. Then and now such bureaucratic language serves as a buffer against the reality of the crimes being committed.

In the same vein, the corporate media’s reporting of drone operations works to separate the American public from the raw horror of the violence, to render it more distant or remote. Even when news coverage acknowledges controversy surrounding the use of military drone strikes, the “accidental” deaths and other issues, the coverage has the air of the routine about it, as if reporting bad weather in far away locales. Everything is seen through a cultural film that subverts the sharp immediacy of the violence.

The Liberal Answer to Guantanamo

Ironically, the Obama White House escalated military drone operations in 2009 partly in response to the global notoriety of the Guantanamo military detention site, which had become a symbol of Bush administration disregard for human rights and democratic due process in the “War on Terror.”

In 2008, then-candidate Obama pledged if elected to shut down the Guantanamo prison. But once in office his administration never put up much of a fight with Congressional opposition to closing the base. Instead, the White House chose to partially sidestep the Bush-era practice of capturing and detaining suspected terrorists with no regard to due process. The solution instead would be to simply preemptively dispatch “suspected terrorists” from the face of the earth using drone-based missile strikes.

This became known in military jargon as the policy of “find, fix, finish.” Or, to paraphrase Joseph Stalin’s preferred way of dealing with enemies: “No person, no problem.” From Bush to Obama, the message is now clear: In a permanent war on terror, the entire planet has become a

battlefield. And, in war, even undeclared, there is no need to put “enemy combatants” on trial. The executive office has thus become the execution office.

All in all, modern power politics is now just a school for lies. ISIS tells lies with its backward religious verbiage about “pagans gathered for a concert of prostitution and vice” in France and other idiotic nonsense. How Allah “blessed our brothers” granting their desires when they “detonated their explosive belts in the masses of the disbelievers after finishing all their ammunition.” Indeed, ISIS’s “anti-imperialism” is about as authentic as Nazi Germany’s “national socialism,” neither socialist nor anti-imperialist.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government tells lies to cover up deaths by drone, of those unidentified or unintended victims who magically become “enemies” in the bureaucratic score sheets of recorded casualties. But whether innocent civilians are killed intentionally or with a shrug of bureaucratic indifference in the end does not matter.

It is as if we have entered a new Dark Ages, one now backlit with technology, in which the victims as always remain primarily the unarmed and the innocent. Indeed, every innocent victim whether killed by terrorists or drone bombs, embodies the immense tragedy of the modern era, one defined by permanent war in a world divided by class, wealth, and power.

Actually, allusions to the cruelties of medieval ignorance are inadequate, for the reality of the modern era of technological warfare are far worse and more extensive than anything previously seen in human history.

Of course, for all their bluster about getting tough on terrorism, few in Washington’s bipartisan beltway are willing to confront the links between the rise of terror groups and historic western support for Middle East dictators and oppressors. Nor has the support of American leaders ever wavered for the Israeli apartheid state, despite its repeated violence in Gaza and the West Bank. It is this legacy that has left the landscape of much of the Middle East shorn of progressive political opportunities, and which now expresses itself in blowback of the worst kind of fundamentalist religious savagery.

Technology Advances, and People Continue to Die

At this juncture the drift of the world moves steadily toward barbarism. The so-called “American Century” that publisher Henry Luce proclaimed at the end of World War II was fittingly inaugurated with the dropping of the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, instantly killing over 210,000 people. Thousands more were to die in years to come of radiation-related diseases.

It was indeed only the beginning. The new post-war reality for the United States was one of a permanent war economy, as military bases spread across the globe, expenditures on weapons and warfare steadily grew, and intervention abroad became the norm. According to some estimates, as much as 15 million tons of explosives would be unleashed by the United States against the Vietnamese people during its long military intervention in that country. The government of

Vietnam estimates the nation suffered over 3 million deaths of military and civilians from 1954 to 1975, the bulk occurring during the height of the American invasion from 1965 to 1975.

The global horror show goes on. While casualty estimates vary considerably, the Korean War of the early 1950s led to *several million* deaths. For its part, the U.S. military essentially set North Korea on fire, burning to the ground every city, town, or village they could, as U.S. General Curtis LeMay later acknowledged. There were as many as 3.5 million total military deaths, according to the PBS series *The American Experience*. Two million North Korean civilians may have been killed, according to this source. Other estimates put civilian casualties on both sides at 1.6 million.

The U.S. military invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused civilian casualties in the hundreds of thousands, according to Brown University's Costs of War project. The Iraqi people continue to this day to die from disease and neglect related to the deterioration of health and public infrastructure, a slow strangulation that began back in 1990 with the first U.S. invasion and continued under President Clinton's long imposition of economic sanctions.

Whether the issue is death by drone, death by infantry, death by aerial bombardment, death by napalm or agent orange or economic sanctions, any accounting of actual casualties in modern military conflicts remains wildly imprecise. That in itself is a damning indictment of the state of the world and the warmongers who run it.

Life remains invariably cheap next to the machinations of military power and those who hold its reins.

'Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible'

I remember now those few hours I spent with that grieving father back in the 1970s. I had the sense at the time that he had picked me up from the side of the road not just because he wanted someone to chat with on a long drive. I was at 19 years near in age to that of his lost son, someone of the same generation. I sensed at some level he wanted to help me out for that reason.

I have forgotten most of what we talked about, but I recall him telling me what a great basketball player his son had been in high school. He never said much about the politics of the war, other than a passing remark that it all seemed a waste. His son had been forced to fight the war and he never came back. The man's grief had quietly pervaded that trip.

Those were the early days of my first critical thoughts about society. Idealistic, I had a hard time understanding the depths to which society could sink into the mire of violence. In my youthful naiveté, I had been inclined to think World War II was more an aberration than an expression of a global capitalist order exploding in violent structural contradictions. But gradually I came to realize that the world we live in, this capitalist system with its ubiquitous class divisions, was at the root of society's troubles. In short, war was built into the system.

A future like the current present is no future at all, and one with the potential to end in global nuclear war on an historically unprecedented scale. That's not apocalyptic hyperbole as much as a statement of what is both *politically* and *technologically* possible under present global realities.

"I remember on the day of the Hiroshima bombing I literally couldn't talk to anybody," Noam Chomsky once recalled in an interview. He was a teenager in 1945 when the United States dropped the first atom bomb on Japan. "I walked off into the woods and stayed alone for a couple of hours. I could never talk to anyone about it and never understood anyone's reaction. I felt completely isolated."

This is not the reaction of a "left-wing radical" per se as much as someone whose humanity is intact. It should be the reaction of any questioning person who believes in the dignity of human beings, and who demands that authority—all authority—has an obligation to justify itself. In this world, as Chomsky and others have long reminded us, we will find much of that authority wanting, and illegitimate.

It was Che Guevara, articulating the essence of his socialist vision, who once said, "At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality."

What we need now are not more career politicians who gravitate to wealth, privilege and power, who cry selective tears for some, but whose loyalty to the capitalist status quo renders their empathy biased when it comes to the encompassing global reality of social injustice. Our world instead needs more human beings who embrace Che's spirit of love and resistance, whose sense of *realpolitik* is to imagine the impossible, a world beyond war and killing, a world beyond capitalism.

The starting point as always remains our revolutionary imagination.