

Drones, Drone Strikes, and US Policy: The Politics of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Ulrike Esther Franke

© 2014 Ulrike Esther Franke

The use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in military operations is currently among the most hotly debated topics in the national and international media. While at first few showed interest in this military technology, the increasing number of missile strikes carried out via UAVs in remote areas of Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia by the United States Armed Forces and the CIA has raised public awareness. Today, reports on “drone strikes” are published daily; UAV names such as Global Hawk, Predator, or Reaper are on everyone’s lips. Criticism of the use of unmanned technology has equally gained momentum. Several organizations lobby for the complete or partial ban of drones, efforts which have resulted in a discussion on adding a protocol to the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) to ban fully autonomous UAVs. High-ranking members of the US defense community have advised caution regarding the use of armed drones and propose moratoria on US drone strikes.¹

Drones—unmanned, remotely piloted, aerial vehicles, short UAVs—are now used by the armed forces of approximately 70 countries around the world. The club of armed UAV holders remains more exclusive; for the moment, its members only include Israel, the United Kingdom, the United States, and most likely China and Iran. This situation, however, is likely to change sooner rather than later with many countries considering the procurement of armed drones.

The four books reviewed in this essay are all motivated by the belief that “the precipitous increase in drone use we have witnessed over the past few years represents just the beginning of the proliferation and widespread use of UAVs, across many contexts.”² Disagreement may reign over whether or not this development is positive; however, the authors agree on one point: drones are here to stay.

Many articles and papers have been written on UAV use, but scholarly debate has been surprisingly slow with academia only getting intensively involved in recent years. Accordingly, this review features works by a journalist, an anti-drone activist, and several academics.

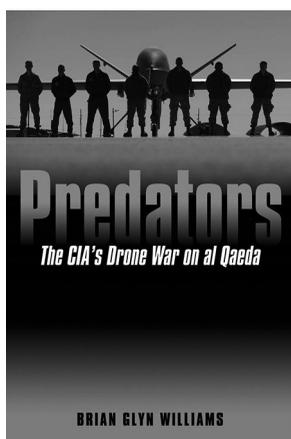
Winning the Battle but Losing the Hearts and Minds—The Importance of Drone Perceptions

Perceptions matter, sometimes even more than reality. Drones certainly have a dreadful reputation—even though they may not necessarily

Ulrike Franke is a doctoral student in International Relations at Oxford University, supervised by Professor Sir Hew Strachan. She studies the military implications of the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and is interested in the Revolution in Military Affairs. Ulrike has worked as a research assistant at the International Institute of Strategic Studies. She holds a BA and MA from Sciences Po Paris and a second MA from the University of St. Gallen.

¹ David Kilcullen and Andrew McDonald Exum, “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2009.

² Bradley Strawser, ed., *Killing by Remote Control. The Ethics of an Unmanned Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.



Brian Glyn Williams, *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on al Qaeda* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 281 pages, \$29.95.

deserve it. This is what Brian Glyn Williams tells readers in *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on al Qaeda*.

Williams, a professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and an expert on the history of the Middle East, cofounded in 2009 UMass Drone, a research project and open-source online database on attacks carried out via armed drones.³ With *Predators*, Williams aims at “record[ing] the history of what amounts to an all-out CIA drone war on the Taliban and al Qaeda.”⁴ A historian by training, he claims wanting to stay neutral in the emotive drone debate: “Proponents and opponents of the campaign can do with this story what they will.”⁵ His neutrality may be debatable; Williams clearly has his own opinion on

whether the use of drones in counterterrorism is effective. Nevertheless, *Predators* is recommended reading to those interested in how US counterterrorism efforts in Pakistan and elsewhere have affected civilian populations living in the targeted countries.

Williams studies the impact of the missile strikes by US drones in remote regions of the world, in particular in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The book is clearly enhanced by Williams's deep knowledge of Pakistani politics and the Pashtun tribal areas. He ensures his readers get at least a general notion of its history, emphasizing that the FATA has always been an independent entity rather than a proper part of the Pakistani state.

