# Drones, Honor, and War

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Drones have become a symbol of the new American approach to warfare. Yet, the American use of weaponized drones has elicited vocal and persistent criticism both at home and abroad. While majorities in the United States and Israel continue to approve the use of drone strikes, the Pew Research Center polls from 2014 indicate that majorities or pluralities in thirty-nine of forty-four countries surveyed have misgivings about U.S. drone strikes. The strongest disapproval is registered in Venezuela (92 percent), Jordan (90 percent), Greece (89 percent), Nicaragua (88 percent), Egypt (87 percent), Argentina (87 percent), Brazil (87 percent), Colombia (86 percent), Senegal (86 percent), Spain (86 percent), the Palestinian territories (84 percent), Turkey (83 percent), and Japan (82 percent). In France, 72 percent disapprove of drone strikes, and in Germany, 67 percent disapprove.[1]

It is not that drones have allowed the killing of more people than prior technology did, but rather that they have made possible targeted killing conducted remotely—eliminating risk for the attacker but bringing up a host of new questions about war, morality, and killing. The national and international press coverage of U.S. drone strikes emphasizes not only the efficiency of

drones but also the dangers associated with their use. The United States is often characterized, much as it was during the Cold War, as an all-powerful and arrogant nation that exploits its technological supremacy without concern for human rights or human life. The morality of American foreign policy is being put into question. The drone is often taken to represent everything that is wrong with the recent American wars, and maybe with American culture.

A growing body of literature on the robotic revolution in warfare focuses on the tactical successes of drones as military weapons and on their potential strategic problems. In this article, however, I am interested not in discussing the military capabilities of drones, but rather in examining the perception of drones in critical discourse. My contention is that there is an assumption, often explicitly voiced, that by using drones, the United States is in fact fighting in a cowardly fashion.

In general terms, violence in war is deemed acceptable, and even honorable, when personal confrontation is involved, and when opposing forces are assumed to share equivalent risks. There is a discrepancy between contemporary technological warfare, exemplified by
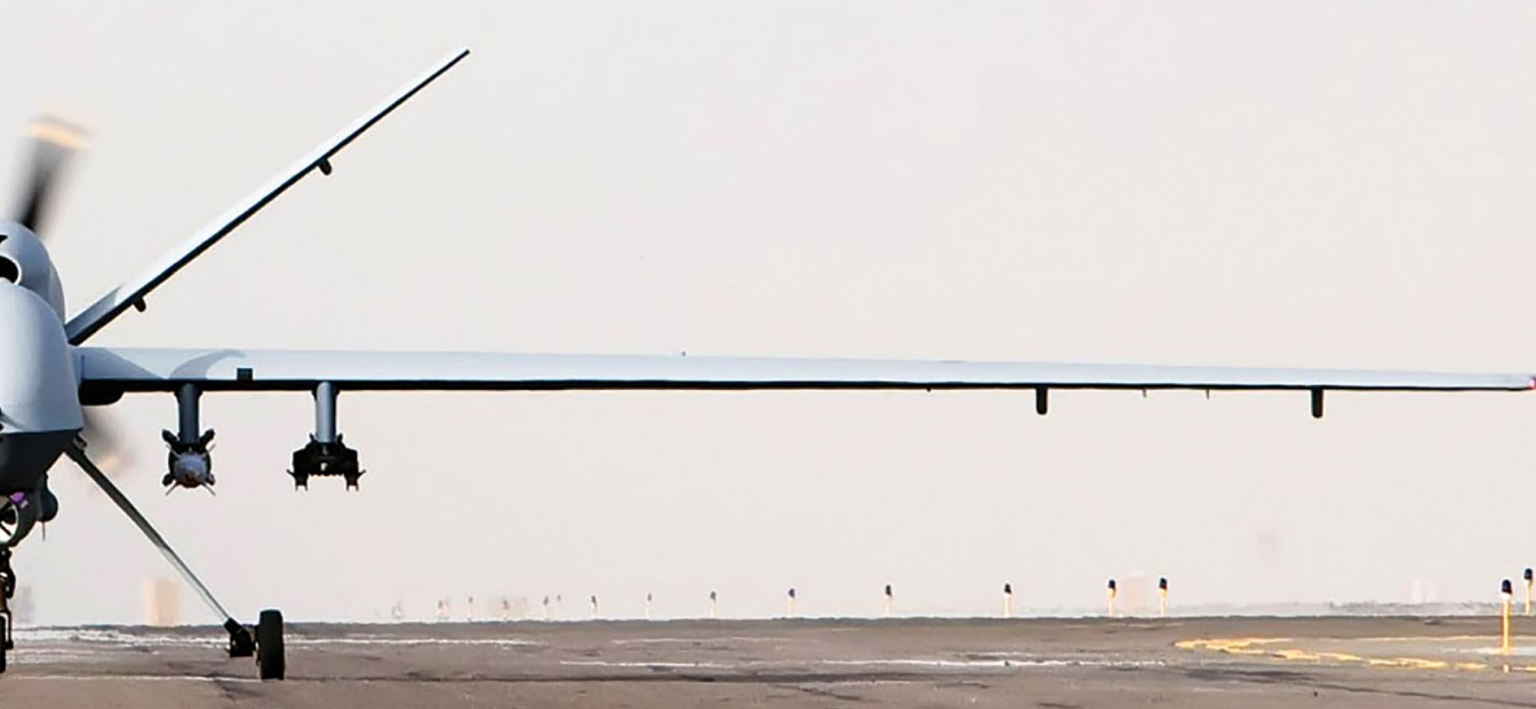
An MQ-9 Reaper takes off March 2009 at Balad Air Base, Iraq.

