

Moral Corrosion of Drone Warfare

Exclusive: The U.S. government uses drones to eliminate risk to its soldiers and thus domestic opposition to war, but that heightens the moral imperative to challenge the remote-controlled killings, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Required by court order to appear before a judge in Syracuse, New York, on July 12, some out-of-towners had already arrived there when the court granted the prosecution's last-minute request for more time to prepare its case against us, the Jerry Berrigan Brigade, for our nonviolent witness against drone warfare on Jan. 28, 2016. A trial date is likely to be set in a month or two, or perhaps three (so much for our Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial).

Back in January 2016, we stood behind 30 larger-than-life-sized wooden silhouettes of Syracuse peacemaker Jerry Berrigan, who died at age 95 on July 26, 2015.

A widely loved and respected educator, Jerry – like his brothers Dan and Phil – was himself larger than life. Even in his early 90s, Jerry could be seen braving the elements, witnessing against the extrajudicial killings enabled by Hancock drone base in Syracuse.

Jerry was asked at one point if there were anything he would change in his life. "I would have resisted more often and been arrested more often," he said.

On Jan. 28, 2016, we – the Jerry Berrigan Brigade – brought images of Jerry to the gates of Hancock as a tangible reminder that this is where he would have been standing that day, putting his body on the line to say a clear, physical "NO" to killing. Jerry's widow and daughter were there with us, cheering us on.

Most Americans are blissfully unaware that, from states-side drone bases like Hancock, drone "pilots" – with a push of the joystick, a click of a mouse, or simply a keystroke – can incinerate "suspected terrorists," on the other side of the globe WITHIN THREE SECONDS.

Thanks to a media that is heavily influenced by what Pope Francis (speaking before Congress in 2015) called the "blood-drenched arms traders," it's largely a comfortable case of out-of-sight-out-of-mind. However, the more the killing is hidden, the more we feel a moral imperative to bring the killing out into the open and appeal to the consciences of U.S. citizens – including those of drone "pilots" many of whom have moral qualms about what they are being ordered to do and end up with bad cases of PTSD.

Many of us protesters – Catholic Workers and Jewish grandmothers alike – take our cue from anti-war activist Rabbi Heschel, who braced us all with this admonition: “When injustice takes place, few are guilty, but all are responsible. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.”

Rabbi Heschel got that right. And Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. reassured us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But how long and how to make it bend?

Seventeen-plus months since our Jerry Berrigan Brigade witness at Hancock, we cannot avoid wondering just how long it will take for our case to find justice. Nor are we sure what kind of “justice” will befall us. Whatever it is, though, it will be a small price to pay, when one considers the price paid by families who slip into the crosshairs of drone-fired Hellfire missiles.

Some well-meaning soul suggested we consider apologizing – a notion far from our minds. Were we to issue an apology, it would be patterned on the one given by Jerry Berrigan’s brothers Dan and Phil and the others of the Catonsville Nine, who burned draft cards with homemade napalm 50 years ago at the height of the war in Vietnam:

“Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children.”

Good Friday Witness, 2017

“Justice” is likely to be meted out more quickly to those of us who decided that Good Friday this year would be a fitting time to honor the memory of innocent victims of Empire, given what happened to Jesus of Nazareth when he challenged Empire. This time nine nonviolent resisters, including from Upstate Drone Action and Catholic Worker, were arrested at the main entrance to Hancock drone base witnessing against Hancock’s role in drone killings.

Three hung on large wooden drone crosses representing victims of U.S. drone strikes in seven majority Muslim countries. Eleven others held smaller drone crosses headed by the phrase, “DRONES CRUCIFY,” each followed by one of these: Children, Families, Love, Peace, Community, the US Constitution, UN Charter, Rule of Law, US Treaties, Due Process, or Diplomacy (in all, 14 “Stations of the Cross”). All the crosses were confiscated by Base personnel.

Perceiving a need to explain our Good Friday action we issued a statement, that includes the following:

“Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus. Recognizing that 70% of our nation identify as Christian, we come to the gates of the Hancock drone base to make real the crucifixion today. As Jesus and others were crucified by the Roman Empire, drones are used by the U.S. Empire in similar fashion.

“In Roman times, crosses loomed over a community to warn people that they could be killed whenever the Empire decided. So, too, our drones fly over many countries threatening extrajudicial killings upon whoever happens to be in the vicinity. On this Good Friday, we recall Jesus’ call to love and nonviolence. We’re asking this Air Force base and this nation to turn away from a policy of modern-day crucifixion.

“What if our country were constantly being spied upon by drones, with some ‘suspected terrorists’ killed by drones? What if many bystanders, including children, were killed in the process? If that were happening, we would hope that some people in that attacking country would speak up and try to stop the killing. We’re speaking up to try and stop the illegal and immoral drone attacks on countries against which Congress has not declared war.”

(A [five-minute video](#) of Nativity Scene Action at Hancock, the theme of which was: “If Herod Had Drones, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Would Have Been Incinerated.”)

Several of those arrested on Good Friday, including me, were the same “perps” awaiting trial for the action of our Jerry Berrigan Brigade action a year and a half ago. But the judge hearing this more recent case told us when we appeared before him on July 13 that he will now set a trial date for us Good Friday protesters.

Other Witness Against Drones

Over the last couple of years there have been many protest actions and arrests at one of the most important drone bases – Creech AFB in Nevada, where many from many parts of the U.S. and abroad have demonstrated against the brutality of drone killing.

Lesser known are actions in other parts of the country to raise awareness of the expansion of drone bases in localities like Des Moines, Iowa. There the Des Moines Catholic Worker and Veterans For Peace have launched a campaign to call attention to the drone assassinations in which the 132nd Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard plays a role from Des Moines airport. There have been several arrests, trials, and convictions.

The July issue of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community newspaper, *Via Pacis*, carries the words of Frank Cordaro, a Catholic priest, before his latest arrest

in late May at the National Guard drone command in Des Moines. Frank reached back to the prophet Ezekiel to address the imperative to “blow the trumpet,” saying:

“This protest is an Ezekiel ‘Watchman’ witness. Ezekiel was a priest of the First Temple and only became a prophet after he was kicked out of Jerusalem and sent into captivity in Babylon. Once there, he started to have visions: ‘The Lord said to me, when the Watchman sees the sword coming against the land, he should blow the trumpet to warn the people.’”

“The Des Moines Catholic Worker community has been a kind of Watchman for the city of Des Moines on the issues of war and peace for the past 40 years. It’s probably because we Catholic Workers have been protesting US-led wars for over 80 years nationally and 40 in Des Moines. And it’s very personal for me too. I grew up on the south side of Des Moines and this airport is just blocks away from the neighborhood I grew up in.”

Needed: more Watchmen and Watchwomen. A drone base may soon be coming to your own neighborhood.

Ray McGovern works for a publishing arm of the Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He has written about the moral imperative of activism and tries to heed it. He was an Army officer and then a CIA analyst for 30 years, and is now on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).
