

Float Like a Plane, Sting Like a Bomb: The Ethics of US Drone Attacks

by Evin Hughes

Ethics for Muhammad Ali was like a third arm, a manifestation donned in a shining scarlet boxing glove that packed a punch hard enough to force his global audience to examine the issues of racism and war. Ali strung up his third glove and danced every time he opined the structural inequalities of racism in America or spoke out about how the recruitment for wars like Vietnam and, most recently, the “war on terror,” was disproportionately towards minorities and the poor. He fought with his ethics-arm in rings shaped like college campus auditoriums and talk-show television sets, one tightly clenched fist striking into existence a paradoxically nonviolent opus. However, Ali’s role as a social, anti-war activist began before he ever stepped inside a boxing ring.

In interviews conducted by Thomas Hauser, who at the time was writing his definitive biography of Ali that was later published in 1991, Muhammad Ali talked about his youth when he still went by his birth name, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. “My mother...[Odessa Clay]...taught us to love people and treat everybody with kindness. She taught us it was wrong to be prejudiced or hate” (Hauser 14). In a similar interview, patriarch Cassius Clay, Sr. said that he taught his son to “always confront the things you fear, try to be the best at whatever you do” (15). When it comes down to it, Ali’s value system was based on the larger proposition that ethics was something that one should hold in high-esteem, that above everything a man’s principles mattered (10). Ali often said that he had been blessed with God-given “special resources” and since then he had a responsibility to use them to do good (18).

Studying this list of Muhammad Ali’s all-inspiring prolific values, I found myself juxtaposing them with that of this country’s leaders. For example, I asked myself: *Should Barack Obama, a man that arguably has “special resources,” not be held to the same standards? Doesn’t our president have the same responsibility to do the right and ethical thing?* Judging by what transpired at the end of his first year as president, if Obama was held to the same principle of doing the right thing as Ali held himself, then you will see that our president’s values didn’t hold up.

On January 19, 2010, Obama and his security officials attended a weekly counterterrorism meeting. When presented with images of fifteen Yemenis suspected of being members of Al-Qaeda, Obama “insisted on approving every new name on an expanding ‘kill list,’ poring over terrorist suspects’ biographies on what one official calls the macabre ‘baseball cards’ of an unconventional war.” In other words, he wanted to be the one that decided who would be targeted and killed by drone attacks, a decision the *New York Times* called the “final moral calculation” (Becker and Shane). Perhaps it is too obvious for me to point out, but the fact that Obama is advocating a list of people to kill makes any claim for morality illusory, if not blatantly contradictory. Instead of unearthing the obvious problems with a policy that gives the power to take away someone’s life to a single individual, republican senator John McCain of Arizona and incumbent attorney general Eric H. Holder, Jr. advocated the prosecution of those that had leaked the existence of the so-called “kill list.” On the other hand, most of the public unrest caused by the controversy of this list is centered on the fact that “the administration can target for death people it decides are terrorists...on secret evidence with no review” (Heuvel).

Though the declassified documents released on June 19, 2012 by the *Central Intelligence Agency* detailing the assassination of former Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden do not show any concrete evidence of those killed in drone strikes during the time,

they do elicit pertinent information from the CIA on the evolution of drones as weapons in the “war on terror.” In late May of 2000, the CIA in compliance with the *National Security Council* and other “supporting agencies” decided to test and operate an unmanned aerial vehicle (or UAV) aptly named the “Predator.” What is left of the original top secret document—now pockmarked with blank white boxes of verifying shapes and sizes, hiding what the CIA still claims as classified information from the public—concludes that the Predator was built as a surveillance drone and its first mission was conducted over Afghanistan on September 7, 2000. According to the document, the Predator “UAV had completed 10 missions with varying degrees of success” (CIA 61).

What began as a drone for monitoring possible threats to the security of our nation soon became a machine of obscene violence. In 2001, unnamed counterterrorism officials decided that there was an opportunity in “capitalizing on an Air Force program,” an opportunity to weaponize the Predator drone, an opportunity that was too good to pass up. It wasn’t long after this decision that the drone was adapted to carry usable Hellfire missiles (CIA 62), a weapon that experts describe as a highly explosive “copper-lined-charge warhead powerful enough to burn through the heaviest tank armor in existence” (Harris). This is what we are striking down suspected individuals with, a weapon designed to pierce the armor of tanks.

