Episode 626: The Perverse Consequences of Drones and High Level Targeting

Guest: Andrew Cockburn

WOODS: We've talked about the subject of drones on the program several times. I love your book; I love *Kill Chain*. I was just reading it. I want to start actually at what might be considered an odd entry point, but I want to talk about the legacy of Kosovo, the bombing in Kosovo in 1999, because there the conventional wisdom became — and the conventional wisdom became this way because all the propagandists spread this idea — that the reason that the NATO forces were successful in Kosovo, this was just a tremendous demonstration of our technological prowess and air power, when in fact, the real reason for the Milosevic change of heart was rather more prosaic.

COCKBURN: Well, that's right. I mean, the real reason for the end of the war in Kosovo was that he lost the support of the Russians. It was actually a diplomatic victory for the U.S., who, by whatever means, they persuaded the Russians to pull their support for Milosevic. So he packed it in. By the way, on terms they were slightly more advantageous to him than what he'd agreed to at the conference in France before the war, so that's worth bearing in mind too.

WOODS: This sort of thing seems to happen quite a bit, or a war winds up happening, and they wind up agreeing to what they could have had even without the fighting. All right, so how is that episode related to the story that you're telling in your book?

COCKBURN: Well, partly for reasons that you just mentioned, which was it was considered a great triumph of precision air power, that we bombed precisely for 78 days, although we originally said we'd be victorious after three days, and although we killed quite a few civilians — I think roughly a thousand people. You know, we didn't lay waste whole cities. And you know, it had the effect of causing — allegedly, though this is not true — of allegedly bringing about the enemy surrender. And along with that, actually it was the first significant use of drones in a war, by us in a war, because they weren't armed at that time, but it was the Predator drone at its — well, it wasn't quite at its baptism, baptism of fire; we'd used it earlier before in the Balkans, but it was certainly extensively used.

And many of the problems that have since surfaced certainly were evident then, which was basically giving the commanding generals a completely false idea of what was going on, that they thought they were in touch with the battlefield and real conditions, but they weren't. Wesley Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander, would

spend hours at a time gazing at the drone feed on the monitor on his desk, completely entranced, and would call up other senior generals asking why they hadn't taken out a particular tank that he was watching on his screen. And this is a guy meant to be running a whole war. So it really was a very important moment, and as a result of the Kosovo war, that's when there was a big push for drones after that, and that's when the whole drone business really got up and running.

WOODS: I do want to discuss some specifics, but let me run by you probably what are now for you very standard objections, but I feel like for the sake of completeness we've got to mention them. We've got this wily enemy; it's a non-state enemy; it's hard to track down; there's no real way that we can expect a formal surrender. So we're in uncharted territory in some ways, and there really is no way to go after an enemy like this that isn't going to be ugly. So in other words, the objection that you might hear would be what would be your proposed alternative that can't also in its own way turn ugly?

COCKBURN: Well, first of all I have to say that, you know, the preferred alternative would be rather than do this, do nothing, because this approach clearly makes things worse. I mean, it'd take too long to explain; people would have to look at the book to see all the examples I give of this, but very simply, it's been shown again and again and again that if you have a strategy of picking off the high value targets, the people you consider to be key enemy leaders or key enemy personnel on the other side, which has been our strategy essentially for the past 15 years, you invariably end up with someone worse. I mean, the situation gets worse for you, and in fact, in the book I talk about a particular intelligence study, which I'm actually the first person to have surfaced, that was done in Iraq, where they actually looked at cases of this. You know, when they kill someone or remove an enemy leader from the battlefield, what happens then? And they found that in every case, attacks on Americans went up; more Americans died. This applies in other areas too, which I go into in the book, about in the drug war, etc. Pursuing this strategy actually increases the supply of drugs in the United States, which I assume is not the intended effect.

WOODS: Yeah, let me jump in on that if you don't mind, because that surprised me, that there was an attempt to target drug kingpins in the '90s, Latin American, and as you say, the result was the opposite of what you would think. And yet, on some level, it seems like that should have worked. If you believed in the drug war and you thought that was a good idea, on some level you can see the plausibility of it, and yet there's a counterintuitive result.

COCKBURN: Well, it always sort of seems like — this sort of idea always seems plausible, maybe because we're all brought up on Westerns, or used to be anyway. Pick off the head of the enemy gang, and the gang will fall apart. You know, pick off the head of al-Qaeda; al-Qaeda will fall apart. Pick off the head of the Medellín Cartel, and a big victory in the war on drugs. So let's talk about drugs. What happened — this is the DEA in the early '90s, you know, developing bureaucratic ambitions, and they announced that they had a big new strategy, the kingpin strategy, which was very advantageous to them, because it meant they could sort of team up, become better

pals with the NSA and the CIA and get out from under the FBI, which they'd been their sort of senior agency for far too long in their view.