Williams's main argument has three parts: (1) The US drone strikes in Pakistan are precise and succeed in killing high-value targets and lower-level Taliban operatives (some of whom have plotted against the United States and other Western nations); (2) The perception of the strikes is very negative in Pakistan and abroad; (3) The drone campaign may ultimately prove counterproductive as it alienates the public whose hearts and minds need to be won.

In Williams's words, the United States:

[C]ontinue[s] to wrestle with a paradox. While the war against the Taliban was transformed into a hunt for HVTs [high-value targets], it became obvious that America's most advanced weapon in the hunt for elusive terrorists might also be their worst enemy in the underlying battle to win the hearts and minds of the people of this volatile region;⁶

Perceptions can be more important than reality;⁷ and

3 UMass Drone Home Page, <http://www.umassdrone.org/>.

4 Brian Glyn Williams, *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on al Qaeda* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), xi.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 38.

7 Ibid., 207.

Drone strikes are a public relations and strategic disaster in Pakistan.⁸

Williams argues the missile strikes by American UAVs are precise and kill comparatively few civilians because of six distinct factors: bureaucratic safeguards ensuring targets are selected properly; UAVs' ability to loiter for a long time, which increases intelligence and allows a strike at the most opportune moment; high resolution cameras; human intelligence on the ground thanks to a spy network and support by the Pakistani government and security services; the use of smaller missiles; and the tactic to target combatants while they are in vehicles.⁹ By analyzing many strikes, he shows that although mistakes and accidents have caused civilian casualties, the majority of those killed are high-value targets and lower-level Taliban operatives. Williams's analysis of the strikes is thorough; his assessment and critique of some of those organizations collecting data on these strikes is at times, however, disproportionate and would have benefited from more extensive editing.

The fact that the strikes are efficient has clearly not reached the Pakistani public, or rather, Williams argues, it was not communicated properly: "Without an American public relations campaign to counteract the critics' attacks on the drone efforts, they remained a mystery for most outsiders, who assumed the worst."¹⁰ Misperceptions do not only exist regarding information on the number of civilian casualties. Many Pakistanis were and still are outraged by the apparent US drones' incursions into their national territory. Williams argues:

[B]oth their elected leaders (Musharraf, Zardari, and Gilani) and their military leaders have actively supported the drone campaign—so much so that they have allowed the CIA to run drone strikes on the Taliban and al Qaeda from the Shamsi Air base in Pakistan. If the United States is, or was, allowed to operate on Pakistani soil with Pakistani troops guarding the drone base at Shamsi, their operations cannot be termed a violation of sovereignty.¹¹

But, Williams criticizes, neither the United States nor the Pakistani government has made real efforts to fight misperceptions or even deliberate misrepresentations, which is why these misperceptions have spread. Ultimately, the reader is left wondering whether this is all worth it: "Opinion in Pakistan, a country of 190 million people, is being turned against the United States all for the sake of killing hundreds of low-level Taliban fighters."¹²

The Macro View

Mark Mazzetti's *The Way of the Knife* is not about the use of UAVs per se. Rather, Mazzetti, *The New York Times* national security correspondent and Pulitzer Prize winner, discusses more generally the new ways of US military action: the use of a "scalpel" rather than a "hammer"—a phrase coined by former chief counterterrorism advisor John Brennan and which inspired the book's title.¹³ For Mazzetti, the "way of the

8 Ibid., 206.

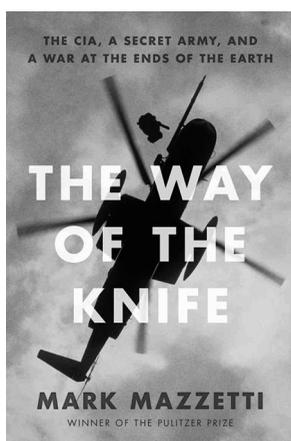
9 Ibid., 101-110.

10 Ibid., 86.

11 Ibid., 189.

12 Ibid., 212.

13 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan at CSIS, May 26, 2010.



Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife. The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 381 pages, \$29.95.

knife” is, however, not a positive metaphor but consists in “a shadow war waged across the globe” in which “America has pursued its enemies using killer robots and special-operations troops.”¹⁴

The book is based on hundreds of interviews with current and former government officials as well as members of the CIA and the military. Mazzetti opens the black box of some of the most secretive US organizations—the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the State Department, and the Pentagon. Mazzetti describes, placing much focus on the story of individuals, how the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the following military interventions have transformed the United States and its ability to wage wars.

In the book, the author explains how US intelligence and military work became blurred and how it militarized the CIA. In the early 2000s, “the Pentagon had the capabilities for hunting-and-killing operations, but the CIA had the authorities.”¹⁵ After 9/11, and due to the workings of a number of influential officials, the CIA revived and JSOC came of age. The result was a jockeying between the Pentagon and CIA for supremacy in new American conflicts. Eventually, “the Central Intelligence Agency has become a killing machine, an organization consumed with man hunting,”¹⁶ while JSOC became “the secret army . . . needed to fight a global war.”¹⁷

Mazzetti retraces the development of the CIA since the 1990s. He describes how the agency lost most of its power with the end of the Cold War and some embarrassing revealings of past activities. This changed with the Global War on Terror. The CIA is “no longer a traditional espionage service devoted to stealing the secrets of foreign governments, [it] has become a killing machine, an organization consumed with man hunting.”¹⁸ The descriptions of the inner-CIA discussions about the role of the agency and their use of armed UAVs are particularly interesting. When the first missiles were strapped onto Predator aircraft in 2000, the CIA did not show much enthusiasm for them. The aircraft “looked like a gangly insect and had a loud engine that made it sound like a flying lawnmower.”¹⁹ Also, in this pre-9/11 world, “the idea of the CIA establishing military-style bases anywhere in the world seemed crazy.”²⁰ Targeted assassinations were not an option: “We’re not like that. We’re not Mossad,” Richard Clarke is cited saying. A former head of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Centre later told the 9/11 Commission

14 Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife. The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 5.

15 *Ibid.*, 81.

16 *Ibid.*, 4.

17 *Ibid.*, 75.

18 *Ibid.*, 4.

19 *Ibid.*, 91.

20 *Ibid.*, 92.

that in the years before the attacks, they would have refused a direct order to kill bin Laden.²¹

The JSOC is portrayed as the brain child of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—the chapter on JSOC is entitled “Rumsfeld’s Spies.” In it, Mazzetti describes how Rumsfeld “envied the spy agency’s ability to send its operatives anywhere, at any time, without having to ask permission.”²² His answer? “[T]o make the Pentagon more like the CIA.”²³ Eventually, JSOC became “the secret army [Rumsfeld] needed to fight a global war.”²⁴

Readers predominantly interested in UAVs will find chapter 5 particularly informative; in it, Mazzetti describes the initial stages of the CIA’s drone program. Equally enlightening are Mazzetti’s reports of several instances where drones were used because manned operations were considered too risky politically. Putting boots on the ground would be considered an invasion, while putting armed drones in the air to do the same job was considered less of an infraction.²⁵

Mazzetti’s book is an interesting and even entertaining work, loaded with interview quotes and background information. He underlines the importance of the context in which the new US way of warfare was born as well as the role specific individuals played. Indeed, his focus on the individuals involved can, at times, be distracting. The author rarely mentions a person without giving his or her background—education, family situation, and career development. This, combined with the novel-like writing style, can at times distract from more important elements. Furthermore, there is no chronological and very little geographical or thematic order in Mazzetti’s writing—trying to find a specific piece of information can, therefore, be challenging. This critique notwithstanding, this book should lie on the nightstand of all those readers interested in the CIA and the inner workings of a nation at war.

Stop the Drones—The Activist’s View

No review on drone literature would be complete without Medea Benjamin’s *Drone Warfare*, which has become one of the most-read books on UAV use. Benjamin is a political activist, best known for her interruption of President Obama’s counterterrorism speech at the National Defense University in May 2013 where she demanded to “take the drones out of the hands of the CIA” and to end signature strikes.

