TOM ENGELHARDT

DRONING ON

WHY MILITARY DREAMS FAIL – AND WHY IT DOESN'T MATTER
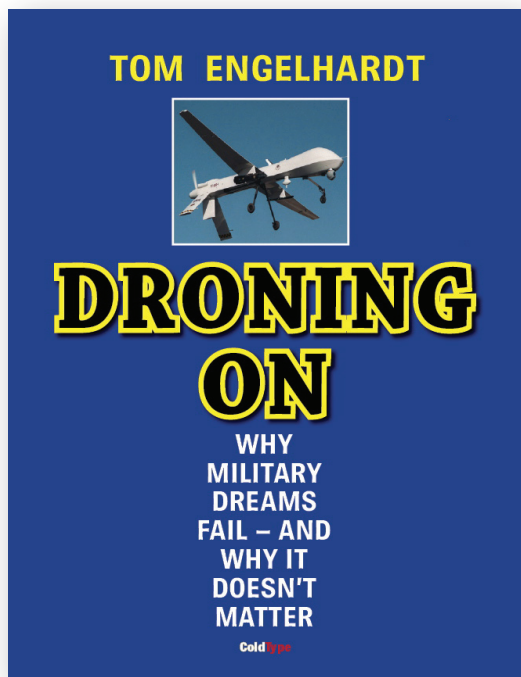
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THE AUTHOR

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WHY MILITARY DREAMS FAIL
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For drone freaks (and these days Washington seems full of them), here's the good news: Drones are hot! Not long ago – 2006 to be exact – the Air Force could barely get a few armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the air at once; now, the number is 38; by 2011, it will reputedly be 50, and beyond that, in every sense, the sky's the limit.

Better yet, for the latest generation of armed surveillance drones – the ones with the chill-you-to-your-bones sci-fi names of Predators and Reapers (as in Grim) – whole new surveillance capabilities will soon be available. Their newest video system, due to be deployed next year, has been dubbed Gorgon Stare after the creature in Greek mythology whose gaze turned its victims to stone. According to Julian Barnes of the *Los Angeles Times*, Gorgon Stare will offer a "pilot" back in good ol' Langley, VA, headquarters of the CIA, the ability to "stare" via 12 video feeds (where only one now exists) at a 1.5 mile square area, and then, with Hellfire missiles and bombs, assumedly

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turn any part of it into rubble. Within the year, that viewing capacity is expected to double to three square miles.

What we're talking about here is the gaze of the gods, updated in corporate labs for the modern American war-fighter – a gaze that can be focused on whatever runs, walks, crawls, or creeps just about anywhere on the planet 24/7, with an instant ability to blow it away. And what's true of video capacity will be no less true of the next generation of drone sensors – and, of course, of drone weaponry like that "5-pound missile the size of a loaf of French bread" meant in some near-robotic future to replace the present 100-pound Hellfire missile, possibly on the Avenger or Predator C, the next generation drone under development at General Atomics Aeronautical Systems. Everything, in fact, will be almost infinitely upgradeable, since we're still in the robotics equivalent of the age of the "horseless carriage," as Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution assures us. (Just hold your hats, for instance, when the first nano-drones make it onto the scene! They will, according to Jane Mayer

of the *New Yorker,* be able to "fly after their prey like a killer bee through an open window.")

And here's another flash from the drone development front: the Navy wants in. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead, reports Jason Paur of *Wired*'s Danger Room blog, is looking for "a robotic attack aircraft that can land and take off from a carrier." Fortunately, according to Paur, the X-47B, which theoretically should be able to do just that, is to make its first test flight before year's end. It could be checking out those carrier decks by 2011, and fully operational by 2025.

Not only that, but drones are leaving the air for the high seas where they are called unmanned surface vehicles (USVs). In fact, Israel – along with the U.S. leading the way on drones – will reportedly soon launch the first of its USVs off the coast of Hamas-controlled Gaza. The U.S. can't be far behind and it seems that, like their airborne cousins, these ships, too, will be weaponized.

Taking the Measure of a Slam-Dunk Weapons System
Robot war. It just couldn't be cooler, could it? Especially if the only blood you spill is the other guy's, since our "pilots" are flying those planes from thousands of miles away. Soon, it seems, the world will be a drone fest. In his first nine months, President Obama has authorized more drone attacks in the Pakistani tribal borderlands than the Bush administration did in its last three years in office and is now considering upping their use in areas of rural Afghanistan where U.S. troops will be scarce.

In Washington, drones are even considered the "de-escalatory" option for the Afghan War by some critics, while

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CIA Director Leon Panetta, whose agency runs our drone war in Pakistan, has hailed them as "the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership." Among the few people who don't adore them here are hard-core war-fighters who don't want an armada of robot planes standing in the way of sending in oodles more troops. The vice president, however, is a drone-atic. He loves 'em to death and reportedly wants to up their missions, especially in Pakistan, rather than go the oodles route.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates jumped onto the drone bandwagon early. He has long been pressing the Air Force to invest ever less in expensive manned aircraft – he's called the F-35, still in development, the last manned fighter aircraft – and ever more in the robotic kind. After all, they're so lean, mean, and high-tech sexy – for *Newsweek,* they fall into the category of "weapons porn" – that what's not to like?