the use of armed drones, and the classical conception of honor and courage in war. In this context, both academic literature and popular media tend to portray the drone as a symbol of America's cultural disintegration. What emerges in the antidrone discourse is a critique of modernity, and a melancholic longing for imagined traditions of bravery and honor.

A Weapon of Cowards?

In *The Thistle and the Drone*, Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University, and a former senior fellow with the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution, suggests that the drone is far more than "the twenty-first century's most advanced kill technology."[2] He sees weaponized drones as the symbol of the cultural clash between the United States and the tribal Muslim societies in the "periphery." According to Ahmed, who studied the Pashtuns, Yemenis, Somalis, and Kurds, the use of drones represents America's new reliance on a martial ethos that is no longer about traditional military values. The American use of drones, Ahmed claims, shows that the United States does not abide by the same rules of honor as ancient cultures. Instead, it embraces a modern philosophy that is alien to the people it attacks. Therefore, Ahmed explains, Muslim tribesmen see drone warfare as "dishonorable" and "blasphemous."[3]

Tribal societies, Ahmed contends, are deeply rooted in tradition, making sense of the present through their understanding of shared experience. Men in these societies, Ahmed contends, live by an ancient code of honor passed on through generations by the actions and oral narratives of a community's elders. The tribal lineage system is characterized by its martial tradition, and the ancient code of honor and revenge. The claim is that the essence of tribal societies is a tapestry of courage and pride, and a sense of egalitarianism, and that these features have remained remarkably unchanged through time.

In the novella *Hadji Murad*, Leo Tolstoy writes about the strength of a Muslim tribal leader facing imperial Russia, and a century later Ahmed detects the same fortitude in the tribal societies he studies. Ahmed argues that, coming from this stable tradition, tribesmen do not respect the new ways in which Americans fight. The drone comes to represent American power, overwhelming and, by definition of its very modernity, unfair, unjust, and unnatural. Honor is equated with the traditional, while dishonor with the modern. It is not only ideology that defines what is or is not honorable but also the techniques or modes of warfare.

Ahmed remarks that Americans *can* fight bravely, and they have proven to be brave, in past battles. There is a sense of nostalgia in this argument. Ahmed turns to World War II to pinpoint a historical moment that he claims showcases American bravery in combat. In the past, he argues, the American soldier could win battles through hand-to-hand fighting that

(U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Steve Horton)

Photo: Capt. Richard Koll, left, and Airman 1st Class Mike Eulo, both from the 46th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron, perform function checks after launching an MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicle 7 August 2007 at Balad Air Base, Iraq. Capt. Koll, the pilot, and Airman Eulo, the sensor operator, handle the Predator in a radius of approximately twenty-five miles around the base before handing it off to personnel stationed in the United States to continue its mission.

