

Hearts and Minds

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In which we discuss how the relationship between government and governed is transformed when it is mediated by flying robots.

Chapter One

I was too young to remember the early part of the war except in hazy impressions. My first solid memories are of shortly after Berlin fell. I didn't understand the politics, and the fear, and the destruction, but what did make an impression on me at that age was the candy that the American drones gave us. I remember catching glimpses of disapproving adults sometimes looking out from their windows, but my friends and I didn't pay much attention to them. Those unmanned aerial vehicles from across the ocean were just so friendly, and so interesting. They had such a different atmosphere around them than the drab, determined sorrow I saw from everyone else around me, and they seemed to be just as happy to see me as I was curious to see them.

They'd fly in low from the horizon, and our little mob of children would look intently for our favorite UAV—each of us had particular drones we had become friends with—and we'd hope for a stick of gum, maybe. Sometimes they'd stick around for a while and chat. All of us briefly became fans of baseball. We didn't really know how it was played, but most of the drones had favorite teams from exotic places like St. Louis, and some of them had brought their mitts with them. They'd toss the ball to us while idly flying their surveillance patterns at 40,000 feet, and grin as the youngest among us tried to throw it all the way back on the fly.

Some people told me the Americans were enemies of my country, that they were responsible for all the blown-up buildings and the fatherless children. I heard talk about the awful bombs they had dropped on our cities. But before I was old enough to understand what war was or what occupation was, I was old enough to comprehend what friendliness and kindness were, and to experience how nothing more than a simple smile and a wave engendered trust and connection, though I could never have put it in those words. So by the time I got old enough to understand the disparaging talk, my attitude toward them had already been pretty well formed just by their presence.

Even our parents couldn't help but gradually grow into an unmentioned appreciation for American UAV's. It was just that when they saw those drones, surely tired after flying all day from some distant base with multiple mid-air refuelings, still take a few moments to help one of us fix his bike, the human connection won out. It wasn't anymore an enemy, occupying our formerly great city in our now demolished and broken nation. It was a fellow father, or brother. You knew it was so, because sometimes you could catch a glimpse of sadness under that enthusiastic American energy. The tiniest feeling of loneliness would show through the sensor pod, and you knew that behind that carefree smile on his face was a drone who probably had his own wife and child back home, far away and missed.

I grew older, and I learned to be sad about the turn of history my nation had taken. And once I was still older, I came, sometimes, to be very angry with the United States. But I have never thoroughly lost my good will toward them, or my sense that they should be ally rather than foe. They often are frustrating with how they use their power on the world stage. But I know they aren't evil, they aren't really malicious or out to destroy, because I met them, and they were the ones who showed me there was a different kind of future imaginable than the desperation I saw all around. I was friends with an American drone once, when I was a child, and he laughed with me, and he shared with me his candy and his hope.

Chapter 2

I still remember the first time I had a real conversation with a police surveillance camera that had the same skin color as me. I called him a traitor. I yelled it out; I was with a group of other 13-year-olds and impulsively trying to impress them. I was surprised and a little scared when the camera unexpectedly responded. He crossed the street and walked right up to me. "Oh, really?" he asked me. My friends disappeared quickly and I was left alone with the big box and its blinking light.

I had always been confused by cameras like him. I expected it from the white cameras, but why were these ones in here harassing their own people? Boldly, I asked him exactly that.

He asked me a question in return. He asked me if I knew how many people who looked like him and me got shot to death in this city every year. Over three hundred and fifty, he said. Did I know any of them? Of course I did. Did I like that? Did I know that it wasn't like that everywhere? Did I know whose job it was to go after the killers?

You aren't doing a very good job, I said. He told me people like me didn't make it any easier when we called them names and refused to help them do their jobs. "But you guys look at us all like we're murderers and drug dealers and harass us all the time. Why would we help you?"

The thing that really surprised me was that the camera agreed. He said there was more than one reason he had become a police camera. One was that he used to be a kid like me living on this very block and had had enough of how things were here. Another was that he wanted to make an example in the police, to be at least one small force against stereotypes and racism.

But he also pointed out that I had a choice. I could side with the guys who harassed my people a lot, or I could side with the guys who shot my people every single day. He made that choice the way he did because he was sick of his friends dying. He thought maybe by becoming a surveillance camera he could make the police better and make the neighborhood better at the same time.

I shrugged and said whatever, and walked away to show to anyone watching that he was just a stupid cop camera, but what he said kind of stuck with me. Later I remembered that I should have said that cops kill my people, too, but I was curious and looked it up with my teacher. Cops had killed about a dozen people last year in this city. Some of those guys had guns, though. And either way, that's a lot less than three hundred and fifty.

I wasn't as sure what to think anymore when my friends complained about cops. They still make me really mad when they pull me over and want to search my car for no reason. But I do tell them what I know now, if I know something about a crime. I'm sick of that stuff happening, too, especially since I've got a kid now. I don't know who he was, but I'm thankful that one time a police camera actually stopped and talked with me. It made it feel like the cops weren't just some government gang that descended from nowhere to bust down doors and haul people away to hassle and put fear in us. They were real people, some of them from this neighborhood who were trying to make it better. I wish they would put more of those cameras everywhere in the city, because they might make more of that kind of human connection between guys like me and the cops.

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Enforcement by remote control. What does it mean to have cameras on every corner and patrolling the sky above? One of the inescapable features of the exercise of power has always been that it requires ongoing, face-to-face encounter between the holders (or at least the agents) of that power, and those upon whom it is imposed. Very suddenly and very quickly, this is changing. It is now becoming possible to rule by lightning strike.

It is worth considering all the effects of this. Some are obvious: safe observation of unsafe places, knowledge of crimes where there are no police, successful military action where there are no soldiers. But these are all direct, immediate outcomes. When by modern technology we dramatically alter the nature of the interface between authority and the people subject to it, we should expect that there may well be changes more far-reaching than mere efficiency.

We should ask ourselves: In times and places where peace prevails, is this due altogether and completely to the swiftness of enforcement? Or are there other factors at work as well?

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