Okay, maybe there's the odd scrooge around like Philip Alston, the U.N. special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, who recently complained to the press that the U.S. program might involve war crimes under international law: "We need the United States to be more up front and say, 'OK, we're willing to discuss some aspects of this program,' otherwise you have the really problematic bottom line that the CIA is running a program that is killing significant numbers of people and there is absolutely no accountability in terms of the relevant international laws."

But as Christmas approaches, somebody's always going to say, "Bah, humbug!" And let's face it, just about everyone who matters to the mainstream media swears that the drones are just

so much more "precise" in their "extra-judicial executions" than traditional air methods, which can be so messy. Better yet, when nothing in Afghanistan or Pakistan seems to be working out, the drones are actually doing the job. They're reportedly knocking off the bad guys right and left. At least 13 senior al-Qaeda leaders and one senior Taliban leader (aka "high-value targets") have been killed by the drones, according to the *Long War Journal,* and many more foot soldiers have been taken out as well.

And they're not just the obvious slam-dunk weapons system for our present problems in Afghanistan and Pakistan, they're potentially the royal path to the future when it comes to war-fighting, which is surely something else to be excited about.

**The Wonder Weapons Succeed
– at Home**
So why am I not excited – other than the fact that the drones are also killing civilians in disputed but significant numbers in the Pakistani tribal borderlands, creating enemies and animosity wherever they strike, and turning us into a nation of 24/7 assassins beyond the law or accountability of any sort? Thought of another way, the drones put wings on the original Bush-era Guantanamo principle – that Americans have the inalienable right to act as global judge, jury, and executioner, and in doing so are beyond the reach of any court or law.

And here's another factor that dulls my excitement just a tad – if the history of air warfare has shown one thing, it's this: it never breaks populations. Rather, it only increases their sense of unity, as in London during the Blitz under Winston Churchill, in Germany under Adolf Hitler, Imperial Japan under Emperor Hi-

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rohito, North Korea under Kim Il Sung, North Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, and of course (though we never put ourselves in such company, being the exceptions to all history), the United States after 9/11 under George W. Bush. Why should the peoples of rural Afghanistan and the Pakistani borderlands be any different?

Oh, and there's just one more reason that comes to mind: it so happens that I can see the future when it comes to drones, and it's dismal. I'm no prophet – it's only that I've already lived through so much of that future. In fact, we all have.

Militarily speaking, we might as well be in the film *Groundhog Day* in which Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell are forced to live out the same 24 hours again and again – with all the grimness of that idea and none of the charm of those actors. In my lifetime, I've repeatedly seen advanced weapons systems or mind-boggling technologies of war hailed as near-utopian paths to victory and future peace (just as the atomic bomb was soon after my birth). In the Vietnam War, the glories of "the electronic battlefield" were limned as an antidote to brute and ineffective American air power. That high-tech, advanced battlefield of invisible sensors was to bring an end to the impunity of guerrillas and infiltrating enemy armies. No longer capable of going anywhere undetected, they would have nowhere to hide.

In the 1980s, it was President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, quickly dubbed "Star Wars" by its critics, a label that he accepted with amusement. ("If you will pardon my stealing a film line – the Force is with us," he said in his usual genial way.) His dream, as he told the American people, was to create an "impermeable" anti-missile shield over the United States – "like a roof pro-

tects a family from rain" – that would end the possibility of nuclear attack from the Soviet Union and so create peace in our time (or, if you were of a more cynical turn of mind, the possibility of a freebie nuclear assault on the Soviets).

In the Gulf War, "smart bombs" and smart missiles were praised as the military saviors of the moment. They were to give war the kind of precision that would lower civilian deaths to the vanishing point and, as the neocons of the Bush administration would claim in the next decade, free the U.S. military to "decapitate" any regime we loathed. All this would be possible without so much as touching the civilian population (which would, of course, then welcome us as liberators). And later, there was "netcentric warfare," that Rumsfeldian high-tech favorite. Its promise was that advanced information-sharing technology would turn a Military Lite into an uplinked force so savvy about changing battlefield realities and so crushing that a mere demo or two would cow any "rogue" nation or insurgency into submission.

Of course, you know the results of this sort of magical thinking about wonder weapons (or technologies) and their properties just as well as I do. The atomic bomb ended nothing, but led to an almost half-century-long nuclear superpower standoff/nightmare, to nuclear proliferation, and so to the possibility that, someday, even terrorists might possess such weapons. The electronic battlefield was incapable of staving off defeat in Vietnam. That impermeable anti-missile shield never came even faintly close to making it into our skies. Those "smart bombs" of the Gulf War proved remarkably dumb, while the 50 "decapitation" strikes the Bush administration launched against Saddam Hussein's regime on the

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first day of the 2003 invasion of Iraq took out not a single Iraqi leader, but "dozens" of civilians. And the history of the netcentric military in Iraq is well known. Its "success" sent Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld into retirement and ignominy.

