

Sting of the Drone: Richard A. Clarke's reservations about American war crimes

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Richard A. Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2014, 294 pp.

Richard A. Clarke is the former counterterrorism “czar” under presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. His career as a high-level US government official began under Ronald Reagan in 1985 and continued under successive administrations. He served on the National Security Council from 1992 to 2003, as National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism from 1998 to 2001 and as Special Advisor to the President on cybersecurity from 2001 to 2003.

In other words, Clarke is one of the most thoroughly and highly connected figures in the American military-intelligence apparatus, with great quantities of blood on his hands. He came most prominently into the public eye, however, after he left government in 2003.

In 2001 Clarke had authored several memos to Condoleezza Rice, then head of the National Security Council, warning of an imminent attack by Al Qaeda. As is well known, his warnings were ignored, presumably deliberately.

Clarke resigned from the Bush administration and achieved some notoriety for his criticisms of its preparedness for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and for his criticism of the Iraq War as a viable strategy for American imperialism. Various Bush officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, then attempted to discredit him. Clarke recounts much of this in his memoir, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror—What Really Happened* (2004).

Clarke has written a number of other nonfiction books, including most recently, *How China Steals Our Secrets* (2012).

He also writes novels, including *The Scorpion's Gate* (2005), about the Saudi monarchy being overthrown in a coup, and *Breakpoint* (2007), in which the US suffers a series of major cyber-attacks.

Clarke has also continued to speak publicly about events that concern the “intelligence community.” After the death

of investigative journalist Michael Hastings in a car crash in 2013, for example, he remarked, “There is reason to believe that intelligence agencies for major powers—including the United States—know how to remotely seize control of a car. So if there were a cyber-attack on the car—and I'm not saying there was—I think whoever did it, would probably get away with it.”

None of this, however, should be considered opposition to the strategic goals of American imperialism. Clarke has sharp, but entirely tactical differences. In his view, the military-intelligence apparatus could work more effectively than it is currently doing at safeguarding the critical interests of the US ruling elite. Clarke currently serves on a special commission to advise the Obama administration about the impact of Edward Snowden's NSA revelations.

Now the former counterterrorism czar has produced another thriller, *Sting of the Drone*, which makes it clear that he has few qualms about maiming and killing defenseless or innocent people—as long as the maiming and killing achieves its purposes.

The novel takes place in the present in various locations around the globe. It follows the actions of a number of players in the drone program, including top government and military officials, CIA operatives and drone pilots stationed in Nevada. On the other side, not surprisingly, it paints a sketchy picture of Al Qaeda, Afghan terrorists and/or drug lords, their patsies and the Ukrainian mafia who owe them favors. The characterization of nearly everyone in the novel is stereotyped. Emotional currents run shallow.

Sting of the Drone is full of killings, kidnappings and shadowy meetings. In between, we read about Air Force officers, CIA operatives and the aides to officials prosecuting the “war on terror” at their more relaxed moments, at dinner or in their swimming pools.

The plot centers on the ability of terrorists to shoot down American drones, and, later, to hijack them and strike back at the US military. Terrorists assassinate CIA operatives and leaders of the drone program. The wife of an Air Force officer is kidnapped.

The terrorists themselves do not appear to adhere to any ideology. They are more or less well-fed Middle Eastern businessmen. They enlist Americanized children of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, who themselves will be eliminated after committing acts of mass murder. The goal of the terrorist chiefs is to foment opposition to drone warfare within the American population in this manner.

The killings carried out by the US side are mostly routine, moral and patriotic. The novel smugly suggests that all the proper channels are being followed and the right decisions being taken when a missile slams into a village in Pakistan. Clarke presents the chilling marking of a person for death (the “kill call” made by the commanders of drone teams to officials who report directly to the president) as a relatively righteous and above-board activity.

The moral cleanliness of state murder smells like it is sprayed from a can. The fictional president in the novel does not participate in the selection of targets, as Barack Obama does on his infamous “Terror Tuesdays,” when “kill lists” are drawn up. At one point during an interrogation, an FBI agent threatens a would-be terrorist with torture by the CIA, knowing, as the author reveals, that the president has now forbade torture. The reader is supposed to be relieved at this, despite the fact that threats of torture are also illegal under US and international law. The National Security Advisor can matter-of-factly tell his new subordinate that he will now also potentially be subject to charges of war crimes.

Little in this book rings psychologically or historically true. That the US is fighting a series of brutal colonial wars around the world, which incur the hatred of millions, is simply passed over, as are the massive civilian casualties that drone strikes cause. In a particularly twisted plot point, children are only killed when they are smuggled into a compound by terrorists who then lure the Americans into a drone strike.

Two things are worth noting in the work because, probably inadvertently, they shed some light on the mental state of the top figures in the military-intelligence behemoth.

In the first place, almost none of these operatives expresses remorse for killing. There are mistakes, to be sure, as when a drone attack—the one in Vienna—kills an innocent medical student.

This incident only becomes bad public relations for the drone program, and provides fodder to a Democratic Party-run investigative committee—another unrealistic touch! On another occasion, a drone pilot tells his superior, “I just don’t know what I am doing here ... Am I like that freak who shot the kids in Connecticut?” But nothing much is made of this. His superior tells him to get drunk and find a prostitute in a casino. A few hours later, the terrorists kill him.

Secondly, the book does betray the real fears of the generals and top politicians who send drones out to kill and maim: some other power, in this case, implausibly, terrorists, may achieve technological parity and American imperialism will no longer have the monopoly on murder from the air.

In so far as Clarke has reservations about the drone killings, which are not that strongly registered in his novel, they relate to the effectiveness of the widespread killing. He told Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* in June that he believed the program had gotten “out of hand” and might be “counterproductive.”

Clarke, who never questioned the legality of the drone strikes in the radio interview, noted that the innocent people killed by such attacks “have brothers and sisters and ... tribal relations. Many of them were not opposed to the United States prior to some one of their friends or relatives being killed. And then, sometimes, they cross over, not only to being opposed to the United States, but by being willing to pick up arms and become a terrorist against the United States. So you may actually be creating terrorists, rather than eliminating them, by using this program in the wrong way.”

Overall, in *Sting of the Drone*, Clarke anesthesiologically describes one of the most anesthetized social layers in the United States, the professional assassins in the military-intelligence apparatus, to which he himself belongs. He barely acknowledges the stress and moral conflict that we know many drone pilots encounter and live with, because, as he presents the matter, they really are not doing anything criminal or even particularly objectionable.

One thing Clarke does communicate well is the isolation of these layers from the rest of the US population. This deep-seated ignorance as to how ordinary Americans, much less the peoples of the region affected by drone warfare as a whole, feel about this illegal state violence is what defines this novel.



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