Inset top left: A MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle prepares to land after a mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

(U.S. Air Force photo by Sgt. Brian Ferguson)

Inset middle: MQ-9 Reaper firing a Hellfire missile.

(Photo illustration courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

Inset bottom right: A view of the drone's targeting screen.

(Photo courtesy of the U.S. Air Force)

exposed soldiers to tremendous risk. This, according to Ahmed, was honorable:

> … for anyone who doubts the tenacity, ferocity, courage, and moral purpose of Americans at war, they need to look at them in action in the last century, at Iwo Jima, for example, and in landing on the beachhead at Normandy–where ground was won through hand-to-hand, inch-by-inch fighting, with enormous casualties.… To lead the allies to victory, the Americans had to show resolve and honor.[4]

American participation in World War II is reified, and the American soldier of the present is imagined as a mere shadow of the brave combatant of the American past. The drone epitomizes, in this narrative, a challenge to American martial traditions of honor, bravery, and sacrifice.

Drones certainly change the dynamics of warfare. Drone operators are not offering their life for the defense of their country or its ideology. Are drones, therefore, the weapons of cowards? Diverse voices seem to imply this.

Mobashar Jawed Akbar, founding editor of the *Asian Age* and a former senior fellow with the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution, argues that the American use of drones will be interpreted as an act of cowardice, not strength: "It will be seen as American cowardice. In war terms, if you are not willing to sacrifice blood, you are essentially a coward."[5] Counterinsurgency

expert David Kilcullen, who served as adviser to Army Gen. David Petraeus, contends that "using robots from the air … looks both cowardly and weak."[6] George Monbiot, who writes for *The Guardian*, claims that "with its deadly drones, the United States is fighting a coward's war."[7] Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Policy Dr. Andrew Exum, a former U.S. Army officer who advised Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan, explains: "There's something about pilotless drones that doesn't strike me as an honorable way of warfare."[8]

The allegation seems to be that a weapon that eliminates the possibility of personal risk for the perpetrator is, by definition, dishonorable. Marine Sgt. Matt Walje, writing on ethics and war, argues that "drone strikes are a kind of ambush kill, an ambush where the killer is invulnerable," adding that "the manner in which drone strikes are carried out has a dishonorable feel, encouraging the dehumanization of the enemy, and in this way, assisting the operators and their leadership in assuaging the blood guilt that follows a kill."[9] Foreign policy journalist Glenn Greenwald agrees:

> Whatever one thinks of the justifiability of drone attacks, … [attacking by drone is] one of the least 'brave' or courageous modes of warfare ever invented. It's one thing to call it just, but to pretend it's 'brave' is Orwellian in the extreme. Indeed, the whole point of it is to allow large numbers of human beings to be killed without the slightest physical risk to those doing the killing. Killing while sheltering yourself from all risk is the definitional opposite of bravery.[10]

Ed Kinane, an antidrone activist in New York, argues that aerial warfare is cowardly in general, and that drones "raise cowardice to new heights."[11] Rev. Kenneth Tanner, an antidrone activist from Michigan, claims that drone violence is particularly dishonorable:

> There's something dishonorable about killing without the risk associated with the act ….
> If you must kill to defend against killers … I believe the only honorable way to do it is to risk your own death or the death of those you love in the effort.[12]

Does killing without risk violate the warrior code of honor and bravery?

Armed drones, however effective they may be militarily, are taken by critics to reflect the frailty of the culture that uses them. The machines are the weapons of the weak, in this narrative, protecting the fearful from sacrifice and danger. If the drone symbolizes the safe, uncommitted, and even cowardly modern approach to warfare, the "traditional" emerges as the risky, committed, and brave. German journalist Dirk Kurbjuweit expresses this sentiment clearly:

> A suicide bomber needs to be 100 percent willing to sacrifice his life. With a drone pilot, on the other hand, the risk of pilot death drops to zero percent. … It's a war between those who are willing to sacrifice everything and those who are unwilling to give up anything—a war of sacrifice versus convenience, bodies versus technology and risk versus safety.[13]

The claim is that the U.S. military is hiding behind its technological superiority because American society is not actually able to fight a war that necessitates commitment, sacrifice, and risk. The predator can never be the prey, and this shows feebleness, rather than strength. The drone, therefore, is supposed to represent the trepidation to face death in battle, and an attempt to bypass an ancient martial ethos.

