

## *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth*

Mark Mazzetti (Penguin Press, 2013) 381 pp.

**Reviewed by Richard T. Willing**

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Mark Mazzetti is one of a group of *New York Times* reporters who specialize in covering (and sometimes disclosing the secrets of) various elements of the US intelligence and national security apparatus. Mazzetti's particular specialty is CIA, and he has chosen the agency's efforts in the struggle against Islamist terrorism since 11 September 2001 as the focus of his first book.

The "Knife" in Mazzetti's title is drawn from a metaphor used by DCIA John O. Brennan while he served as President Obama's counterterrorism and domestic security advisor to describe America's approach to waging war against al Qaeda. The nation, Brennan observed in a May 2010 speech, must "prudently" use force, relying at times on a "scalpel" rather than a "hammer."<sup>1</sup> It is Mazzetti's thesis that the scalpel approach, meaning the selective use of armed drones and small paramilitary forces, is far from the neat surgical incision that the word seems to imply. Instead, he argues, the scalpel approach has created enemies as well as destroyed them, has "short-circuited the normal mechanisms" for going to war, and has turned the CIA into a "killing machine" consumed with "man hunting."

From the first pages, the author's point of view is clear: he doesn't approve. The way of the knife, he argues, places the president in the unprecedented position of making individual targeting decisions in secret, which is bad for American democracy. It has caused the CIA, he continues, to become distracted from its singular role as producer of vital centralized intelligence. Inevitably, Mazzetti writes, the CIA and the Department of Defense have become tangled in a

duplicative and often counterproductive rivalry, as intelligence gathering and paramilitary activities "bleed" into one another.

Mazzetti's conclusions won't come as a surprise to readers familiar with his coverage in the *New York Times*. His point of view seems to prevent him at times from seeing the larger picture or appreciating nuance as he seeks out anecdotes that seem to prove his case. For instance, he argues that the disaster in Benghazi in September 2012 is best described simply as a direct outgrowth of overreliance on the way of the knife. This is facile analysis.

*The Way of the Knife* is not a negative screed, but it does little to acknowledge the CIA's successes or to offer historical context. Readers won't learn, for instance, that the tension over whether and how to undertake covert operations, as well as rivalries between civilian intelligence and the military predate CIA's founding in 1947. Nor will they learn that what Mazzetti describes as the "shrunken and dispirited" CIA of early 2001 was already hard at work on its assignment to find, fix, and finish Usama Bin Ladin.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, *The Way of the Knife* is a lively and worthwhile read. Which authorities and protections ought to be available to the CIA (instead of the military) in carrying out actions abroad is a question we are bound to continue to discuss. Our president and Brennan have signaled as much. Mazzetti's credentials ensure that his arguments will receive a wide airing. The intelligence professional, though, will also find that his thesis and the manner in

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<sup>1</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-assistant-president-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism-john-brennan-csi](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-assistant-president-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism-john-brennan-csi)

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which he supports it require close and sometimes skeptical scrutiny.

Mazzetti's description of the drone program is a case in point.<sup>2</sup> He tracks its development from the post-9/11 stage to what he describes as parallel and competing military and CIA programs operating in the mountains of Pakistan, on the Arabian peninsula, and in Africa. (pp. 46–47, 267–68, 311)

Drones—precise, effective, unmanned, remotely piloted—prove, in the author's view, to be an irresistible weapon for administrations constrained by policy judgments and court rulings from taking prisoners or placing boots on the ground. Drones are also, in Mazzetti's telling, the perfect antidote for a CIA presumably demoralized by its "years in the detention-and-interrogation business." The CIA has seized on armed drones and "targeted killings" as its "new direction," Mazzetti argues. (26, 219)

The author describes in detail how collateral damage from drone strikes, including the deaths of innocents, has strengthened al Qaeda's case and complicated America's relationship with its allies. Here Mazzetti relies on well-publicized but still unacknowledged details of operations and commentary from professionals with knowledge of the drone program and, usually, a viewpoint sympathetic to the author's. (162)

The CIA's relationship with the Department of Defense receives similar treatment. In Mazzetti's telling, a rivalry began in earnest after the 9/11 attacks, when CIA acted quickly to get operators on the ground in Afghanistan and became the lead agency in the global war on terror. The military, with a large array of Special Operations Forces available, lacked

"actionable intelligence" (and possibly legal authorities) to get into the field quickly. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld complained, asking in a memo to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Isn't it conceivable that the Department (of Defense) ought not to be in a position of near total dependence on CIA in situations like this?" (67–68)

Mazzetti then describes a period in which the military attempted to compensate by building up its intelligence collection capabilities, often relying on elite special units and private contractors. CIA, meanwhile, enlarged its paramilitary capabilities to meet the needs of its expanded mission. The result, the author concludes, often has been duplication, confusion, and an informal marketplace in which parallel or conflicting programs are created and providers can shop their services to the highest bidder.

"Everything is backwards," former CIA lawyer W. George Jameson is quoted as saying. "You've got an intelligence agency fighting a war and a military organization trying to gather on-the-ground intelligence." (314) Perhaps this is so, especially for those overly concerned by organizational charts. But the fact remains that the CIA did continue to collect and analyze, and the military did its share of fighting (recall that a Navy SEAL team, not a CIA unit, carried out the raid on Bin Ladin's compound). Organizational "bleed" or not, the combined efforts of the Intelligence Community, with the CIA in the lead, and the American military largely have been getting the job done over the past 10 years. Mazzetti gives this little consideration, leaving the reader to wonder what other inconvenient truths were cast aside as he assembled his book?



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<sup>2</sup> The Predator's pre-9/11 roots are described in Frank Strickland's "The Early Evolution of the Predator Drone," *Studies in Intelligence* 57, no. 1 (March 2013).