In the same way, robot drones as assassination weapons will prove to be just another weapons system rather than a panacea for American warriors. To date, in fact, there is at least as much evidence in Pakistan and Afghanistan that the drones are helping to spread war as that they are staunching it.

Yet, the above summary is, at best, only half the story. None of these wonder weapons or technologies succeeded in their moment, or as advertised, but that fact stopped none of them from embedding themselves in our American world. From the atomic bomb came a whole nuclear landscape that included the Strategic Air Command, weapons labs, production plants, missile silos, corporate interests, and an enormous world-destroying arsenal (as well as proliferating versions of the same, large and small, across the planet). Nor did the electronic battlefield go away. Quite the opposite – it came home and entered our everyday world in the form of sensors, cameras, surveillance equipment and the like, now implanted from our borders to our cities.

True, Reagan's impermeable shield was the purest of nuclear fantasies, but the "high frontiersmen" gathered and, taking a sizeable bite of the military budget, went on a decades-long binge of way-out research, space warfare plans and commands, and boondoggles of all sorts, including the staggeringly expensive, still not operational anti-missile system that the Bush and now Obama administrations have struggled to emplace somewhere in Europe. Similarly, ever

newer generations of smart bombs and ever brighter missiles have been, and are being, developed ad infinitum.

Rarely do wonder weapons or wonder technologies disappoint enough to disappear. Each of these is, in fact, now surrounded by its own mini-version of the military-industrial complex, with its own set of corporate players, special lobbyists in Washington, specific interests, and congressional boosters. Each has installed a typical revolving door that the relevant Pentagon officials and officers can spin through once their military careers are in order. This is no less true for that wonder weapon of our moment, the robot drone.

In fact, you can already see the military-industrial-drone-robotics complex in formation. Take just one figure, Tony Tether, who for seven years was the head of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which did its share of advanced robotics research. When he left the Pentagon in September, it was, according to Noah Shachtman, who runs *Wired*'s Danger Room blog, to join "an advisory panel of Scientific Systems Company, Inc., which works on robotics projects for the Pentagon. In June, he joined the board of Aurora Flight Sciences, Inc., developers of military unmanned aircraft." He has also become "a part-time technical consultant and 'strategic advisor' for the influencers at The Livingston Group" which represents some large defense contractors like Northrup Grumman and Raytheon.

The drone industry, too, already has its own congressional representatives. Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter, for instance, is a major drone booster. In April 2009, he insisted that "we must also press forward with the development of the next generation of UAVs, including

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the Predator C. During my service in the Marine Corps, I engaged targets with the Predator A and B Series, and I recognize the advantages offered by Predator C." In 2008, General Atomics, whose "affiliate" makes the Predator drone, gave $6,000 to Hunter's election campaign committee, making it his 13th largest contributor. That company was also the number two contributor to his Peace Through Strength political action committee.

In the American Grain
This, then, is the future that you can see just as well as I can. When the Obama administration decides to up the ante on drone use in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as it's soon likely to do, it will be ensuring not the end of al-Qaeda or the Taliban, but the long life of robot war within our ever more militarized society. And by the time this set of robotic dreams fails to pan out, it won't matter. Yet another mini-sector of the military-industrial complex will be etched into the American grain.

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Haven't any of these folks ever seen a sci-fi film? Are none of them Terminator fans? Are they sure they want to open the way to unlimited robot war, keeping in mind that, if this is the latest game in town, it won't remain mainly an American one for long. And just wait until the first Iranian drone takes out the first Baluchi guerrilla supported by American funds somewhere in Pakistan. Then let's see just what we think about the right of

any nation to summarily execute its enemies – and anyone else in the vicinity – by drone.

Is this actually what we Americans want to be known for? And if we let this happen, and General Atomics is working double or triple shifts to turn out ever more, ever newer generations of robot warriors, while the nation suffers 10.2% unemployment, who exactly will think about shutting them down?

[Note on Further Reading: For a fascinating, if underappreciated history of American dreams about ultimate weapons leading to world peace, don't miss Bruce Franklin's remarkable little book (reissued in 2008 in an updated edition), War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination. *On drones, the piece to read is Jane Mayer's recent essay,* The Predator War, *in the* New Yorker. *Katherine Tiedemann and Peter Bergen's*

> **Sometimes it takes 66 pages to report on a war. Sometimes a century old novel can do the trick**

Revenge of the Drones, *a report from the New America Foundation, has a particularly sensible discussion of a question that is, at present, impossible to answer (because no reporters are around): How many civilians have died in drone attacks in the Pakistani borderlands? Priya Satia's* Nation *magazine report,* Attack of the Drones, *is well worth checking out, too. ("Lord Bingham, a retired senior British judge, compares hunter-killer drones to cluster bombs and land mines, weapons that have been deemed too cruel for use... Airstrikes, manned or unmanned, regulated or not, cannot build a better Afghan future.") And my earlier drone piece,* Terminator Planet, *at tomdispatch.com, might be worth a glance. The website to keep your eye on for the latest news on drones and other advanced military technology is Noah Shachtman's* Danger Room, *much cited in this essay.]*

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