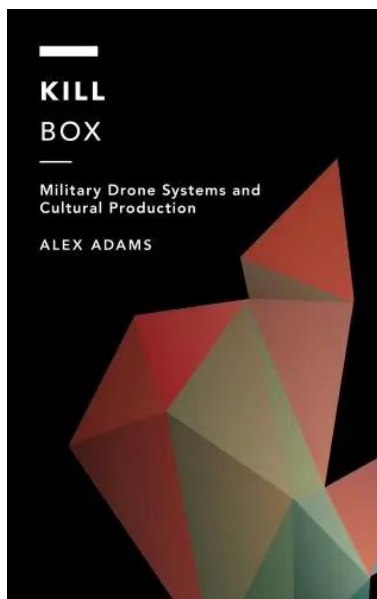# The Attack Killed Them:
Drone Warfare and the Exonerative Voice

BY Alex Adams **PUBLISHED** December 5, 2024

URL https://dronewars.net/2024/12/05/the-attack-killed-them-drone-warfare-and-the-exonerative-voice/

Language is one of the most powerful political weapons. The ability to choose how state violence, such as drone warfare, is described is the ability to attempt to determine how it is understood. Consider the difference between the word 'murder', for example, and the word 'neutralisation'. Though they can both be used to mean the same thing – the deliberate killing of a person – the word 'murder' is vividly emotive, whereas 'neutralisation' is vague, bureaucratic, and sterile. To say that a drone has been used to *murder a person* sounds much more negative – violent, gruesome, even – than to say that it has been used to *neutralise a threat*. For 'neutralisation' we could substitute, perhaps, equally banal words such as 'interdiction' or 'prosecution', lofty-sounding technical words with an aura of expertise and formality but which are also difficult to pin down to a precise meaning.

Language, that is to say, often masks the horrors of drone warfare in ways that subtly work to sanitise and legitimise it. One of the key claims about drone warfare, after all, is that it is uniquely positioned to minimize harm, with the metaphors of 'surgical precision' and 'pinpoint accuracy' being used to suggest that drone strikes are a particularly clean, and therefore proportionate and defensible, form of aerial bombardment. But it is not only such clear uses of metaphor that function to obscure the nature of drone killing. Very often we see the use of what has become known as the 'exonerative voice' or the 'past exonerative tense', which is a specific way of constructing utterances in order to simultaneously declare

that violence has been done and to obscure responsibility for that violence. When exonerative language is used to describe state violence, we are made aware of this violence in a specific way: a way that makes it seem perhaps accidental, or inevitable, or a benign or unimportant by-product of an automatic and legitimate process. Violence appears as anything but violent.

The Politics of Grammar

Perhaps the most direct way to explain the exonerative voice is through examples. Discussing the ubiquitous phrase "mistakes were made," John Broder writes that this particular piece of innocuous-sounding jargon "sounds like a confession of error or even contrition, but in fact, it is not quite either one. The speaker is not accepting personal responsibility or pointing the finger at anyone else." It is a linguistic sleight of hand through which people can simultaneously *admit* that something disagreeable happened and *hide* the fact that this disagreeable thing was an act (often a deliberate act) of wrongdoing for which people or groups can and should be held accountable.

Many writers have pointed out that this specific linguistic trick is often used to describe police killings. In a satirical piece structured as a style guide for using the past exonerative, Devorah Blachor shows how multiple accounts of the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 (the killing that sparked global waves of Black Lives Matter protests) failed explicitly to acknowledge that Floyd was murdered by police. Instead, they coyly referred to police misconduct, a death in custody, or to an incident in which an officer was disciplined for kneeling. The *New York Times*, for instance, wrote: "4 Minneapolis Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody." The past exonerative tense, Blachor archly writes, "transforms acts of police brutality against Black people into neutral events in which Black people have been accidentally harmed or killed as part of a vague incident where police were present-ish".

'I Can't Breathe': 4 Minneapolis Officers Fired After Black Man Dies in Custody

"Being black in America should not be a death sentence," the city's mayor said as video of the arrest was widely shared.

New York Times, May 26, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/us/minneapolis-police-man-died.html

Writing about the curious phrase "officer-involved shooting," a deliberately ambiguous formulation which is often used to refer to police brutality, scholar Michael Conklin likewise argues that the awkward and indirect nature of the phrase fails to identify anybody as having actually done anything.

> The phrase "officer-involved shooting" is not just grammatically ambiguous; it also deceptively implies that the officer did not do the shooting. This is because referring to someone as being "involved" in an act insinuates that he was only involved in some tangential way.

To the degree that state violence is intelligible at all when spoken about in this opaque register, it appears accidental or incidental, rather than as the central content of the reported event. This is no accident: the exonerative voice is a fantastically effective tool for the misrepresentation of violence.

Drone discourse, too, has its equivalent version of this rhetorical trick. Rather than saying that mistakes were made or that individuals died, however, responsibility for harm is displaced away from the drone or the drone crews and onto the strike itself.