And they said that the kingpin strategy, we're going to get the heads of the big cartels. And they went in for wiretapping on a sort of huge scale, electronic intelligence much more than they'd ever done before. And it worked on one level, very good. The Medellín Cartel, they killed Pablo Escobar, and they captured the leaders of the Cali Cartel, which was the biggest sort of criminal organization in the world at the time. Very satisfactory. Big headlines, very beneficial for the DEA budget.

But what happened then? The supply of drugs, of cocaine and indeed heroin, shot up in this country, which you can measure very precisely. There are published figures on this, on the price, which came down. Drugs are scarce, price goes up; drugs are plentiful, price goes down. So drugs were plentiful. Why was this? Because, it turns out — well, it should have been obvious, that when you — what a cartel does is control supply and the price, and likes to keep the price high. If you dismantle the cartel, so there are many people now competing for the business, which is what happened in the drug business in the '90s and since, they compete on price. They try and under cut their rivals. So more drugs available. And by the way, we've seen this more recently with the recapture of the infamous Mr. Guzman, El Chapo in Mexico. The heroin supplies are ticking up in this country, which has already become an epidemic, really thanks in part to the kingpin strategy.

WOODS: All right, let's go back now to the drone issue. And of course we associate drones with the War on Terror more than anything else, so what would be, if you had to tell a *Reader's Digest* story of the history of drones as part of the terror war, what are some of the signposts? What are the landmark events that we would want to be aware of? Perhaps the very first use of a drone might be one, but are there — in other words, can they say they've had a lot of successes here?

COCKBURN: Oh, they can and do say they've had a lot of successes. You know, tick off the number of enemy leaders who've been killed in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, in Yemen, in Syria, and Iraq. But if you're asking me what are the big landmarks I'd point to, I'd start with really an event in late 2000 when, I think it was October or November 2000, late fall of 2000, when the CIA flew a Predator drone over southern Afghanistan — or actually Afghanistan, not quite so much in the south. And they were looking, and one of the place they — it wasn't armed at that time; it was just sort of taking pictures. And they flew it over an area, a place called Tarnak Farms, which was where Osama bin Laden liked to hang out or was thought to like to hang out. And hey, presto, it came back or it took a picture, or it was video, of what on the screen it seems to be a white dot, bunch of buildings and a street, and down the street is moving a white dot surrounded by a lot of little black dots. And this was inferred to be Osama bin Laden himself surrounded by his bodyguards, you know, going out to lunch or going to the mosque or something.

WOODS: Was this inferred entirely from the visual evidence that the drone was supplying?

COCKBURN: Right.

WOODS: So there's no supplementary intelligence?

COCKBURN: Nope. Nope, nope, nope. And they said it looked like it would be him, because the black dots seemed to be behaving in a sort of deferential manner.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, black dots have a very deferential way to them. Oh my, all right.

COCKBURN: See, you know, you might say if you blow up the picture, do you get a better image? No, you don't. I've looked at blown up versions of that, and it just becomes blurry. You can't see anything at all.

WOODS: Oh my.

COCKBURN: So on this news, this video ricocheted around Washington. Everyone got incredibly excited and thought, if we'd only had a missile on that drone, we could have taken out Osama bin Laden himself. And this is before 9/11, but he was already a target. So they had a crash program to be able to put a Hellfire missile on a Predator drone, which they did a good job, and it worked. So I would regard that as the seminal moment in the use of drones as an assassination weapon.

And then the next moment would come on the first night of the war in Afghanistan, October 2001, when they thought they saw a car, which they thought might contain Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. In fact, they were right; it did, as a matter of fact, as we subsequently found out. And they followed it, and the whole of the U.S. high command was watching this picture. They just started an entire war, bombing a whole country and everything, but they're all fixated by this video picture, which is one of the effects that drones have. And they couldn't decide — it seemed to be stopped outside what they thought was a mosque, and people went inside, and they were trying to decide whether they could hit the mosque, and eventually the question god up to Bush, President Bush. Can we fire a missile from this one machine at this building and maybe kill the enemy leader? It was a stupid attitude. Then actually the commander of CENTCOM, Tommy Franks, got fed up and ordered the drone to fire a missile at the car, which was sort of parked, and it hit the car, blew up the car, in which Mullah Omar was actually not sitting. There was no one in the car. He ran out of the mosque, got on a motorbike, and was never seen again until we heard he died in a Pakistani hospital. So that was another big moment.