There is no ambiguity—Benjamin is an activist, and *Drone Warfare* is an activist’s book. It is not a book about drone use, but against it. Benjamin’s position is clear: “The drone wars represent one of the greatest travesties of justice in our age.”²⁶ For her, UAVs are “death robots,”²⁷ “killing machines,”²⁸ and “killer drones.”²⁹ The book is a pamphlet

21 Ibid., 88.

22 Ibid., 68.

23 Ibid., 68.

24 Ibid., 75.

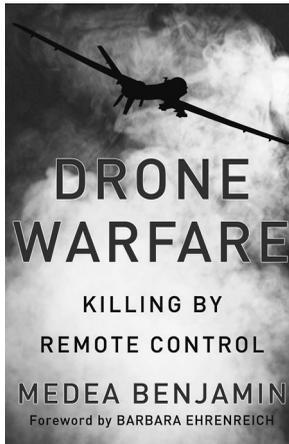
25 Ibid., 116, 133.

26 Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare. Killing by Remote Control* (London: Verso, 2013), 124.

27 Ibid., 53.

28 Ibid., 28.

29 Ibid., 15.



Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare. Killing by Remote Control* (London: Verso, 2013), 246 pages, \$16.95.

against armed drones, and parts of it could double as a pacifist manifest. Benjamin quotes President Eisenhower's famous statement that "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."³⁰ Following this same logic, she criticizes the procurement of US drones during a financial crisis which "led to the slashing of government programs from nutrition supplements for pregnant women to maintenance of national parks."³¹ The book is permeated by emotional stories of maimed Pakistani and Afghan children and parents who have to bury their sons "in the dry cold soil of the village they had loved."³² The last two chapters are dedicated to activism against drone use and US military policy.

This is one side of Benjamin's book. At the same time, *Drone Warfare* is also an informative, well-researched work that provides the reader with an extensive list of references. Benjamin tries to discuss the most important aspects of the use of armed UAVs: the history and development of drones, the drone market, the points of view of drone pilots, the legality and morality of their use, drone use by other countries, and the points of view of drone use by terrorists and victims. As informative literature on UAV use is still scarce and mainly comes in forms of newspaper reports, this in itself is laudable. Her discussion of the drone market and the UAV-"military-industrial-complex" is particularly enlightening. Even well-informed readers can be sure to find new pieces of information and good quotes. Readers new to the subject get an overview of the main points of discussion.

Unfortunately, Benjamin's generic opposition to the use of armed drones stands in the way of an academically rigorous discussion of the topic. Her critique is unfocused, as the object of her criticism is not clear. She often does not differentiate between the technology, i.e., unmanned weaponry, and policy, or using unmanned weaponry in specific ways in specific contexts. This is a general problem of the drone debate; for Benjamin it means that a lot of her criticism appears ill-directed.

At times, her critique of both the wars and drones appears a bit naïve, as no alternative is proposed. It is not clear what Benjamin argues in favor of. When she criticizes that "[w]hen military operations are conducted through the filter of a far-away video camera, there is no possibility of making eye contact with the enemy and fully realizing the human cost of an attack," the reader is left wondering what the alternative would be.³³ Returning to a type of warfare in which soldiers make eye contact with their enemies (a type of warfare lying long in

30 Ibid., 54.

31 Ibid., 17.

32 Ibid., 111.

33 Ibid., 160.

the past, not only since the advent of drones)? Benjamin fails to answer these questions.

Benjamin's book is a good introduction to the topic and interesting read even for those familiar with the debate. One should, however, be advised to counterbalance the biased view with other, preferably more academic and analytically rigorous accounts.