Even when equipped with the Hellfire missiles, drones, according to senior editor Gordon Duff at *Veterans Today*, are primitive machines; machines built “to create war, to foster fear and hate where none had existed before, to maintain a continual state of war where no questions are asked, no evidence is gathered, no fingers pointed.” The marine Vietnam veteran, Duff explains that though drones are terribly expensive they are comprised simply of a propeller, a few sensors, and a battery to keep them going (Duff). Many supporters for the war that have hyped about the sophistication of the technology used in these drones ignore the news when the inadequacies of certain UAV’s are questioned. For example, they do not mention in the media—though it was minimally covered—a type of drone known as the Global Hawk was unable to even stay in flight and crashed into a Maryland swamp in June, 2012 (Colgrass).

Because of media sycophants like war activist John Brennan, a White House counterterrorism adviser, many people see the drones as “angels of death”—an angelic technology that metes out justice on the behalf of the United States. Calling drones “angels of death” asserts the notion that targeted killings is an accepted action from a religious standpoint, but this is a laugh in the face of all Abrahamic teachings of the Golden Rule or its international equivalent the Principle of Universality. Many Americans develop a bloated sense of patriotism, a media-fed consciousness that hosts binaries of “us,” the citizens of the United States, and “them,” a category that all peoples of middle-eastern descent gets clumped into. This consciousness nourishes phrases like “there are only enemies, a world of them.” They do not see that women and children in these “enemy” countries are often the ones subjected to the devastation of Hellfire missiles from drone strikes. As long as there are these “angels of death” around, they feel safe in their beds—as long as the newspapers, the TV interviews with counterterrorists, and press releases from the Pentagon, show us that more Al-Qaeda members have died in drone attacks (Duff). To use a reference from popular culture: the “one ring” from the *Lord of the Rings* series is the drone, a simple thing that represents the terror of human will. Consumers of corporate media look at a group of middle-eastern people and

categorize all of them as “terrorists”, just as orcs categorize all Halflings as “Hobbits,” even though there are Baggins, Took, and Brandybucks just as there are Kurds, Ibadis, and Berbers, while the United States—dark lord Sauron—polices middle-east—“middle-earth”—chanting maniacally, “One drone to rule them all, one drone to find them, one drone to bring them all and in the darkness kill them!”

Though the events on September 11, 2001 were acts of terrorism by one specific group of radicalists, the United States set up Special Operations forces in over sixty countries and has unleashed drones in at least five (Heuvel). For some of these countries the United States has been bombing continuously since the start of this retaliation-war of the “war on terror,” including Pakistan. Based on an analysis of US drone attacks in Pakistan, the *New America Foundation* has statistics that go as far back as 2004. This nonprofit organization reports that there have been over three hundred drone strikes in Pakistan in the last eight years and death tolls range from two to three thousand. Hence, the real non-militant fatality rate from 2004 to the present is approximately sixteen percent (New America Foundation).

It is important to note that one of the most detrimental effects of drone attacks, aside from the deaths of civilians, is the extreme long-term anti-American sentiment it creates in the citizens of other countries. Synonymous in meaning with William Blake’s aphorism “Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion,” which suggests that law creates criminals and the need for prisons as religion creates a sexually suppressed society and the need for brothels, drone attacks create terrorists. Because of drone attacks and the devastation they do to cities, Pakistanis are faced with a refugee crisis. Impoverished children are forced to attend the free schools that are conducted with radical idealists, like the schools of the Deobandi tradition of Islam during the soviet-Afghan War, which bred the Afghan Taliban faction and the Sunni extremist militias (Kumar). In an interview with Gordon Duff and the Pakistani politician Imran Khan, Khan stated, “Men who begin with love and hope in their hearts, when the drones come, when they see innocent family members die, from that day forward will be warriors and those who sent the drones [have] turned men into enemies and simple farmers into jihadists” (Duff). John Brennan stated in an interview that targeted killings by drone attacks “reduce the danger to US personnel (Brennan)” but the truth is one dead terrorist spawns many more in his place, putting American soldiers in even greater danger.