There is also the suggestion that the post-9/11 wars have created a generation of "cubicle warriors" that are not as courageous as the soldiers of the past, or as the soldiers against whom they fight. Drones, the idea is, have turned our fighters into office workers immersed in the drudgery of the mundane.[14] Instead of showing their military strength physically, instead of risking and sometimes sacrificing their bodies, and instead of committing completely to war, drone pilots are removed from harm's way. This situation is diametrically opposed to the romantic notion of war as a battle of the brawn, where hand-to-hand combat, bravery, and high risk prove physical strength and superiority.[15] The place for romantic notions of masculine heroism dissipates. Drones are a mode of killing that cannot threaten the body of the perpetrator. This position of tremendous power can be conceptualized as a weakness.

An alternative to the "cubicle warrior" image has also emerged in the antidrone discourse, and that is the drone pilot as a "gamer." Controlling a drone is likened to playing a video game. The idea is that the drone

operator, removed from both risk and fear, and sitting at a computer's controls surrounded by joysticks and buttons, is disconnected from the scene of battle and its concomitant dangers. War is allegedly transformed in the imagination of the cyber warriors into a virtual landscape, removed from the brutal reality of death, and its moral implications. According to Walje, "Killing through a computer screen sterilizes and dehumanizes the act, and seems to create a cavalier attitude toward their [drones'] use by both their operators and senior leadership in the U.S. government."[16]

The video game quality allegedly makes violence easy for the perpetrators, who become desensitized to it, and who can imagine they are playing in a death-delivering video game. In his 2010 "Study on Targeted Killings," Philip Alston, then United Nations special representative on extrajudicial executions, made the parallel between operating a drone and playing a video game. He wrote, "Because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audio-feed, there is a risk of developing a 'PlayStation' mentality to killing."[17] In this scenario, drone warfare is the worst form of violence, the encouragement of aggressiveness robbed of *gravitas* and sacrifice.

In this context, the debate concerning a service medal for drone pilots is interesting. In 2012, the Pentagon decided to create the Distinguished Warfare Medal specifically for drone pilots. The war medal reflected the changing nature of war in the twenty-first century, then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta explained. In fact, the proposed medal ranked above the Purple Heart and other decorations earned in direct combat. Yet, the opposition to the medal was strong. A petition on the website Change.org opposing the medal quickly gathered thirty thousand signatures. One of America's largest veterans groups, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, vocally and publicly opposed the medal, as did others such as the American Legion and VoteVets.org. In 2013, a bipartisan group of twenty-two U.S. senators pressed the Pentagon to reconsider the medal. In a letter to new Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, they wrote,

> We believe that medals earned in combat, or in dangerous conditions, should maintain their precedence above noncombat awards. Placing the Distinguished Warfare Medal above the

Bronze Star and Purple Heart diminishes the significance of awards earned by risking one's life in direct combat or through acts of heroism.[18]

Forty-eight members of the House of Representatives also wrote Hagel, questioning the new medal. The main point voiced was that drones may be important to modern American warfare, but controlling them does not involve gallantry, risk, or valor—the conditions that make a great warrior. This shows there is political ambivalence towards the figure of the drone operator as warrior. Hagel canceled the medal soon after replacing Panetta.[19]

Good Kill?

Good Kill, the first Hollywood feature film about a drone pilot, was released in the United States in May 2015.[20] Unlike *American Sniper*, which came out six months prior, the film has not become a blockbuster hit or received extensive media coverage.[21] Nonetheless, Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill* is an interesting film from a political perspective because it brings to life many of the tropes that circulate in the academic literature and in the press concerning drones. Many reviews of *Good Kill* discuss drones as a symbol of our cultural decay. Anthony Lane, writing in *The New Yorker*, claims that the drone is "almost too convenient an emblem of alienation."[22] Stephen Holden writes in the *New York Times* that the "movie makes a persuasive case that our blind infatuation with all-powerful technology is stripping us of our humanity." He claims that *Good Kill* is "a contemporary horror movie about humans seduced and hypnotized by machines into surrendering their souls."[23] Ethan Hawke, who stars as Maj. Thomas Egan, believes that the drone symbolizes a larger drama we all face: "It's not a huge jump from what's happening to these pilots to what's happening to all of us," he said. "More and more of our intimacy, what used to feel real and tangible, is now automated, [and] is now from a distance. We're avoiding … [things that were] difficult, war being one of them."[24] The idea is clear. Drone technology strips us of our humanity, increases and displays our alienation, and destroys our ethical center.