Gut Instincts are not Enough—Academia's Contribution

Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military adds academic and analytical rigour to the discussion. In the current drone debate—largely dominated by journalists and activists and often conducted on an emotional level—this book serves as a reminder of the merits of scholarly work. The volume was edited by Bradley Jay Strawser, assistant professor of Philosophy at the United States Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Strawser is best-known by students of drone warfare through his groundbreaking article “Moral Predator, The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles.”³⁴

While Strawser, because of this paper, is sometimes considered a drone advocate, his agenda in *Killing by Remote Control* is to “push the scholarly conversation [over the ethics of drones] to a deeper analytic level.”³⁵ He believes the debate needs to move out of the “first wave” of journalistic attention: “those of us working on and thinking seriously about these questions need to move out of those early phases [...]. *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military* is part of that deeper analytic push.”³⁶

The book's chapters discuss the ethics of using remotely controlled weapons for lethal missions. The focus lies on armed UAVs, targeted killings, and autonomous systems. Many tricky ethical questions are addressed in the book:

- Can drone warfare be analyzed through the lenses of Just War Theory or are new theories and rules needed?
- Does the use of UAVs undermine military virtues?
- Does the use of UAVs imply the judgment that the targets of such weapons are expendable while the operators are not?
- Do UAVs make war more likely and is this necessarily a negative development?
- Should extreme military asymmetry in warfare be condemned?
- Are there ethical differences between remotely piloted and autonomous



Bradley Strawser, ed., *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 296 pages, \$49.95.

34 Bradley Jay Strawser, “Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 4 (2010): 342-68.

35 Strawser, *Killing by Remote Control*, 5.

36 Ibid.

weapons?

In the particularly thought-provoking chapter 6, “Robot Guardians: Teleoperated Combat Vehicles in Humanitarian Military Intervention,” Zack Beauchamp and Julian Savulescu address the claim that armed drones will make war easier and, therefore, more likely—an assertion frequently brought forward by anti-drone activists. The authors argue that “lowering the threshold is not, as commonly assumed, necessarily a bad thing. In at least one case, the bug is in fact a feature: drones have the potential to significantly improve the practice of humanitarian intervention.”³⁷ In their opinion, often, “the wars states do not fight are the ones they most ought to,” namely, interventions to stop human rights abuses and crimes against humanity.³⁸ The reason for the reticence is casualty aversion. If drones make going to war easier as they minimize the risk to the intervening soldiers, this means that intervening for humanitarian reasons would equally be made easier. Furthermore, according to Beauchamp and Savulescu, when states grant significant weight to minimizing their own casualties, “they are more likely to fight in ways that result in significant—and preventable—loss of civilian life.”³⁹ UAVs could, therefore, help to reduce civilian casualties in humanitarian interventions.

Avery Plaw’s chapter “Counting the Dead: The Proportionality of Predation in Pakistan,” should become compulsory reading for anyone interested in the discussion of the effectiveness of targeted killing via drones. Plaw, a colleague of Brian Glyn Williams at UMass Drone, analyzes the numbers on civilian casualties in Pakistan gathered by the four “most rigorous and transparent databases” that track the impact of drone strikes, namely *The New America Foundation*, *The Long War Journal*, *UMass Drone*, and the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*.⁴⁰ By meticulously studying their numbers, Plaw concludes the missile attacks have been “highly effective in eliminating enemy operatives, including key leaders, particularly when these HVTs [high-value targets] are hidden in inaccessible and politically problematic locations like the FATA.”⁴¹ Furthermore, Plaw shows that US nondrone operations in the FATA, such as precision artillery strikes or commando raids, have caused much higher civilian casualties than attacks via drones. Therefore, he argues that the issue of proportionality does not provide a basis “for claiming that US drone strikes in general are either unethical or illegal (although this does not preclude such claims on other grounds).”⁴²

Not all of the authors see the development towards an increased use of UAVs positively though. David Whetham (chapter 4 “Drones and targeted killing: Angels or Assassins?”) warns the US strikes in remote areas of Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia are establishing a norm which “doesn’t get used just by ‘nice people.’”⁴³ He criticizes the United States for not being more transparent with regard to its actions.

