The assassination complex: inside the government's secret drone warfare programme
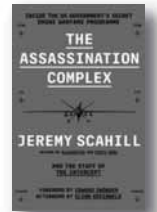
Jeremy Scahill is a founding editor of the online news publication *The Intercept* and author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* and *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield* as a well as a documentary movie of the same name. *The Assassination Complex* is not so much a book as a collection of articles from several journalists at *The Intercept* and follows on from a recent exposé titled 'The Drone Papers'. As such, the narrative does not necessarily build from chapter to chapter and there is some degree of repetition. Edward Snowden has provided a foreword, and, to top and tail the book, Betsy Reed a preface and Glenn Greenwald an afterword. In all, it is a relatively easy to read book on a fascinating and topical subject.

Nobody was quite sure what form the 'war on terror' would take when that phrase was first uttered in late 2001. After 15 years it is has evolved through many forms and one growing element is the United States Government's (the government's) programme to use armed unmanned aerial vehicles (also called 'remotely-piloted vehicles' and 'drones') for 'targeted killings' or assassinations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Somalia.

Leveraging multiple sources of highly classified information, *The Assassination Complex* provides in-depth revelations about the government's drone programme and about America's policy in prosecuting the war against terrorists and their organisations from several different angles. One of these is whether the 'war on terror' is indeed a war or a law enforcement activity – a debate that has significant ramifications for how it is conducted.

When the government discusses drone strikes publicly, it offers assurances that such operations are a more precise alternative to troops on the ground and are authorized only when an "imminent" threat is present and there is "near certainty" that the intended target will be killed. But the reality is less clear or certain, as *The Assassination Complex* explains, with flaws in the legality of this form of action, the targeting of individuals using primarily signals intelligence, the inability to conduct 'exploitation' from kill rather than capture missions, and the overall cost/benefit assessment for the programme in terms of non-combatant casualties and international precedent. It might only be a couple of years, for example, before countries like China have the capability to assassinate 'terrorists' located in other countries; what happens then?

This campaign, carried out by two presidents through four presidential terms, has been deliberately obscured from the public and insulated from democratic debate. *The Assassination Complex* allows readers to understand the circumstances under which the government grants itself the right to sentence individuals to death without the established legal checks and balances of arrest, trial, and appeal.

The angle that is perhaps the most concerning is the transfer of drone and signals intelligence gathering technology (particularly mobile phone tower simulators) to domestic law enforcement activities in the United States. Privacy and civil liberty advocates are now mobilising to try to put some boundaries on the domestic use of this form of technology.

Australia as a coalition partner in the 'war on terror' has no doubt been intimately involved with the type of operations described in *The Assassination Complex* through intelligence gathering and sharing, as well as Special Forces. To date, as far as we are aware, no Australian citizen has been targeted and killed; unlike United States and United Kingdom citizens. But without our own fleet of armed drones, we are more likely to see a debate about the use of signals intelligence gathering technology in Australia for law enforcement purposes – which for all I know may already be happening[1].

The book has a number of black and white images (some poor) and explanation boxes, as well as some tables. It includes a comprehensive glossary of acronyms, extensive notes and a good index. *The Assasination Complex* will be of interest to military, law enforcement and legal professionals as well as those who study the art and science of developing public policy.

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[1]For information on Australia's use of unarmed drones see: Jenkins, John (2013). The operational role of the Heron remotely-piloted aircraft in the Royal Australian Air Force. *United Service* **64** (4), 21 – 23.