The prejudices and hate instilled by drone strikes among Pakistanis and other affected peoples and cultures is in marked contrast to Muhammad Ali’s principles that he learned from his mother. In March 2003, Ali’s wife Lonnie—speaking on her husband’s behalf—expressed concern for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In lieu of the rise of the “war on terror,” Ali was saddened by the violence that was sweeping the globe and was completely opposed to the conflict (Butterworth and Gorsevski 60). This display of Ali continuing to stand up for his nonviolent beliefs, despite his ongoing battle with Parkinson’s syndrome since his 1984 diagnosis, is reminiscent of the courage he had in 1960; after returning from the Olympics as a gold-medalist, Ali was not allowed to step inside a segregated restaurant, so he threw his Olympic medal into a river (59). In an identical demonstration of courage, many war veterans have recently thrown away their war medals from Afghanistan and Iraq to symbolize their discontinued support in the war that causes so much unnecessary suffering (Harcourt).

If an argument could be made for Muhammad Ali actually possessing “special resources” endowed to him by God, they would be his “enduring rhetoric [that] provides a model for analyzing texts and social movements invoking the paradox of the violence in nonviolent civil disobedience” (Butterworth and Gorsevski 50). But what does this mean, violence in nonviolent civil disobedience? Basically, even though Ali was a boxer, a sport and occupation based completely on violence, he worked nonviolently for peace. For example, in April 1967, Ali was drafted to participate in the Vietnam War, a conscription that he denied to comply with. After being taken to the United States Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station in Houston, Ali stood in a straight line with other drafted individuals and his name was called; in a nonviolent resistance, he did not step forward, a felony under the Universal Military Training and Service Act (Hauser 169). Remarking on his summons, Ali stated, “If I thought goin’ to war would bring freedom, justice and equality to twenty-two million Negroes, they wouldn’t have to draft me, I’d join tomorrow” (Hietala 138). This type of behavior, this exhibition of impetuosity and defiance dissolved many political and cultural norms at the time (Butterworth and Gorsevski 54). A recent study of the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War gives evidence to Ali’s claim of the war being disproportionate in its draft towards minorities, showing that double the amount of African Americans were inducted by the draft than whites (Ernest and Baldwin 125).

What Ali was able to do through his nonviolent rhetoric that is still relevant to this day was successfully make millions of people “bear witness” to the violence and irrationality of war. For example, say you are watching the news with a roommate and the news anchor, within her nicely lit and air conditioned studio, talks in a monotone about the deaths of civilians in a Pakistani market by a drone strike, and your roommate immediately changes the channel, not giving the terrible story another thought. Your roommate doesn’t understand the gravity of that devastation any more than the news anchor does; neither understands the significant socio-economical problems that the drone strike has caused in that area. How about the man sitting behind the joystick, the Nintendo-war-controller, pressing the buttons to release the Hellfire missiles like Mario firing at Bowser? Though the drone operator of all people probably knows the extent of the devastation he is causing, he refuses to think about it, he hides the truth from himself. The drone “pilot,” the unenthusiastic anchor, your roommate—they are all complicit. Shoshana Felman, influential in raising issues connected with Holocaust testimony and what is called the “crisis of witnessing,” says that those that *misunderstand* or *hide* what they see are unable to take that information and “translate...[it]...spontaneously and simultaneously into meaning” (Felman 212). Famous psychologists Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan described this as disavowal—a defense mechanism in which a person refuses to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception (Evans 44).

Through speeches recited on college campuses, Ali urged thousands of students to bear witness to the problems of integration and segregation, hate, and the Vietnam War. In one such speech, he links the violence in Vietnam caused by the war to the violence in the states; he stated that he would rather fight what was going on in a legal way. Not by war in a foreign country, but by nonviolent resistance right here in the United States. “Whatever the punishment, whatever the persecution is for standing up for my beliefs, even if it means facing machine-gun fire that day, I’ll face it...” (Hauser 187). Through

this speech, Ali led as example to all those students in the crowd, to all those seeing and not choosing to accept reality, to all those in disavowal.