And then — oh, what other ones can we point to? Well, the first killing in 2002 when they killed the Yemeni, an al-Qaeda person in Yemen, who happened to be with an American citizen. So that was the first time they killed an American citizen. I mean, they didn't mean to kill an American citizen.

Then later on, I'd say, jumping forward without taking too much of your time, 2008, when the CIA went to the White House, and they said, well, up till now we've only

been able to hit people who we can positively identify. You know, we have to know who we're shooting at. But quite often there's a chap who looks like a terrorist, walks like a terrorist, quacks like a terrorist, so we assume he's a terrorist, but we don't actually know who it is. Can we hit them? And Bush said, sure. So that was the birth of the signature strike, which has been the preponderance of CIA strikes since, because they — well, strikes by the military, too — because they don't actually know who they're shooting at, but they have a good feeling that they're bad people and therefore feel confident in killing them.

I would say January 20th, 2009 was another big moment in drone war, when President Obama took office, because he was the man that met his weapon or the weapon that met its man. And he loved them — they really seemed to appeal to him, because they're sort of impersonal; they're supposed to be very precise. They're less precise I think than he believes, than he thinks. And you know, it's become the signature — you know, become part of his legacy, so that was another big one.

WOODS: I want to get back to that in a minute, because you're right. I mean, the drone policy has become part of the general bipartisan foreign policy approach. Almost nobody objects to it. To my knowledge even Bernie Sanders doesn't really object to it in principle.

COCKBURN: No.

WOODS: So what I want to know is is the issue that you see as fundamental here, is it drones themselves, or is it the high value target strategy, whether it's delivered by drone or delivered by sniper?

COCKBURN: Well, it's both. For the high value target strategy, the drone seems to be the ideal weapon. I mean, you also have what have been called — not by me — you know, human drones, these highly trained special forces squads, Delta Force and the Seals, DEVGRU, as they're now called, Seal Team 6, who go out and are trained to go and assassinate people. And that's been part of the high value target strategy too. I would say drones are the ultimate expression of this, because it's so much technology, which there's been other very vital technological aids that I talk about in the book, which were secret for a long time. Like there's a thing that goes by a variety of names, but we can call it Stingray, which is a way really of locating a particular cellphone, and indeed of identifying — of following it and indeed picking up its calls, which has now become rather favored by law enforcement in this country.

But as again, I tell a story in the book of a time when they, because of this technology, they were using this technology, they were following what they deemed to be a senior Taliban leader, and they were completely confident they had the right guy, and he was moving around in northern Afghanistan. And eventually they found a suitable spot to kill him, which they did actually ultimately with a shot from a helicopter, but it was drones sort of overseeing the whole thing and really clearly directing — I mean, being used to direct the operation. And then it turned out that actually they killed completely the wrong fellow. He was a perfectly innocent guy who was actually busily

campaigning for his nephew in a parliamentary election and had been in all the papers and everyone knew him. And when people said, my God, you killed the wrong guy, a perfectly innocent person, the military absolutely refused to accept this. They said, no, he was the right person, we have complete faith in our technology and our intelligence, and maybe it was the bad guy traveling under a false name, which is absurd. So it's this fixation, this faith in the technology that really blinds people to reality.

WOODS: All right, I want to ask you about the whole high value target strategy and what you would recommend in its place. If that doesn't work, then what would work? Before we do that, let's pause to thank our sponsor.

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Now, suppose — maybe you have a different view from — I mean, a lot of people, especially when you're listening to U.S. presidential debates, you get a lot of talk about we've got to wipe out this group and annihilate that one and so on and on. And part of the strategy seems to be this high value target strategy: we knock out these kingpins and then the whole thing will collapse. That doesn't seem to work, but then what approach — suppose you were Ted Cruz. Now, he's talking about ISIS, but suppose you wanted to get rid of al-Qaeda, let's say. Would you just say that the whole thing's a fool's errand to begin with, or would you recommend a different type of strategy than the one they're using now?

COCKBURN: Well, let's take ISIS, for example. Our policy towards ISIS has been pretty odd. On the one hand, of course we've had a drone campaign or an assassination campaign, and every so often we announce that we've got some key ISIS leader, you know, their minister of finance or the director of military operations or whatever, which doesn't seem to make much difference.

