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The Seductiveness of Drone Warfare

There is much to unpack in Christopher J. Fuller’s book on the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in drone warfare. The main title, *See It/Shoot It*, suggests an unreflective process of killing, one that puts a premium on speed and action. A “secret” history suggests levels of classification and a process that is kept hidden from the American people. And the word “lethal” stresses the emphasis on kill shots against HVTs, or high-value targets, in the GWOT, or America’s global war on terror after the attacks of September 11, 2001. It is an eye-catching title, but more importantly Fuller’s research and his arguments are more subtle and sophisticated than the title suggests.

The words “see it/shoot it,” Fuller explains, came from Richard Clarke, a counterterrorism expert in the William J. Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. Fuller is after the “true origins” of the CIA's involvement in drone warfare, which, he argues, predates the 9/11 attacks. He begins his survey with the administration of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, showing its preference for lethal action, preemptively applied where possible, to eliminate terrorist threats. Policy preceded technology. Fuller notes, as he colorfully quotes Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North’s injunction that “it was time to kill ‘cocksucker’ terrorists” (p. 38). Here, legality mattered far less than lethality. Fuller sums up his thesis on page 62: “The legal architecture that authorized the hundreds of drone strikes that the Obama administration launched, the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, which has overseen and coordinated the strikes, the network of informants on the ground who have guided them, and the technological innovations behind the drones that have executed the strikes are all products of two decades of persistent experimentation and evolution [before 9/11/2001] in America's ongoing effort to neutralize the threat posed by burgeoning anti-American terrorist groups.”
As Fuller charts the course of US drone strikes after 9/11, he is careful to delineate the problems with the “kill cocksucker terrorists” mindset. Blowback is one. As CIA-run drones kill “terrorists,” many innocent civilians often die as well, which reinforces anti-American sentiment and feeds extremists’ recruitment efforts. The CIA must also rely heavily on foreign agents for intelligence, and those agents have their own agendas that usually run counter to those of the CIA. “Smart” and “surgical” strikes are often neither. Another aspect of these strikes is international law, which, as Fuller notes, becomes yet another victim of “America’s long-standing willingness to operate outside [of] universal norms” in the pursuit of alleged terrorists (p. 77).

Kill shots, even of questionable legality, are what US citizens have come to expect, or to accept, argues Fuller, citing statistics that show the American public overwhelmingly supported the Obama administration’s reliance on drones to kill terrorist suspects overseas. Fuller suggests that America remains a democracy and its people broadly support murderous vengeance, but he fails to articulate fully how the worst aspects of drone warfare (the murders of innocents, and bloody images of the same) are kept hidden from the American people. Consent is, in a word, manufactured.

Fuller then turns to the evolution of the armed Predator drone, a technology that was ready for action in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. What US officials liked most about these drones, besides their capacity to kill, was the fact that no American lives had to be risked; no pilots could be lost or taken prisoner. For risk-averse US officials seeking affirmation through vengeance, Predator (and, later, Reaper) drones promised decisiveness without complications. (As an aside, Fuller could have reflected on the names chosen for the drones. “Predator” and especially “Reaper” stress death, and both drones routinely carry “Hellfire” missiles, another word suggestive of diabolical punishment. What these names do not suggest is a reflective and considered policy based on methodical intelligence that seeks to limit deaths; it is as if foreign peoples, whether they are Afghan or Iraqi or Libyan, simply do not count.)

Why the CIA? Drones, after all, are remotely piloted aircraft, and most fall under the purview of the US Air Force. What the CIA offered, was secrecy, and a certain flexibility when it came to the legality (or lack thereof) of the US government’s counterterrorism program. Put differently, CIA personnel had a “level of deniability” vis-à-vis drone strikes and their results that was typically unavailable to US Air Force personnel (p. 149). But secrecy, illegality, and avoidance of accountability are inconsistent with democratic processes and corrosive to the same.

Remarkably, the US leader who won a Nobel Peace Prize, Barack Obama, embraced drone warfare and expanded it beyond what the Bush administration had practiced, despite the lack of clear legal sanction for these assassinations. Here Fuller cites the words of Leon Panetta, director of the CIA under Obama, who explained that drone strikes were “the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership” (p. 209). The “only game in town” may have proved popular domestically in the United States, but it proved less than effective in countering terrorism. Here and elsewhere, Fuller makes an important point: drone warfare and killings, whether done by the CIA or the US military, whether effective or disastrous, enjoyed broad bipartisan support in Washington, DC. As Republicans and Democrats embraced it, President Obama was heard to quip that he had become quite good at assassinating foreign “terrorists.”

Fuller ends his study on a positive note by suggesting how drones can be beneficial in non-military settings, yet his book is at its sharpest when he details the growing violence and de-personalization of kill shots via snipers in the sky. I was especially taken by his analysis of words associated with drone warfare. Revealingly, the air
crews who operate these drones reject the terminology of “drones” and UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) or UAS (unmanned aerial system). They prefer the term RPA, or remotely piloted aircraft. They want to be known as essential humans in the loop; they want to count for something.

Whereas American airmen want to stand up and be counted as the pilots of their “remote aircraft,” the CIA and the Pentagon do not want to think about the targets of these drones as human beings. Civilian casualties are grouped and shrouded under the term “collateral damage,” an Orwellian euphemism that combines a banking term (collateral) with the concept of damage that hints at reversibility and repair. But collateral damage really means innocents blown up and blasted by missiles. Should not these humans count too?

Another term Fuller discusses is “neutralization.” The US counterterrorism goal is to “neutralize” opponents, meaning, as Fuller notes, “killing, rendition, and imprisonment” (p. xi). Again, with a word like “neutralization,” Americans are not encouraged to think of those being attacked as humans. It is all about “neutralizing” threats, so what is the problem here?

Interestingly, the whole idea of terrorism is something they do, not American officials. This is because the US defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents” (p. xi, emphasis added). Note that word: subnational. By this definition, nations cannot commit terrorism, which is a handy definition for US leaders, who present its drone attacks as defensive or preemptive—always necessary—and never terroristic.

Finally, the Pentagon and the CIA are at pains to assert they take the utmost care in reducing “collateral damage” in their “neutralization” efforts. Yet as Fuller notes, “the U.S. government did not always know the identity or affiliations of those killed in its drone strikes” (p. 214).

So, who counts, and who does not? Whose humanity is to be celebrated (pilots of the drones?), and whose humanity (innocent victim of those drones) is to be suppressed?

The value of Fuller’s study is that it stimulates such uncomfortable questions. Fuller is to be congratulated for shining a light in otherwise dark areas, even if we Americans may not always like what we see.