What Felman proposes is a *community of seeing*: a space into which “we can bring into consciousness what is unconscious in us”—like the college auditoriums and classrooms where Ali conducted his speeches—to analyze and make sense of events as a community (Amy 67). It is the very nature of the violence of the “war on terror” that does not allow a community of seeing. The media-attack on these countries by ingratiating news anchors take the American people and place them onto a platform where they are unable to reach a *community of seeing*, unable to argue the ethics of this war. We are divided, separated from the truth. Democratic representatives John Conyers, Dennis Kucinich and many more, were calling for a truth as a community of officials when they wrote letters to the president demanding for him to publicly release the criteria on which he would elect people to be attacked by drones on his infamous kill list (Heuvel)—there has been no more coverage of the letters in the media. Unless we become conscious as a community of the truth of the violence we are creating, unless we bear witness and develop a *community of seeing*, we are doomed to be “locked into violences we cannot escape” (Amy 69).

Muhammad Ali lives by a principle that was developed by Mahatma Gandhi—arguably the most famous nonviolent resister of all time—a principle called *satyagraha*. Translated to “insistence of truth,” this Gandhian strategy is a philosophy of nonviolent resistance based on the power of telling and knowing the truth (Majmudar 138). Proponents for the legitimacy of the use of drone attacks, the legality of death sentences based on undisclosed information, practice willful divergence from this value. One way in which these proponents have been able to successfully argue the legality of drones is by a technique commonly known as “double-hatting.” Double-hatting is a policy in which “the distinction between military and covert action, and thus the distinct identities of personnel operating under the auspices of the military and the CIA, have been deliberately blurred” (Alston 7-8).

This blurring of distinctions, of definitions, has resulted in making any scrutiny of the unethical acts of targeted killings by drone nearly impossible. After 9/11 there was no reputable congressional consultation on retaliation measures. There was however a premium put on rapid action, which resulted in loosely constrained agency discretion, often at the expense of human rights (25). Without a more exhaustive congressional consultation, international law will continue to be bypassed, warped and curtailed because of an intentional lack of clarity. As with the killing of bin Laden (Axe), there is a complete uncertainty to the legal criteria under which the CIA has conducted drone programs and air strikes. If nothing is changed, the United States’ Department of Defense will continue to escape the legal examination of intelligence committees; the Department of Defense will continue to be granted impunity for the illegal drone attacks they authorize (Alston 53). Another consequence of double-hatting is that it has set a bad example to other nations, a precedent that could be mimicked to justify disobeying international law. Recently, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez announced that the Venezuelan government is now using surveillance drones (Ellsworth). Knowing that many US drones started out as surveillance machines, one could only hope that Venezuela will not begin using drones as weapons as well, ignoring international law by using the same double-hatting technique. This slide-of-hand magic trick, this act played

by a CIA-clown in an American-flag-pantsuit and two matching hats, is performed for the sole purpose of avoiding accountability and responsibility to the harm that is being caused by drones and other forms of targeted killings.

Helping to blur the lines, there is also a lack of agency-wide agreed definitions for terms like “targeted killings” and “civilians.” Most definitions for targeted killings are not complex enough to effectively comply with international law—some define it simply as an act of self-defense (Kasher and Yadlin 56), while others define it as an unavoidable preventive measure (Gross 106). To accurately account for international law, a targeted killing is “the intentional, premeditated and deliberate use of lethal force, by States or their agents acting under color of law, or by an organized armed group in armed conflict, against a specific individual who is not in the physical custody of the perpetrator” (Alston 11). International law, specifically International Humanitarian Law, directly states that redemptive attacks on civilians are not allowed unless they are behaving as a “hostile” (14). Some sources say that the family members, of known Al-Qaeda members, who in no way are affiliated with the group, are not considered civilians. Instead, they fall under the category of “low-level militants” (Rogers 15) or “low-level fighters”.