The movie, said to be based on actual events, follows Egan, an experienced F-16 fighter pilot who has served six combat tours but is now stationed in Las Vegas as a drone pilot. Therefore, the film does not take place in Pakistan or Afghanistan, but rather in a bunker, a suburban

home, and the highways and casinos of Las Vegas. Yet, like many contemporary films about the post-9/11 wars, the movie is a study of alienation and anger.

Within the first five minutes of the film, the audience sees that drones can monitor, and on occasion kill, civilians. On repeated occasions, in fact, the drone crew is ordered to deploy weapons that will kill both known targets and noncombatants. Even children playing in nearby areas. Even people attending burials. Even whole families, in the middle of the night, while they sleep. This is shocking to witness, because in American war movies, American soldiers are rarely seen killing unarmed civilians.[25] In *Good Kill*, the viewer observes civilians being killed, but the victims do not see the threat coming, and the perpetrator is immune from attack. The asymmetric relation between the victim and victimizer is highlighted.

Egan is, clearly, increasingly tormented by his role. It is not so much *the killing* that disturbs him as it is *the method* of killing. Talking to the teenage cashier of a liquor store, he says, "I blew away six Taliban, in Pakistan, just today. Now I'm going home to a barbecue."[26] He internalizes his anger and withdraws from his wife, who remarks that he always seems "miles away." In a heated discussion with her, Egan reflects on this: "I am a pilot, and I'm not flying. I don't know what it is that I am doing, but it's not flying." While flying is deemed honorable, operating a drone is imagined as cowardly. In the city of replicas that only mirror the originals, Egan is imagined as fake pilot "flying" only in name.

Egan is not a pacifist, and it is not war in general, nor the post 9/11 wars, that he opposes. In fact, he desperately misses flying and repeatedly begs for the chance to return to a war zone. In a dream sequence, images of fighter planes are romanticized much as they are in the film *Top Gun*.[27] Flying is conceived as exciting, fun, and dangerous. Exhilarated with his memories of flying, and all

of a sudden energetic, Egan reminisces: "I miss the fear. You are up in the sky; something can happen. There's risk." He craves the adrenaline rush and the danger, and he feels none of this while controlling a drone: "I feel like a coward every day, taking pot shots from half the world away in an air conditioned cubicle. Worst thing that could happen to me is carpel tunnel, or spilling coffee on my lap. Most dangerous thing I do is drive home on the freeway."

Conclusion

The use of weaponized drones has elicited national and international criticism. There is concern about the morality of drone-mediated killings, and critics denounce as excessive the collateral damage associated with the use of drones. Some pundits claim that the Obama administration is in fact abusing its power. There is a fear of surveillance and of creating and allowing a technology that can watch and kill remotely, both abroad and, eventually, in the United States itself. The American Civil Liberties Union, for instance, has litigated numerous lawsuits on the American use of drones, and it lobbies for increasing the accountability and transparency of the drone program. The specter of technology overpowering the human can be terrifying, and it precipitates questions about morality, war, and killing.

Is drone warfare intrinsically morally apprehensible? No, because it minimizes risk for the attacker and

(Photo by Mohammad Hussain, Associated Press)

American citizens hold a banner during a peace march organized by the party of Pakistan's cricket star turned politician Imran Khan (not pictured) in Tank, Pakistan, 7 October 2012. The Pakistani military blocked a convoy carrying thousands of Pakistanis and a small contingent of U.S. anti-war activists from entering a lawless tribal region along the border with Afghanistan to protest U.S. drone strikes.

reduces collateral damage. Yet drones often are *perceived* as particularly problematic. As suggested in this article, there is a narrative about the drone as a symbol of weakness. It is not that there is a concerted and uniform discourse advancing this proposition, but rather that disparate voices touch upon common

themes in their critique of drones. The allegation seems to be that drone operators are not really warriors, and that drones are not a courageous form of battle. The United States emerges as a representation of modernity, ruthless and simultaneously weak. The perception of the drone embodies this caricature.

