

Book Review

Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins¹

Reviewed by Major James K. Wolkenberg*

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*²

I. Introduction

Andrew Cockburn, celebrated author of *Rumsfeld*³ and the Washington editor of *Harper's*, examines the provocative topic of drones in his latest book, *Kill Chain*. Cockburn provides a convincing critical examination of the history of remote sensors and weapon systems which also scrutinizes the overarching strategy of targeted killings. His collection of compelling episodes and recurring real-life characters keeps a reader turning the pages. More importantly, he provides a well-timed looking glass through which the realities and perceptions of drone warfare and our national counterterrorism strategy can be examined.

A must-read for military, intelligence, and political audiences involved in making tough decisions about cutting-edge questions at every level, *Kill Chain* provides important perspectives and further invigorates a topic that rightly inspires heated debates. For audiences exploring these questions thoroughly for the first time, *Kill Chain* may fuel fears, but it should ultimately fuel interest and research into these complex and novel issues.

II. History in the Form of Stories

Kill Chain's chapters weave their way through an impressive collection of stories that recount the history and development of drones and the strategy behind their use. The narrative is not at all chronological, but Cockburn successfully uses themes and focal points throughout the book to keep the reader thoroughly engaged. For example, the first chapter draws the reader in by presenting the findings of a military investigation in compelling prose, using quotations from a radio transcript interspersed with background and commentary to tell the story of a drone strike gone bad.⁴ Although the resulting deaths of dozens of civilians, including women and children, could paint a picture of a simple mistake, a rogue pilot, or a thoroughly corrupt system, Cockburn successfully presents a portrait of numerous personnel scattered across the globe, from Afghanistan to Nevada, armed with complex machines and genuinely trying

to do what they believe to be the right thing with limited information and tools.⁵

Cockburn's chosen style presents stories rather than arguments, although his journalistic personality and personal conclusions characteristically shine through the results of his penetrating research. The earliest history he includes comes from World War II and tells the story of the Allies' consideration of the pros and cons of assassinating Hitler.⁶ This story effectively sets the stage for further consideration of the global strategy against terrorists that has become known euphemistically as "targeted killing."⁷ Churchill supported the idea of assassinating Hitler, but the Allied experts on Germany generally disagreed. One British expert on Germany in particular explained that killing Hitler,

[W]ould almost certainly canonize him and give birth to the myth that Germany would have been saved if he had lived. . . . As a strategist, Hitler has been of the greatest possible assistance to the British war effort. . . . He is still in a position to override completely the soundest of military appreciation and thereby help the Allied Cause enormously.⁸

The Allies never successfully assassinated Hitler and Cockburn sees that as a potentially good thing. The Allied operation that killed Schutzstaffel (SS) General Reinhard Heydrich resulted in the Germans immediately slaughtering "[t]housands of Czechs, including the entire male population of the village of Lidice, as well as the last surviving Jews of Berlin."⁹ Cockburn later assesses the strategy and results of high value targeting in later conflicts.

III. Memorable Protagonists

Cockburn successfully ties a wide variety of stories together not only by returning to his main themes, but also through his captivating cast of recurring real-life characters. He translates his interviews and research of these servicemembers, bureaucrats, and agency officials into

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¹ ANDREW COCKBURN, *KILL CHAIN: THE RISE OF THE HIGH-TECH ASSASSINS* (2015).

² SUN TZU, *THE ART OF WAR* loc. 77 (Lionel Giles trans., 1994) (1910).

³ ANDREW COCKBURN, *RUMSFELD: HIS RISE, FALL, AND CATASTROPHIC LEGACY* (2007);

⁴ COCKBURN, *supra* note 1, at 1–16.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 74–76.

⁷ *Id.* at 116.

⁸ *Id.* at 75.

⁹ *Id.* at 76.

convincing portraits of real people involved in complex decisions, helping the lessons they learn (or fail to learn) sink in even more effectively for the reader.

Rex Rivolo, for instance, is introduced to readers as a young, Bronx-born fighter pilot in Vietnam¹⁰ who flew 531 combat missions.¹¹ After the war, Rivolo earned a doctorate in physics, taught astrophysics at the University of Pennsylvania, and worked on the Hubble space telescope program for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.¹² Cockburn includes such details about Rivolo's background to illustrate Rivolo's personality and genius, assets Rivolo later applies to drones and targeting strategies.¹³

In the 1990s, Rivolo applied his skills to an analysis of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operations in South America, discovering first that the DEA's strategy of targeting and eliminating drug lords actually increased drug supplies in the United States.¹⁴ In 1995, Rivolo came up with a plan that successfully doubled the price of cocaine in New York and Los Angeles, making it less accessible for Americans.¹⁵ Rivolo reappears throughout the book, perhaps most notably as part of General Raymond Odierno's special team evaluating the high-value targeting operations strategies in Iraq.¹⁶

