



2014-045

Lloyd G. Gardner, *Killing Machine: The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare*. New York: New Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 289. ISBN 978-1-59558-918-7.

Review by Edmund F. Byrne, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (ebyrne@iupui.edu).

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), better known as drones, are now preferred instruments for the precise targeting and killing of problematic human beings, given their cost efficiency and the absence of personal risk to their operators as compared to alternative weapons. The full extent of the transformative role of this radically new way to fight a war is still to be determined, especially in view of the vast expenditures on other weapons. But they will have a far more revolutionary impact on war making than did the introduction of spears, catapults, machine guns, or helicopters. Scholars have now begun to examine the technological, military, and policy issues that accompany the use of drones.

Historian Lloyd Gardner (Rutgers Univ.) has written or edited over a dozen books on aspects of US foreign policy, especially regarding Vietnam and the Middle East. With *Killing Machine*, he turns to post-9/11 UAV strikes that purportedly target only terrorists but also kill noncombatants. These attacks, he contends, are rendering obsolete both constitutional constraints on war making and previous military equipment.

Gardner concentrates on tactical and strategic changes in American military priorities. These reflect not any scrupulously developed master plan, but piecemeal executive branch debates, especially during the Barack Obama administration, about how best to use finite military resources to contain insurgents and terrorists both within and outside Afghanistan. The US commander in chief has discounted his leading military advisers' preference for more traditional counterinsurgency operations in favor of the drone strikes and cyber-attacks endorsed by proponents of special forces operations.

Gardner brings to his subject a focus on the rhetorical ploys of executive branch pronouncements, including some key presidential speeches, and the reactions to these in Congress and the media. Though not privy to relevant classified documents, he persuasively reveals the sharp disconnect between official assertions about drones and the actual uses to which they are being put. A few US senators have expressed concerns about this information gap: Ron Paul unsuccessfully filibustered the nomination of John Brennan to head the CIA, and Dick Durbin held hearings (April 2013) on targeted killing and drone use in the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights (235-41). Since Gardner's book went to press shortly thereafter, the recently approved federal budget bill has hindered the administration's desire (allegedly in the interest of greater transparency) to shift control of drone missions from the CIA to the military.¹

Congress is in fact ahead of its constituents regarding UAV warfare, except as concerns its use against American citizens. Although Gardner is mostly content to report what various spokespersons say about drone targeting, including the "signature" killing of non-threatening individuals, he does express strong reservations about the broader implications of such missions—"the United States has already flown drones across constitutional boundaries and has them headed dead on for the foundations of the Republic" (xii). His modus operandi is to report the public conversation regarding drones, while inserting his own commentary on inadequately addressed theoretical and practical problems. Consider a few examples:

Obama made his commitment to [John] Brennan as his chief terrorism adviser knowing he was a drone advocate even before he had an opportunity to review with other advisers the legal, moral, and practical questions that accompanied such a decision. (41)

1. Eric Schmitt, "Congress Restricts Drones Program Shift," *NY Times* (17 Jan 2014) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1409.htm.

When [Gen. Stanley] McChrystal fell from grace ..., the tortured process that had produced the Afghan surge became a desperate embrace of drone warfare with its unresolved implications—all put aside in the persistent belief Americans have in technological “breakthroughs” that eliminate political obstacles. (65)

Defenders of the strikes slowly retreated from the zero civilian deaths line to a more reasonable argument that ... drones caused far less collateral damage than strikes, say, by F-117s or other similar piloted aircraft. Of course, that evaded the question of national sovereignty or formal war zones, as well as the controversy over “signature” strikes. (151)

Drones were eliminating the need for pursuing the war on terror one country at a time. They were the technological fix for long, inconclusive wars—if political obstacles such as national sovereignty or irksome constitutional rights could be overcome. (160)

Drones appeared to be the answer to the problem of maintaining American world leadership without bankrupting the nation in the process or forcing to the surface nationalist anger that would undermine the American presence.... (162)