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Notes

1. Pew Research Center, "Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America's Image," Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends website, 14 July 2014, accessed 1 September 2015, http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/global-opposition-to-u-s-surveillance-and-drones-but-limited-harm-to-americas-image/.

2. Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2013), 1.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid., 326.

5. Mobashar Jawed Akbar, quoted in P.W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 312.

6. David Kilcullen, quoted in Doyle McManus, "U.S. Drone Attacks in Pakistan 'Backfiring,' Congress Told," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 2009.

7. George Monbiot, "With Its Deadly Drones the U.S. Is Fighting a Coward's War," *The Guardian*, 30 January 2012.

8. Andrew Exum, quoted in Jane Mayer, "The Predator War: What are the risks of the C.I.A.'s covert drone program?" *New Yorker*, 26 October 2009.

9. Matt Walje, "Drone Warfare and Jus ad Bellum: Mala Prohibita under Right Intention," The Polemistés Ethos weblog, accessed 1 September 2015, http://thepolemistesethos.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/hello-world/.

10. Glenn Greenwald, "Bravery and Drone Pilots: The Pentagon Considers Awarding War Medals to Those who Operate America's Death-delivering Video Games," Salon website, 10 July 2012, accessed 30 July 2015, http://www.salon.com/2012/07/10/bravery_and_drone_pilots/.

11. Ed Kinane, "Drones and Dishonor in Central New York," Dissident Voice website, 25 September 2009, accessed 30 July 2015, http://dissidentvoice.org/2009/09/drones-and-dishonor-in-central-new-york/.

12. Kenneth Tanner, "Rand Paul, Drones, and Honor," Sojourners website, 8 March 2013, accessed 1 September 2015, http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/03/08/rand-paul-drones-and-honor.

13. Dirk Kurbjuweit, "Fear the Reaper: 'Humane' Drones Are the Most Brutal Weapons of All," *Der Spiegel*, 9 August 2012.

14. The term "cubicle warrior" was used by P.W. Singer in *Wired for War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), and developed by other authors.

15. Historically, war has served as a framework to shape the social construction of masculinity. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Holt), 1998. For a study of drones and the issue of gender, see Mary Manjikian, "Becoming Unmanned: The Gendering of Lethal Autonomous Warfare," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16(1) (2014): 48–65.

16. Walje, "Drone Warfare and Jus ad Bellum."

17. Philip Alston, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Addendum: Study on Targeted Killings*, U.N. Human Rights Council, 28 May 2010, 25.

18. "Manchin, Rockefeller Bipartisan Group Protect Rank of Purple Heart, Bronze Star," Joe Manchin website, 8 March 2013, accessed 29 July 2015, http://www.manchin.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2013/3/manchin-rockefeller-bipartisan-group-protect-rank-of-purple-heart-bronze-star.

19. The debate about the award was extensively covered in the media. See, for instance, Ernesto Londono, "Pentagon Cancels Divisive Distinguished Warfare Medal for Cyber Ops, Drone Strikes," *Washington Post*, 15 April 2013.

20. Andrew Niccol, *Good Kill* (Voltage Pictures, Dune Films, and Sobini Films, 2015).

21. Clint Eastwood, *American Sniper* (Village Roadshow Pictures, Mad Chance Productions, 22nd & Indiana Pictures, and Malpaso Productions, 2014).

22. Anthony Lane, "Distant Emotions," *New Yorker*, 18 May 2015.

23. Scott Shane, "Drone Strikes Reveal Uncomfortable Truth," *New York Times* (23 April 2015).

24. Ethan Hawke, quoted in Stephanie Merrie, "Ethan Hawke on 'Good Kill' and the Difficulty of Getting Good Dramas Made," *Washington Post* (21 May 2015).

25. Cora Sol Goldstein, "Good Kill? U.S. Soldiers and the Killing of Civilians in American Film," in *Disappearing War*, Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse, eds., (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2015).

26. All dialogue quoted is from *Good Kill*.

27. Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, *Top Gun* (Simpson/Bruckheimer, 1986).