

Book Review: Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and Warrior Ethics by Neil C. Renic

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Renic, Neil C. *Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and Warrior Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 2020. 272 pages. Hardback, \$85.00.

When is it moral to kill a human during war? This question has been asked since the first soldier stepped foot onto a battlefield. Dr. Neil C. Renic of the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg is a noted international researcher in the field of modern warfare and the law of armed conflict. In *Asymmetric Killing*, Renic explores the question within the historical context of the development of weapons which afford one side the ability to wage war against an enemy without the risk of the enemy's ability to retaliate.

To introduce the subject, Renic contrasts Jünger Ernst's memoirs of World War I, *Storm of Steel*, to an article written in the *New Yorker* in 2009. The article described the killing of a Pakistan Taliban leader by a drone, controlled by a pilot and operator located in Nevada. Ernst describes the hurling of hand grenades to that of fencing: "It's the deadliest of duels as it invariably ends with one or other of the participants being blown to smithereens. Or both" (p. 1). In the 2009 article, there was no chance of anyone killing the CIA pilot or operator in the engagement.

"The focus of this book is whether this intensifying risk imbalance represents a challenge to the existing moral frameworks that justify killing in war." (p. 2) Within the context of current warfare, Renic focuses on the United States use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) on the battlefield while looking historically back to weapons such as "early projectiles, firearms, the submarine, military sniping, and aerial bombing" (p. 5). Each of these afforded one side the ability to attack without fear of losing men or materials, which can affect whether the government has the political support to go to war or whether "...democratic leaders will be greater empowered and incentivized to war in the absence of public consultation and support." (p. 19).

Although Renic focuses on the United States use of armed UAVs after the 9/11 attacks in the Global War on Terrorism, he also discusses the use of high altitude manned bombing missions

conducted during Operation Allied Force (OAF), the NATO air campaign to counter Serbian attacks in Kosovo. The U.S. and its NATO allies flew high altitude and stealth bombing missions that were largely immune from ground or air attack by Serb forces. Renic quotes a statement attributed to U.S. General Wesley Clark, the NATO commander, as saying, "...nothing would hurt us more with public opinion than headlines that screamed, '*NATO Loses Ten Airplanes in Two Days*'" (p. 20).

Both warfare methods alleviate the risk to a pilot or operator, and Renic further argues that the U.S. has used both high altitude bombing and armed UAVs with the "absence of significant military ground force presence" (p. i). This lowers the risk to the nation's military and increases the public acceptance of the leadership's decision to use UAVs instead of deploying ground troops. Renic delves into a subject that is not often considered by many outside of the military ethics community; that is the ethics of just war. This could be likened to the playground fight where an older bully picks on a smaller, younger child who has little or no ability to defend themselves; he discusses that the early soldiers in Greek and Roman literature could not claim honor on the battlefield without some risk to themselves. He quotes Euripides, "...brave men think its unworthy to kill the enemy by stealth" (p. 62). Plato, similarly, resented naval warfare. The warrior ethos has changed over time and will continue to change as modern technology and society norms evolve.

In closing, Renic uses the game of chess as the "perfect symmetry of risk between enemies" (p. 188), where two sides are equal, engaged on an even battlefield, and using agreed upon rules. Over time, the balance in warfare has shifted to the point where warriors question its legitimacy. Nations have agreed to various treaties and pacts which in combination are known as the law of armed conflict and, when studied, may provide legitimized justifications. However, today's wars

between nation states and non-state actors does not always fit with the black and white rules agreed to decades ago. Renc concludes by questioning the line between what is lawful and what is moral. “The book provides a theoretically and historically grounded framework for better determining the point at which such violence is no longer compatible with the assumption that underpins the moral right to kill” (p. 199).

Renic has presented a well-documented and researched study that looks over the history of warfare from the Roman and Greek era to the present. There is little scholarly literature that covers warrior ethos and just war. His discussion of the ethical questions is well presented and provides the framework for future discussions. It will be of great interest to military ethicists as well as military planners and leaders. Renic provides a lengthy list of references and the information is well indexed, however he uses inline citations, which may be cumbersome when an item is cited in several reference volumes.

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