Another of the many intriguing personalities Cockburn includes in *Kill Chain* is retired Marine Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper.¹⁷ Van Riper participated in Millennium Challenge 2002, the largest and most elaborate war game ever held,¹⁸ as the commander of the enemy red team fighting the blue United States forces.¹⁹ The blue team's assets included a larger force of men and machines, including more advanced technology, but Van Riper applied unpredictable tactics and "[o]nly a few days in, the war was over, and the twenty-first century U.S. military had been beaten hands down."²⁰ *Kill Chain* provides numerous examples of enemy (or nominally friendly) leaders easily outsmarting U.S. methods reliant on

machines in Vietnam,²¹ Serbia,²² Iraq,²³ Afghanistan,²⁴ Pakistan,²⁵ and Yemen.²⁶

Van Riper resigned from the war game and submitted a scathing report, which was promptly classified so outsiders could never read it.²⁷ This story, like others included in *Kill Chain*, is reminiscent of a scene from the movie *The Pentagon Wars*,²⁸ which presented a caricature of the bureaucratic morass leading to the creation of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. In one scene, an Army general explains to a congressional committee that during combustibility tests the fuel tanks of the Bradley were filled with water instead of fuel, saying, "If the tanks had been filled with fuel there's a good chance the vehicle would have exploded. . . . If the vehicle had exploded we wouldn't be able to run additional tests!"²⁹

IV. Hubris and Omniscience

Kill Chain documents Van Riper's public critique of the doctrine of "information superiority" . . . which he said consisted of 'sweeping assertions and dogmatic platitudes.'³⁰ Van Riper told Cockburn that he was amazed "that people who were smart could believe this stuff. The hubris was unbelievable."³¹

Cockburn presents significant evidence throughout *Kill Chain* that drone systems and targeting strategies are not nearly as effective as numerous extremely intelligent people claim in apparent good faith. For example, Cockburn quotes General Joseph Votel as saying, in earnest, "We want to be everywhere, know everything, and we want to predict what happens next."³² This impressive claim or aspiration, presented to open the final chapter of *Kill Chain*, paints a stark contrast to the collection of contrary evidence in the rest of the book, successfully illustrating serious limitations in the U.S. intelligence community's reliance on technology.

Rather than referring back to an earlier story, Cockburn illustrates the contrast between General Votel's claims and the ground truth by pointing out that three days after Votel's

¹⁰ *Id.* at 26.

¹¹ *Id.* at 93.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 94.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 101.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 104.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 164–67.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 134.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 133.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 135.

²⁰ *Id.* at 136.

²¹ *See, e.g., id.* at 17–31.

²² *See, e.g., id.* at 62.

²³ *See, e.g., id.* at 153–67.

²⁴ *See, e.g., id.* at 122–23, 189–200.

²⁵ *See, e.g., id.* at 229–30.

²⁶ *See, e.g., id.* at 235–39.

²⁷ *Id.* at 136.

²⁸ THE PENTAGON WARS (Home Box Office, 1998).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ COCKBURN, *supra* note 1, at 48–49.

³¹ *Id.* at 49.

³² *Id.* at 244.

speech, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) “unleashed a hail of drone-launched missiles across southern Yemen, killing some sixty-five people.”³³ Weeks later, government officials could not name a single one of the targets.³⁴ The public outcry led both Votel and the CIA to initiate investigations that concluded mostly militants had been killed, contradicting the testimony of survivors in the detailed investigation conducted by the non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch, which concluded, “[P]robably all and certainly most of the victims were civilians.”³⁵ All three investigations illustrate that the use of drones falls far short of current hopes or claims of omniscience. The conclusions of the official investigations may cause additional concern considering that earlier in *Kill Chain* Cockburn refers to a *New York Times* article citing administration officials explaining that when reviewing a drone strike, “[A]ll military-age males [are] combatants . . . unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent.”³⁶

Cockburn successfully uses this technique to deconstruct lofty claims by senior officials through the evidence of his research presented as an engaging narrative. George W. Bush, as a presidential candidate, laid out his strategy to transform the national defense: “We must be able to strike from across the world with pinpoint accuracy . . . with unmanned systems. . . . Influence is measured in information, safety is gained in stealth, and force is projected on the long arc of precision guided weapons.”³⁷ *Kill Chain* presents case studies that show each of these plans are not as successful as initially hoped or as officials continue to claim, such as President Barack Obama’s 2012 remarks about “very precise precision [sic] strikes.”³⁸

The illusion of omniscience not only affects policy and the accuracy of intelligence, but also the battlefield, especially when the illusion leads commanders at the highest level to believe that they know the reality on the ground, causing confusion and frustration. Cockburn echoes the martial

wisdom of those he interviewed, stating, “It was extremely dangerous for the higher commander to try to get involved in the rapid pace and details of the firefight and thereby lose his focus on and grasp of the overall battle.”³⁹ He shows how this principle plays out in his detailed assessment of the battle of Takur Ghar in Afghanistan,⁴⁰ and in briefer examples, such as when General Wesley Clark orders the destruction of two tanks he sees on video from a drone in Kosovo.⁴¹ General Tommy Franks later followed suit when he ordered the destruction of a Toyota Corolla by drone strike in Afghanistan.⁴² After the Toyota exploded, the two-star general directing all allied air forces in Afghanistan exhibited confusion and frustration by exclaiming, “Who the hell ordered that?”⁴³

