

**Joseph O. Chapa.** *Is Remote Warfare Moral?: Weighing Issues of Life and Death from 7,000 Miles.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2022. 336 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5417-7445-2.



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## Good Kill? The Morality of Remote Warfare

In early 2015, a Reaper drone crew tracked an al Qaeda commander in the hills of Afghanistan, walking alongside a young boy, presumed to be his son. The Reaper crew waited for an opportunity to strike the target without causing any civilian casualties. The child walked home, and when the al Qaeda leader walked alone away from the house, the Hellfire missile from the Reaper took out the leader. According to the *jus in bello*—justice in how wars are fought—guidelines of war, the strike was discriminate, proportionate, and exercised with due care—a "good kill." Yet, when the crew stayed overhead to conduct a battle damage assessment, they were confronted with the vivid reality of what their "just" strike had done. The Hellfire not only killed the al Qaeda leader, but it also mutilated his body, with his limbs scattered around the scene. The boy returned from the house and began "slowly and methodically" picking up the pieces of his father's body and "put them back together in the shape of his late father."

When presented with the gruesome aftermath, the Reaper pilot who fired the shot, and who had a son about the same age as the boy on the screen, said, "I can't watch this," asked another pilot to take over the controls, and left the cockpit (p. 86). Joseph O. Chapa's book confronts the notion that war at a distance through the lens of a drone evokes a "PlayStation mentality" to killing, showing that this does not match the realities faced by operators in the US Air Force (USAF) (p. 87).

The number of books, articles, op-eds, and speeches on remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), more colloquially known as drones, is absolutely staggering. However, *Is Remote Warfare Moral?* truly stands out from the rest. Most of the work on the ethics of US drone strikes have focused solely on the CIA targeted-killing program, which operates outside of declared warzones in places like Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. Others have wrongly lumped USAF use of drones in the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan in together with the more

morally and legally questionable CIA strikes. Chapa's work masterfully blends his insider's perspective as a lieutenant colonel in the USAF who was a safety observer for Predator drone strikes in Afghanistan with his PhD in moral philosophy from Oxford to deeply grapple with these moral issues in a way that only a soldier-philosopher could. The vividness of the concrete ethical dilemmas presented in this text offers a necessary counterweight to much of the abstract theorizing about the morality of drones in contemporary warfare. Rather than a thought experiment about hypothetical cases, Chapa immerses the reader in the decision-making experience, with all the uncertainty, heaviness, and intensity only RPA operators could understand. The soldier-philosopher perspective that Chapa brings provides an immensely readable and engaging book for students, practitioners, academics, and leisure readers alike.

This book is organized into seven chapters, each of which tackles some prominent ideas, misconceptions, and myths about the role of USAF RPA operators and the moral implications of their work. From the psychological implications of being an RPA operator to the myth of riskless warfare, the role of human judgment, and the ideal of military virtue, Chapa examines these topics in vivid detail. When it comes to the notion of riskless warfare, his deep understanding of remote warfare's psychological impact on USAF personnel is exemplary of what John Williams referred to as the "distant intimacy" that RPA crews experience. [1] This captures the idea that killing someone on the other side of the world may be a far more intimate killing experience than "traditional" combat. As one crew member reflected on their "good kill," where the proper target was struck with zero collateral damage: "We kill him ... that's the first time I saw someone dead and we zoom in to view the dead body.... Right then, it hit me. My heart just started pumping ... I couldn't get that image of his [dead] body out of my mind ... I started thinking about a kid growing up without his father that I had killed ... about two weeks later I broke down.

I couldn't hold it in anymore and I had to seek help ... I wanted to know if God was OK with what I was doing" (p. 102). While this particular case fell short of an official diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, there is substantial moral injury to the crew here that makes them question their core identity and is indeed a form of psychological rather than physical risk that RPA crews experience.[2]

Although this book situates itself within the just war debates surrounding the morality of drone warfare, I do not believe it sufficiently engages with the divisions within the literature between traditionalist and revisionist just war theory. Chapa centers the role of human judgment and agency in the context of virtue ethics as central to the morality of remote warfare. This has important implications for the debates surrounding lethal autonomous weapons systems in that agency—which in this case includes the ability to not push the button even when you may be legally justified in doing so—is central to the ethics of killing by drone. Thus, while Chapa implicitly pushes back against both the revisionist trend toward abstract thought experiments with his vivid detail and the traditionalists' frequent arguments that risk asymmetry undermines foundational rationales for the right to take life in war, in my view he insufficiently engages these authors directly in any depth.

Finally, I believe the book also falls somewhat short in its failure to address the question of *jus ad bellum*—justice in going to war—when it comes to the United States's war in Iraq. Is it a just war? If not, then what are the implications for the morality of war when one side is engaged in an unjust conflict? As exemplified in the World War II Pearl Harbor example, there is an implicit sense of the moral equality of combatants who cannot be held necessarily accountable for decisions that their governments made to fight, and these combatants thus enter the special *jus in bello* relationship. Moreover, while this book does engage with a

number of contemporary debates, it is not overly academic in its tone or style. The practitioner, student, or military reader may find this appealing, but it may leave some academic readers wanting more direct engagement with the literature. I know that these are questions that Chapa has grappled with and would have a compelling answer to, but you might not find it all in this book.

All that said, *Is Remote Warfare Moral?* is a refreshing take that focuses on the lived realities of USAF RPA operators and all the moral and psychological implications that come with that. I can say that although I have been studying drones for over a decade, I truly gained so much from this book. Its compelling narrative style and firsthand accounts from RPA operators make it immensely readable, and I recommend that it go to the top of your reading list, as it is anything but just another book on drones.

I will end this review with an excerpt from a poem by Olivia Garard, a US Marine Corps unmanned systems officer, whose work I think is a fantastic summation of the moral ambiguity of remote warfare that Chapa examines throughout this book. She captures the ethical dilemmas of killing at a distance in a way that only a soldier-poet could: *Good kill.* / The words disoriented me. / Logic / and morality / clashed. ... *Good kill.* / Necessary— / Yes. / Justifiable— / Certainly. / But good? [3]

#### Notes

[1]. John Williams, “Distant Intimacy: Space, Drones, and Just War,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2015): 93-110, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679414000793>.

[2]. Ned Dobos, *Ethics, Security, and the War Machine: The True Cost of the Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3]. Olivia Garard, “Good Kill.” *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 30 (2018), <https://www.wlajournal.com/wlaarchive/30/GARARD.pdf>.

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