37 Ibid., 106.

38 Ibid., 114.

39 Ibid., 112.

40 Ibid., 126.

41 Ibid., 145.

42 Ibid., 127.

43 Ibid., 78.

Without transparency as to why an individual has been killed, a targeted killing carried out anywhere for the best of reasons and in the most careful, conscientious, and professional way might as well be considered an assassination or just plain murder. If a state is not prepared to provide any of that information at all or any reason or justification for a killing, then we should refrain from calling such an action targeted killing and instead call it what it effectively becomes—an execution.⁴⁴

In “War without Virtue?” (chapter 5), Australian philosopher Robert Sparrow expresses concerns that the use of UAVs for military purposes poses a significant threat to martial virtues such as physical and moral courage, loyalty, honor, and mercy. In his view, the introduction of UAVs marks “a significant quantitative—and perhaps even qualitative—change in the nature of military combat.”⁴⁵ Because of the absence of risk to life and limb, and the fighting in complete safety, martial virtues are no longer required. For Sparrow, this is a “disturbing prospect.”⁴⁶

It is impossible to do each paper of an edited volume justice in a short review. Each of the eleven chapters in *Killing by Remote Control* deserves more attention. The collection’s main contribution, however, does not lie solely in the quality of its chapters and well-made arguments. Rather, the volume in its entirety demonstrates the valuable contribution scholarly writing can make to the current drone debate.

As editor Bradley Strawser emphasizes, it is crucial to question one’s beliefs and intuitions. At first sight, there appears to be “something profoundly disturbing about the idea of a war conducted by computer console operators, who are watching over and killing people thousands of kilometers away.”⁴⁷ On closer examination, though, the views “that something is intrinsically wrong with this form of killing over other forms of killing, simply in virtue of being remotely controlled, across all possible circumstances . . . are surprisingly hard to articulate consistently and clearly.”⁴⁸ Strawser’s call to look closer and be more rigorous is particularly convincing since he admits “in following the arguments where they led, I ultimately arrived at several conclusions rather far afield from my initial ‘gut instincts’ that first got me interested in the topic.”⁴⁹ “Gut instincts” can and should not lead an academic debate. Rather, “such sentiments must be unpacked . . . ; an argument is needed, not mere assertion. At this point in the debate, we still await such an argument.”⁵⁰ *Killing by Remote Control* is an important step in this direction.

Conclusion

Each of the four books discussed in this review has specific merits—*Predator* gives a fascinating account of the Pakistani perspective; *The Way of the Knife* allows an insight into the black box of US state agencies in their global fight against terrorism; *Drone Warfare* is an appealing example of activism literature; and *Killing by Remote Control* is a useful scholarly work

44 Ibid., 82, 83.

45 Ibid., 86.

46 Ibid., 104.

47 Ibid., 88.

48 Ibid., 10.

49 Ibid., xvii.

50 Ibid., 12.

on the ethics of drone use. While these books naturally have flaws, as a whole they form a comprehensive overview of the current drone debate.

The drone literature still suffers from shortcomings. As the four books show, the debate revolves almost exclusively around the use of armed UAVs for lethal operations. Unarmed UAVs, which have proliferated extensively over the last few years, are rarely, if ever, discussed. While “killer robots” may be more attention-grabbing than surveillance UAVs, the almost complete disregard of other UAV types is deplorable. The focus also predominantly lies on the US use of drones even though more and more countries procure and use UAVs. More research is needed with regard to these developments. In general, more data, official data in particular, is needed, such as the numbers of civilian deaths caused by missiles fired from UAVs.

One interesting fact that deserves more attention is touched on by several of the authors but not discussed in detail. It appears that operations—even lethal ones—carried out by UAVs are perceived as being less intrusive, less of an infraction of a state’s sovereignty. Brian Williams shows how the Pakistani public appears to accept UAVs more than boots on the ground: “The Pakistanis were willing to countenance the occasional civilian death or attacks on militants if they were administered by unmanned drones, US troops landing on Pakistani territory was essentially construed as an act of war.”⁵¹ Mark Mazzetti makes a similar point. While most international lawyers would not support such a view, President Obama recently voiced the same idea when he discussed the drone program in May 2013. He warned about the risk that manned operations would “lead [the US] to be viewed as occupying armies, unleash a torrent of unintended consequences,” and “may trigger a major international crisis.”⁵² Sending drones, the message was, is much less controversial.

It is clear that much research remains to be done with regard to the study of UAV use for military purposes. The works reviewed here provide a useful basis for further research and are a good step in this direction.

51 Williams, *Predators*, 74.

52 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by the President at the National Defense University*, May 23, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.