The consequence of this lack of clear terms has led to unequal numbers in polls of civilian deaths by drone in many countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. In Pakistan alone, less than two percent of actual civilian deaths have been reported since April 2011 when the Head of Pakistan’s intelligence agency and the Chief of Staff of the Pakistani army asked many members of the Special Operations forces from the United States inhabiting the country to leave (Perlez and Khan); it is not clear that the officials actually left Pakistan or that the change in the definition of civilians reduced the number of deaths so that they could stay. Reports by drone strike monitoring groups based in the United States range from only twenty to thirty civilian deaths during the entire “war on terror,” but independent sources like the New American Foundation say that for Pakistan alone out of nearly three thousand deaths totaled since 2004 about five hundred were not classified as direct militants (New America Foundation). The Hellfire Missile that was aimed at Baitullah Mehsud, once a supposed Taliban leader in Pakistan, killed seven of his bodyguards, a lieutenant, his wife, uncle and several of his in-laws (Mayer). I can see a case for the bodyguards and the lieutenant arguing that they were hostiles, but what about Mehsud’s wife and in-laws? Can we so quickly call these people “low-level militants?” Does that label make it any less inhumane and ungodly to kill them? Imagine inverting this on our security forces. Would it be acceptable if the family members of our troops were targeted as “low-level militants” by the groups we are warring with?

Despite the clear lack of humanity in the legal definition-blurring justification for the death of many civilians, White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan told Neal Conan in an interview with *National Public Radio* that drone attacks comply with the “principle of humanity, which requires us to use weapons that will not inflict unnecessary suffering.” So, according to Brennan, the murders of the wives of supposed Taliban leaders are necessary, ethical and just. Of course Brennan doesn’t mention these types of killings by drone attacks. However, he does state that drones have a “surgical precision” that make it easy to kill a terrorist like cancer and leave behind the “surrounding tissue” or the civilians (Brennan). These drones are so precise in fact, that they often become overloaded with information, an error that causes the machine to

mistake the identity of insurgents—in March 2011, nine young children, boys, each of them someone's son, were mistaken for insurgents and killed in a strike (ISAF). I cannot speak for the White House's counterterrorism group, but if the current drone technology can't tell the difference between innocent children and terrorists then the technology isn't ethical to use.

For targeted killings to be legal they must conform to international law and to do so "the use of force must be proportionate so that any anticipated military advantage is considered in light of the expected harm to civilians in the vicinity" (Alston 15). Supporters for the use of drones argue that weaponized UAV attacks are proportional. John Brennan went as far to say, "We are a nation of laws, and we will always act within the bounds of the law" (Brennan). Other supporters argue that determining whether any given drone attack is proportional is an impossibility, like Michael Llenza from the diplomacy department at Northfield University in Vermont who proposed that the commander of the attack has the discretion to determine proportionality (Llenza 54). Several cases of targeted killings have been investigated to ensure that personnel used appropriate proportionality principles. In one such case, Salah Shehadeh who was once the head of the Operational Branch of Hamas in Gaza was targeted and killed in an event that also took the lives of his wife, his assistant, his child, thirteen civilians many of which were children, and injured one hundred and fifty others (Meyerstein). The Commission report following the investigation concluded that the strike was disproportionate because of the amount of senior officials involved in the operation. Leaving the discretion of proportionality in the hands of the commander isn't enough when, as in the Shehadeh bombing, mistakes can be attributed to "incorrect assessments and mistaken judgments" (Special Investigatory Commission).

Another reason why the use of drones is unethical is the obscene amount of money spent on them every year. The Unmanned Systems Caucus, quickly becoming known as the "Drone Caucus," is the group that has been gathering money for the building of drones. Eight of the fifty-eight members are part of the House of Committee on Appropriations, giving them access to a lot of the government's money. Since 2011, the Drone Caucus has received over two million dollars from political action committees. Among the top five contributors are General Atomics Aeronautical Systems and Northrop Grumman Corporation. General Atomics supplies the United States with the Predator drone and has recently awarded the Drone Caucus over one hundred and forty thousand dollars. Northrop manufactures the Global Hawk drone and gave nearly one hundred and fifty thousand (Replegle). The average cost per unit for the Predator drone is four million dollars (SAF/FM 4-118), a whopping one hundred and four million dollars for the Global Hawk drone (4-111), and three million for the Raptor drone (Duff). Since 2005, the federal government has spent around twelve billion dollars for contracts alone (Replegle).