V. Conclusion

The captivating stories in *Kill Chain* provide a wealth of opportunities to reassess U.S. military and intelligence policy and strategy. Drones may not be the best tools for every task. President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously said about World War II: “The Jeep, the Dakota, and the Landing Craft were the three tools that won the war.”⁴⁴ His comment illustrates that most problems do not require the most costly and complex tools. In one of the book’s asides, Cockburn describes a government review of U.S. Border Patrol operations using six Reaper drones resulting in the capture of 5,103 undocumented aliens and drug smugglers and compared it to a U.S. Border Patrol operation using a rented Cessna light aircraft equipped with a simple infrared sensor that led to more than 6,500 captures.⁴⁵ The drone operation cost \$7,054 per person captured while the Cessna operation cost only \$230 per person.⁴⁶ Considering the cost comparison of these two operations, Eisenhower’s quote about the utility of the Jeep is less relevant than his warnings about responsibility regarding the military-industrial complex in his farewell address.⁴⁷

³³ *Id.* at 248.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Jo Becker & Scott Shane, *Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will*, N.Y. TIMES (May 29, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>. See also COCKBURN, *supra* note 1, at 217.

³⁷ COCKBURN, *supra* note 1, at 63.

³⁸ *Id.* at 232.

³⁹ *Id.* at 66.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 124–32. The battle involved an overwhelmed sea, air and land (SEAL) team and a rescue force of Army Rangers facing approximately 1,000 insurgents, while their headquarters believed intelligence that reported less than 250 foreign fighters. *Id.* at 128–29. Cockburn quotes the two-star general in command of the operation congratulating his team after bombing a single car that had been the focus of their video feed, saying, “Hell, I’ve been trying to shoot a truck on that damned road for two days!” *Id.* at 129. Additionally, Takur Ghar demonstrated that an outdated A-10

“Warthog” could provide not only more effective close air support than numerous more expensive, modern, and technologically advanced systems, but also achieve a more realistic appraisal of the situation on the ground by observing the battle with the pilot’s naked eye. *Id.* at 129–30.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 65.

⁴² *Id.* at 118–20.

⁴³ *Id.* at 119.

⁴⁴ David Stubblebine, *Jeep*, WORLD WAR II DATABASE, http://ww2db.com/vehicle_spec.php?q=243 (last visited May 11, 2016).

⁴⁵ COCKBURN, *supra* note 1, at 179.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Farewell Address (Jan. 17, 1961), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/dwightdeisenhowerfarewell.htm> 1 (“The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”)

Today's headlines highlight the importance of examining the issues raised in *Kill Chain*. Recently, police handcuffed and detained a fourteen-year-old high school freshman in Irving, Texas, named Ahmed Mohamed who dreams of attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.⁴⁸ Ahmed brought a clock he made at home to school, and his school's administrators believed it looked like a bomb.⁴⁹ Ahmed received a public outpouring of sympathy, including a tweet from President Obama, who invited him to the White House.⁵⁰ The media immediately picked up on the President's invitation⁵¹ and in twenty-four hours the message had been re-tweeted almost half a million times.⁵² The next day, the popular *Gawker* blog posted the headline, *Obama's Drone Program Probably Would Have Killed Ahmed the Clock Kid*.⁵³ The article backs up the claim of the title by explaining how "signature" drone strikes are based on a target's "pattern of life activity" and that the Administration has justified killing American citizens in the past, including a sixteen-year-old American citizen in Yemen.⁵⁴ The author then asks you to imagine Ahmed living in Yemen and seen by a drone pilot in Nevada on a video feed taken from 10,000 feet in the air, watching Ahmed assembling wires and metallic pieces in a case.⁵⁵ The article concludes, "There's every reason to believe he'd have been vaporized, with far less procedure, oversight, and recourse than Ahmed faced in Irving, Texas."⁵⁶

The *Gawker* article referred to many of the sources used by Cockburn, and reading *Kill Chain* will prepare readers to closely analyze stories about drone strikes. But, above all, the lessons from *Kill Chain* will help us all strive to live up to the mandate from President Obama, that "as Americans, we reject the false choice between our security and our ideals."⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Manny Fernandez & Christine Hauser, *Handcuffed for Making Clock, Ahmed Mohamed, 14, Wins Time With Obama*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 17, 2015, at A1.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ President Barack Obama (@POTUS), TWITTER (Sept. 16, 2015, 12:58 PM), <https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/644193755814342656>.

⁵¹ Fernandez & Hauser, *supra* note 48.

⁵² President Obama, *supra* note 49.

⁵³ Sam Biddle, *Obama's Drone Program Probably Would Have Killed Ahmed the Clock Kid*, GAWKER (Sept. 17, 2015),

<http://gawker.com/obamas-drone-program-probably-would-have-killed-ahmed-t-1731145274>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at the U.S. Naval Academy Commencement (May 22, 2009), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-us-naval-academy-commencement>.