On the other hand, for a long time we enabled — because we, for whatever reason, seem to hate Mr. Assad so much, we didn't confront ISIS when it was attacking the Syrian government. If you remember last year, ISIS took Palmyra, this extraordinary historic city in Syria, and everyone lamented the fact that they were now destroying all the antiquity, but we'd done nothing to stop them. We did no bombing; we certainly, of course — perish the thought — didn't give any help to the Syrian army in defending Palmyra. You know, for ages we sort of protested when the — this isn't quite ISIS — when the Russians started bombing al-Qaeda groups in Syria, including groups that we had armed and supplied and paid for. And we protested loudly. So it's almost like the high value targeting is kind of a vent. It makes us feel good but doesn't really deal with the real problem.

And of course, going back to the root cause, which we can't do much about nowadays, unfortunately, it's probably a mistake to meddle in the affairs of these countries in the first place. Saddam Hussein was a terrible person, absolutely no doubt about that, a terrible, cruel dictator. But obviously deciding to get rid of him and invading Iraq was an equally terrible idea, which just led to all the subsequent disasters. Meddling and

stoking and fermenting, helping to sort of keep the Syrian civil war going was also a terrible idea, which is what we did, because it really enabled the growth of ISIS and the disaster for Syria and Iraq. So I would say leave other places alone is a good place to start.

WOODS: That would be a good place to start. If only somebody who's running for president now really, really believed that to the point that they would talk about it or be consistent about it. It's very frustrating, and what's also frustrating is that the public just does not care about the drone issue at all. I mean, when we think about Vietnam, they cared then because they saw so many Americans dying.

COCKBURN: Yeah.

WOODS: And then they cared a little bit when they saw Americans dying in Iraq, but it really wasn't that many. But when it's unmanned drones killing people, even if they're innocent, the view of a lot of Americans is, well, they may be innocent, but they're basically guilty. That is a recipe for institutional inertia on the subject of drones. There's no incentive for them ever to change the policy.

COCKBURN: Well, that's right, and that's part of the great appeal, just like the volunteer army was a reaction to what you said about Vietnam, to sort of take war away from the people, so people aren't as directly engaged. And now they've taken the people, at least with drones, completely out of war, because you know, you use what seem to be robots, although they're not really. I mean, they're controlled by people sitting in Nevada or whatever. But it's very helpful to anyone who thinks waging war overseas is a good idea.

WOODS: Before I let you go, anytime someone rights a book it's very rare that you know absolutely everything and you sit down and start writing. You do learn as you're going. Was there anything that surprised you? Is the situation maybe worse than you imagined, or was it about what you expected?

COCKBURN: I mean, the more I learned about it the worse it seemed. It surprised me just how sort of wonky — I'm using that in the English sense — how the technology — the faults and the failures of the technology kind of surprised me. My favorite, most amazing discovery was that — until recently, at least, and it hasn't gotten that much better — the night vision of a drone, which is half the time they're being used, was 20/200, which, by the way, is the legal definition of blindness adopted by most DMVs in this country. So we're going around sort of spotting people, deciding who to kill, using something that is legally blind. And there are many other examples like that, like a $200 million drone we have, Global Hawk, spends half of its time on the ground, because it can't fly when the weather's bad, and stuff like that. It's really struck me what a racket the whole thing is, that we're being sold this bill of goods, this marvelous technology which gives us absolute precision, and you know — the Global Hawk, this $200 million monster, bits fall off, because the glue doesn't work so good.

WOODS: I remember being a college kid when the first of the — the Persian Gulf War took place, and we heard all about the precision of the Patriot missile. And only later did we hear that this was exaggerated, let's say.

COCKBURN: (laughing) No mistake. I'd say "exaggerated" is putting it mildly.

WOODS: Yeah.

COCKBURN: But actually I quote in the book a study that was done, which almost no one saw, about how well the precision weapons had actually worked in the first Gulf War, you know, that produced those TV pictures that got us so excited, and it turned out, when they said it had taken just one shot, one kill to knock out some target, it had actually been more like six or seven or eight. You know, that basically all the claims they'd made for the performance were completely inflated. And nothing much has changed since.

WOODS: Well, I want to urge people to check out *Kill Chain: The Rise of the High-Tech Assassins*. I'm going to link to it at TomWoods.com/626, this being Episode 626. We'll link also to your Twitter account, get you some more followers. And let me ask, if there's a website you'd like me to link to, I'd be glad to do that as well.

COCKBURN: You can find most of my recent articles on Harpers.org. You just type in my name in the search box, you'll get pretty much everything I've written in the last two or three years, apart from this book.

WOODS: Excellent, okay; we'll make sure and do that. Thanks so much for your time, Andrew Cockburn. It's been a pleasure.

COCKBURN: Hey, Tom, it's been fun.