Future projections for the amount of money spent on drones will astonishingly be up to nearly ninety billion dollars in ten years (Stone). Coincidentally, there have been reports of the budget for higher education being cut by the same ninety billion dollars—a proposition made by president Obama over the next ten years (Lauerman). One can't help but to link these two projections and wonder, *is the money from cuts in higher education being displaced to fund an illegal war overseas?* There is no evidence linking these two predictions, but wouldn't our government's money be better spent on education? What



about infrastructure? There are six hundred thousand bridges in need of repair in this country, along with over one hundred dams and countless highways and sewer systems (Kelderman). Instead of giving billions of dollars toward building and maintaining drones, we should be, for instance, funding the one-trillion-dollar-make-over that our country's infrastructure needs.

Dr. Lori E. Amy, a professor in the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University, describes one of her students in her book *The Wars We Inherit: Military Life, Gender Violence, and Memory* as having had a husband in the war in Iraq. Before leaving the student's husband had a kind, gentle, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly attitude, but when he returned he had a short fuse and often hit her (Amy 145). In a study by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, it was discovered that one out of four soldiers return from Iraq and Afghanistan with posttraumatic stress disorder (Friedman). What is even more haunting is that in some reports more veterans of the Iraq or Afghanistan commit suicide than they die behind enemy lines (Swofford). It is a mundane happenstance that normal—emotionally, mentally—men and women are going into the machine of war-training only to be spit out on the conveyer belt as a “soldier”; a robot built with degradation and humiliation. “Enculturation into the military is designed to strip a person of individual identity, to make loyalty to the group, obedience to superiors, and duty the core of identity” (Amy 131). The machine of war breeds sadists not soldiers, products who would rather kill themselves than go living with what they've done; unable to find peace.

All of these are facets of the an unethical mirror—Obama's kill list, the terrible example the United States is making on countries all around the world, the violence and anti-American sentiment drone attacks create, double-hatting, the billions of dollars wasted on lobbying and manufacturing drones, the psychological problems they cause in soldiers, the disproportional use of force in many cases of targeted killings, the death of civilians, the inhumanity. When all the pieces are assembled, the reflection looking back at us is the hideous face of hate, prejudice, of the drone, of America. Lack of accurate media coverage doesn't leave room for a *community of seeing*, a place to bear witness to this hideous face, keeping us from peering into the mirror; outraged by the media, author of *The Violence of Peace: America's Wars in the Age of Obama* and law professor of Yale Stephen L. Carter said, “And there's another ethical problem that we don't spend enough time thinking about, and that's the way that the drone war goes away from the front pages. It's not on the evening news...it's done in secret, it's clandestine, it's hard to keep track, and we really should know what's being done in our name” (Carter).

It's the attempts to legitimize the legality of drones that has deformed America; it represents a dramatic reversal of history, a sick Darwinian flip that devolves the masses, a regression of US law and policy that “threaten[s] to do irreparable harm to the international legal framework designed to establish and uphold foundational protections for the right to life and human dignity” (Alston 5). As a nonviolent resister and anti-war activist Muhammad Ali spoke out on many occasions about peace. The morning after winning his match with Sonny Liston, the match that made him the new heavyweight champion of the world, he attended a press conference where he said, “I believe...in peace” (Hauser 83). If we could all adopt the values Muhammad Ali embodies, if the soldiers controlling drones and the leaders in this country that let it happen—cause it to happen—could stop and see the harm that they are causing the world, it would be the first

step toward a new future devoid of the violence we've created with drones. Perhaps then in this imagined future we can echo, without being hypocritical, Ali when he said, "All I want is peace—peace for myself and peace for the world" (Hauser 103).

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