

Drones in the Sky: Operating the Mechanized Kill Machine

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#),
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Never tell a soldier that he does not know the cost of war. Lt. Gen. Frank Benson (Alan Rickman), *Eye in the Sky*(2015)

All it takes is a boffin on the trigger, then goodnight all. That is the gist of Horace Rumpole's words in John Mortimer's legal creation by that name – the ever direct barrister who finds himself acting in a court martial in Germany on behalf of a British soldier, member of the famed Seraphs.

Such is the ethics of modern affair: the lethal trigger instead of the bloody sword; the weapon fired at a safe distance against a human opponent with little if no chance to retaliate in fair play. Gone are the days of empty headed light brigades charging foolishly yet breathtakingly against strong positions.

Mortimer's reflection was penned some decades ago, primarily on the issue of potential nuclear extinction. The button of contemplation (watch those nuclear keys!), the bomb, the nuclear deterrent, had done away with the traditional players, who were essentially frustrated thespians uniformed for life's great show.

From triggers to sticks, the emergence of the drone system, remote, piloted warfare, has further given cause to the soldier actor, where simulation has greater significance than what is being simulated. What matters now is that the computer addled actor is a true killer, a veritable Xbox-trained murderer. The soldier in that setting becomes a games operator framed by a world of piloted projections. Never mind that these simulations somehow disperse themselves into the effulgent destruction of a target, in all its carnage.

The ethical question of using such trigger-based, remote controlled weapons, is swiped away by their ever enthusiastic deployment. In many cases, targets can be eliminated with little international fuss; Security Council resolutions from the UN need not be sought; and killing can take place in a manner less than disrupting for domestic audiences.

Poor men and women in body bags in a distant country rarely make the newsworthy stage. What prevails are utilitarian notions of about using Hellfire missiles against populations where the insidious idea of "collateral damage" is employed with impunity seem to prevail with ubiquity.

A series of ponderings often follow in such war, if it can even pass as that. To kill in order to avert the incalculable (fictional casualties arising from a suicide bomber in a shopping mall, for instance), thereby asserting certainty in the face of probability; to take life from remote positions on the globe, linked via an international collaborator network of mechanised slayings.

A recent exploration of such a theme is undertaken in Gavin Hood's *Eye in the Sky*, based on a tight screenplay by Guy Hibbert. Brought to the screens is a coldly accurate yet reflective depiction about imminent death from the air and strained moral acrobatics on the ground.

The language portrays the chilling artificiality about human life as it is reduced before a range of variables wedded to a bureaucratic rationale: a young girl Alia (Aisha Takow) with her hula hoop and selling bread baked by her mother; attempts to rationalise the action whether a strike on a building in Nairobi housing future terrorist attackers should take place.

The Al-Shabaab figures gather with weapons and their suicide vests, among them UK and US nationals. They are being witnessed by an assortment of devices, notably a robotic, metallic fly that keeps eye with its camera, all part of a UK-US-Kenyan enterprise. While this is happening, discussions are taking place in Britain and Kenya as to whether the strike should take place, with Washington eventually prodded into an irritable response.

On seeing the prospect of what she regards as an imminent attack, Col. Katherine Powell, played by Helen Mirren, seeks an alteration of the original mission, one of capture of the suspects, to that of kill. An extrajudicial act, in short, is being embraced over that of a legal procedure.

What follows is a form of kill chain morality, the referring up to the higher command that requires confirmation from an even higher placed command that such a strike passes muster. Powell's commanding officer, Lt. Gen. Frank Benson (Alan Rickman), has little issue giving in to his subordinate's examination of the facts. The next in line to receive the order is drone pilot Steve Watts (Aaron Paul), based in Las Vegas.

Some of the Brits seem squeamish and wobbly, concerned whether such a strike would be militarily proportionate, even against a terrorist group in a friendly state. Only Powell comes across as cold, cutting steel in the face of rubbery indecision, be it the vacillating foreign secretary, who has the runs while attending an arms conference, or the prime minister, who feels that the issue of killing US citizens needs Washington's clearance.

The US contingent, by way of contrast to their allies, can't see what all the fuss is about, berating their British counterparts for stalling over such moral issues, even matters of US nationality. As valuable allies, it was important that Britain do its part in the business of deracinating and liquidating such groups, despite their constitutional protections.

This clanking of killing chains is triggered by the drone pilot's insistence that confirmation be made that launching such a strike might give Aisha, who finds herself selling bread beside the compound in question, a chance of survival.

We are back in the kingdom of speculations and superimposed calculations: would hitting the compound minimise casualties within a certain radius? Should the girl be encouraged on the ground to disperse by the Somali agent who seeks to buy her bread? All of this comes to naught. The resolute Powell eventually gets her way, forcing an *underestimation* of the potential damage to be recorded in the discussions.

That attitude, in particular, speaks volumes to the sorrows of empire. Neat killings exacted with forensic accuracy are somehow taken to be substitutes for diplomacy and development. But consequences beget more consequences; wars waged at such distances,

globally, irrespective of sovereign lines and geopolitical wisdom, provide a rotten harvest.

It may very well be that certain states have eyes in the sky with marked sight, capable of a global gaze and acting with impunity. Such high bound activity, however, encourages blindness to those matters of a more terrestrial kind.

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