Drone-Involved Strike
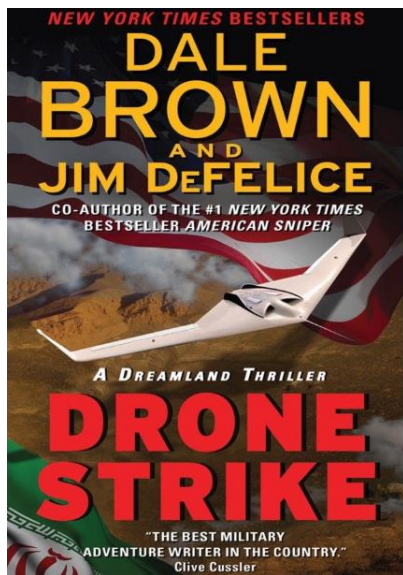
For a particularly vivid look at how the exonerative voice can be found in drone discourse, let us consider *Drone Strike*, a 2014 military thriller novel written by Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice. The plot of the novel centres on the realization of a long-dreaded political possibility: the active development of nuclear weapons by the Iranian state. The novel's characters, however, use drone technology to infiltrate the Iranian nuclear weapons programme and detonate all of the materials in the bunker where the warheads are being assembled. There is no official death toll for this covert mission, but it is implicit in the operation that every single Iranian engineer working in the laboratory will be vaporized along with the fledgling weapons. Where this novel becomes interesting for the present discussion, however, is the way in which Brown and DeFelice show us the moral qualms of the drone operator, Turk Mako.

"Though he didn't feel guilt, exactly," write Brown and DeFelice, "Turk felt unsettled":

> How many people had died in the nuclear explosion, or been buried by the resulting tremors? It was the Iranian leaders' fault, he told

himself, not theirs, and certainly not his. If anything, he had saved thousands, millions. Destroying the weapon meant it couldn't be used, and even the crudest math would easily show that the damage here was far less than if the weapon had been.

Turk's reasoning here is a short cut to reassurance. Not only is the attack morally legitimate because of its preventative nature, but what is more, he concludes that he personally is not responsible for the nuclear detonation caused by his own actions. Note that he wonders how many people died in the *nuclear blast* and the *resulting tremors*, and not in the strike that he himself conducted and that was the sole direct cause of the detonation and its aftershocks. As soon as he begins to reflect upon his own actions, he begins to elide his own responsibility for them by thinking in indirect, exonerative language.
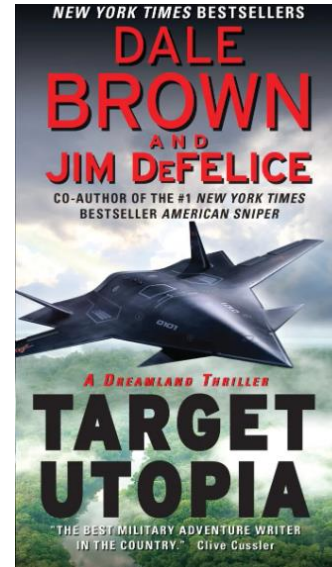
In the follow-up novel, *Target Utopia* (2015), Turk reflects that he is "mad at the Iranians for cheating on their nuclear agreement and making the attack that had killed so many lives necessary." This partly passive, partly deflective, and partly probabilistic formulation is particularly interesting: *the attack* did the killing, and *the Iranians* made it necessary because they *might* have used a bomb which they *may* have developed. Once again, this exonerative formulation of events obscures Turk's responsibility for them, disguising the fact that it was Turk himself who infiltrated Iran and used American drones to detonate Iranian nuclear ordnance. Yet he explains to himself that it was the attack that killed his victims and the Iranians themselves who invited it. His own responsibility for the detonations is dissolved in an exonerative formulation that subtly but definitely shifts responsibility onto his victims. What is most interesting is that these actions that Turk is so eager to disavow are simultaneously the heroic actions that constitute the central dramatic content of the novel and for which he is celebrated.

But it is not, of course, only in fiction that such linguistic contortions can be found. To return to the broader political and journalistic language used to describe state force, we can see that Israeli airstrikes in Gaza are also able to independently kill large amounts of people. This July, *The New York Times* wrote that "Israeli Airstrikes Kill Over 20, Gazans Say"; in October they wrote that "Israeli Airstrikes on Northern Gaza Kill at Least 20, Aid Workers Say."

Israeli Airstrikes Kill Over 20, Gazans Say, and Hit Another U.N. Building

The Israeli military said it was targeting militants operating in a U.N. school being used as a shelter in Nuseirat. A second strike caused fatalities in Al-Mawasi, the Gazan Health Ministry said.

New York Times, July 16, 2024.
https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/16/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza.html

Though these headlines do, of course, announce the fact of Israeli violence in Gaza, they do so by saying that it was Israeli airstrikes – and not Israeli *personnel*, or Israeli *soldiers* – that did the killing. By subtly placing distance between the use of force and the people responsible for it, this linguistic device presents violence against Gaza and Gazans as somehow *automatic* and *inevitable*.

Drone Strike and *Target Utopia*, then, give us an interesting insight into the ways in which these linguistic strategies in fact reflect a particularly interesting mindset. At the same time as these utterances reveal violence, they conceal the complex matter of moral and practical responsibility, and they are evidence of a double standard in which those responsible for violence wish to both conduct colossal violence with impunity and convince themselves that they do not have blood on their hands.

Alex Adams is author of *Kill Box: Military Drone Systems and Cultural Production*, published in December 2024 by Rowman and Littlefield. His past work includes *Death TV: Drone Warfare in Contemporary Popular Culture*, published by Drone Wars UK in 2021.