



The Spoils of War: Power, Profit and the American War Machine

Andrew Cockburn

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Neil postman (1993:2) wrote that technology is both a friend and an enemy: it is a friend not just because it makes life easier but because of its lengthy, intimate and inevitable relationship with culture, "... technology does not invite a close examination of its own consequences; it is an enemy because "It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living." This tension or contradiction is at the heart of Andrew Cockburn's collection of reportage, *The Spoils of War*. His focus is the US military-industrial complex and the way in which it constantly pursues new forms of technologically advanced weapons and logistics systems which invariably fail to materialize on time and on budget (see also NASA), with the result that insufficient numbers of new systems are put into operation and so older or obsolete items must be kept in use to make up the shortfall. As he puts it:

"The Air Force's fighter strength, for example, declined by almost two thirds between 1999 and 2022. Furthermore, since new models never arrive in sufficient numbers, the service must keep older models in service for longer than originally projected, which of course require progressively more intensive maintenance, driving costs still higher (p.270)."

Not only is this clearly sub-optimal in itself but the desire of commercial companies and the senior military brass who work with them (and often, subsequently, for them) to incorporate the very latest technological advances actively acts to undermine the social relations of good military practice, as Postman foretold.

Cockburn has made much of this in another book, *Kill Chain* (2016), which described the rise of drones and drone technology in contemporary warfare and made the connection that it was reliance on technology rather than human interventions that has led to the perpetration of civilian massacres in America's battlefields in the Middle East. In this book, he writes of a similar problem affecting the Air Force (which is the most prone to this kind of mistake because, at least in part, of historical wrangles over its existence and funding).

Here, the contrast is drawn between the A-10 Warthog (other models are, I believe, in service) and the much newer B1 bomber. The former was specifically designed for close ground support, which means it is able to approach military operations at close range while being protected by extensive armour plating. The armour does not improve the plane's agility but it does accentuate its role of flying close above the action while the pilot and crew can take careful note of what is going on and who is involved. Military leaders who were genuinely concerned to minimize civilian casualties would use the A-10 and its human intelligence to make sure they knew what was happening. However, the A-10 was considered outdated and its functions could be assumed by a new generation of aeroplane, in the form of the B1. Unfortunately, so as to be bedecked with the very latest baubles and gadgets, the cost of each B1 had spiralled to US\$300 million so, unarmoured as it was to enhance performance, it had to be kept well out of the way of enemy fire. Consequently, B1 crews relied on technology and the reports of remote observers to identify targets which they would then seek to destroy from afar. In the event of uncertainty, perverse incentives came into play – releasing weapons defined an event as a military confrontation and that appeared on an individual's record, leading to better opportunities for promotion and transfers to more desirable theatres of operation. Besides which, should anything go wrong, those involved could realistically depend on government spokespeople and obedient media mouthpieces to claim that anyone killed was a 'militant' or enemy combatant of some sort and that, by virtue of being in the vicinity of a designated target, is sufficient to merit a death sentence.

Cockburn collects a variety of pieces in this book (he also credits his editor for doing this), most of which first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* and each which a brief paragraph bringing the story up to date. As a journalist, he relies upon the personal interview and has clearly obtained access to individuals at very high levels. That he has been able to do this lends credibility to his exposition of the facts and this is buttressed by the occasional use of triangulation in the form of secondary literature. This is good enough for journalism and the people willing to provide a positive blurb for the back cover suggests that many readers will be convinced by the way the story is told. However, the narrative is generally written in a way that consistently follows a pattern and there will be those who imagine real life is somewhat less predictable and that a fuller explanation of who was spoken to, when and under what circumstances might yield some alternative interpretations. There is also the issue of omission: in every chapter, an impressive range of sources is deployed from across the years to buttress the main argument but what did they say that we are not being told? Journalists protect their sources, of course and academics too will insist on confidentiality for their respondents. Even so, there remains a sense that other stories could have been told.

Although most of the pieces in the book cohere around the central narrative, there are a couple towards the end which stray into the areas of finance and banking. Insofar as these pieces contribute to the general understanding of American governance generally being at least as corrupt as anywhere else, they too contribute to the thrust of the book. However, these chapters do tend to dilute the overall flow.

The military debacle does not seem to be getting any better: the new fighter plane being introduced to allies around the world is the F35, assiduously hawked at all weapons shows, despite the fact that it is out of operation for nearly half the time, no one dares to fly it near to a thunderstorm and the pilots have to wear helmets so unwieldy that they can scarcely move their heads. These machines also require an inordinate

amount of maintenance and support, that can seemingly be provided only by American mechanics and engineers. Can the F35 really overcome these problems and prove to be decisive on the battlefield? Cockburn concludes that this is not the point of the military-industrial complex. Drawing on the thought of Pentagon analyst Frankin 'Chuck' Spinney, he claims that "... the imperative of the US military-industrial complex is not to prepare for war, but to perpetuate and amplify the flow of money in its direction, principally by means of promoting ever more expensive and complex systems of dubious utility (p.269)."

It is certainly true that claims made by military leadership around the world of the benefits of the technology they are able to deploy has been found to be overblown. The progress of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the strike by Hamas fighters (who are terrorists) against Israel both suggest that relying on technology to perform in the way claimed for it would be a mistake.

References

Cockburn, A. (2016). *Kill chain: Drones and the rise of high-tech assassins*. London and New York, NY: Verso.

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John Walsh, Krirk University