The rationale for drone warfare, of course, was that normal conditions of warfare did not exist in this case—and likely ones in the future. Counterinsurgency theory had posited wars without front lines; now drone theory and practice simply assumed that national boundaries did not really mean sovereignty. (221)

Americans now lived in a world where there was no distinction between near and far, national borders existed only in atlases, and the difference between war and peace could not be defined. (223)

Gardner shows in detail how American drone policy and practice have been affected by, respectively, the anti-terrorism killings of Osama bin Laden by a secret special ops mission in Pakistan in May 2011, and Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen, by a drone strike in September 2011 (173)—an event he thinks may have motivated the Boston Marathon bombers (238).

Three of President Obama’s key policy presentations are carefully analyzed: his speech at West Point in December 2009 informing cadets that “our effort will involve disorderly regions, failed states, diffuse enemies” (32); his 2010 Nobel Peace Prize speech, “A Just and Lasting Peace,” touting just war theory but allowing American exceptions (79–90); and his national security speech in May 2013 defending the use of drones against targets outside of Afghanistan (245–46).

Other critical war policy documents that figure prominently in Gardner’s argument include President George W. Bush’s authorization of CIA black sites and assassination of terrorists which afforded “a mile-wide freeway for lethal actions” with no prior consultation required² (129); the Justice Department’s *Authorization to Use Military Force*, prepared by John Yoo in 2002; the *US 2012 Defense Strategy Review: Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership—Priorities for 21st-Century Defense*; two pertinent military field manuals;³ General McChrystal’s 2009 *Initial Assessment* (of NATO’s status in Afghanistan); and Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis’s damning 2012 report “Dereliction of Duty II: Senior Military Leaders’ Loss of Integrity Wounds Afghan War Effort”⁴ (198).

Gardner’s principal problem with drone warfare is its lack of constitutional justification. Like Americans in general, he seems less troubled about the grim realities of often unjustified aerial killings. He offers readers a non-technical, reasonably thorough account of the post-9/11 shift in US war-making policy from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism, featuring the use of drones not only in Afghanistan but against targets elsewhere as well.

The book would have benefitted from fuller information about government accommodation of the drone industry, extending to the convenient location of military bases. Even within the author’s chosen pa-

2. *Memorandum of Notification* (17 Sep 2001).

3. *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2007) and *Field Manual FM 3-24.2: Tactics in Counterinsurgency* (Washington: HQ Dept of the Army, April 2009).

4. Available online – www.miwsr.com/rd/1410.htm.

rameters, his work is time-sensitive owing to the limited information available to or usable by spokespersons and journalists. This flaw is intensified by the book's rather abrupt ending with no identification of resolutions, present or future, to the issues it raises. Already, more detailed inner-circle information about the post-9/11 era is accessible in, for example, memoirs by John Rizzo,⁵ who signed off on all CIA-directed drone strikes from 2001 to 2009, and Robert Gates,⁶ head of the CIA and Secretary of Defense under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Defense Department and CIA involvement in drone warfare is reportedly dwarfed, however, by the activities the Joint Special Operations Command.⁷

For the most part, Gardner astutely contextualizes administration justifications for American war-making policy in Afghanistan and elsewhere. But he also forcefully states his own concerns about what is at stake and how best to further US "national interests." He comes close to identifying a legal Catch-22: if drone killings are acts of war, then they are unconstitutional because never fully authorized by Congress; if they are not acts of war, then they violate the prohibition of assassinations in international law.

5. *Company Man: Thirty Years of Controversy and Crisis in the CIA* (NY: Scribner, 2013).

6. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (NY: Knopf, 2014).

7. See Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (NY: Little, Brown, 2011). For further details about the design, production, distribution, and use of drones, see Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* (NY: Verso, 2013), and Nick Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire: Special Ops, Drones, Spies, Proxy Fighters, Secret Bases, and Cyber Warfare* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012).