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Superman, Iron Man, Captain Kirk and the Predator Drone Dilemma

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MARC DIPAOLO, DEC 13 2013

Superman punches a Predator drone out of the sky. He doesn't want it discovering his secret identity as Clark Kent, finding the Fortress of Solitude, or generally following him around. He offers a half-hearted apology to two military officials, who complain that he has destroyed very expensive equipment. They justify their spying by explaining that the U.S. government regards him as an alien security threat. Superman protests that he is from Kansas, is as American as one can get, and should be trusted instead of spied upon.

Tony Stark, shell-shocked from his wartime experience repelling a vast army of alien invaders from the streets of Manhattan alongside the Avengers, spends every waking hour building a vast army of Iron Man "drones" – unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) suits – to defend his family and country from future threats.

These segments from two of 2013's summer blockbusters, *Man of Steel* and *Iron Man 3*, demonstrate that superhero stories continue to make themselves relevant by commenting upon real-world social concerns and military conflicts. While the earliest comic books were products of the Great Depression and saw 1940s era heroes such as Captain America and Wonder Woman fighting the Axis Powers during World War II, later costumed hero adventures featured the Punisher serving in Vietnam, the Joker teaming up with the Ayatollah Khomeini in *Batman: A Death in the Family* (1989), and the Fantastic Four allegorically re-enacting Operation Iraqi Freedom by conquering Latveria in *Fantastic Four: Authoritative Action* (2004).

Continuing this long-standing tradition of politically minded superhero adventures, *Man of Steel* and *Iron Man 3* both consider heroism in the age of the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator, an unmanned surveillance and attack plane that has been used in combat most famously in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Yemen. The Obama administration has placed increased emphasis on the use of attack drones in the war on terrorism, touting their ability to launch "surgical strikes" against targets and keeping American troops' "boots off the ground." Critics of the drone program, such as Jeremy Scahill, author of *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield* (2013), argue that the use of drones causes great civilian collateral damage – killing pregnant women and other innocent civilians – and generating more future enemies of the United States than they eliminate. Also, as an assassination method, the drones are used to execute enemies of the state who should be arrested instead of exterminated, law professor Bill Quigley argues.

And yet, instead of going away, the use of the technology is broadening, as various cities around the world are implementing drone programs to patrol the streets to prevent graffiti and other street crimes, and the BBC has reported that the FBI has employed drones in domestic surveillance since 2006. Meanwhile, Amazon.com recently announced that it is developing a drone-driven delivery system, expected to be ready within five years, to replace traditional mail delivery of their packages.

The drones represent both a major moral dilemma for modern society and a storytelling stumbling block for adventure narratives. The questions that social liberals and libertarians might be likely to ask themselves are: Do drones violate a basic right to privacy? Do they undermine the principals of freedom and civil liberty Americans claim to embrace? Are we headed for the kind of dystopian future envisioned in the *Terminator* film franchise in which the

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supercomputer Skynet rules the world and uses drones and cyborg assassins to crush the human resistance? Meanwhile, superheroes (if they were real) might wonder what need there is for their assistance in a world already adequately policed by robot “superheroes.” Instead of Superman diving out of the sky to defeat a criminal, the CIA can simply send in a drone. And what good is one Iron Man suit operated by an alcoholic egomaniac like Tony Stark when one can send in hundreds or thousands of empty Iron Man suits to take out the Chitauri forces? And these suits know how to follow orders! If superheroes are in danger of becoming obsolete thanks to drones, what chance do average humans have, or such quaint artifacts like the United States Constitution?

In the epilogue of the *Man of Steel*, Superman actually represents the average American, protesting that his own government need not spy upon him. Yes, Superman says, on some level, we are all “security risks,” but a little trust is in order, or there is no freedom. Meanwhile, *Iron Man 3* is about how the Military Industrial Complex justifies its own existence and funds the creation of truly dangerous technology by “responding to” exaggerated foreign threats and mass media fueled public fear frenzies. The film ends with Tony Stark refusing to participate in an atmosphere of fear and destroying his entire drone army. He chooses hope over fear and opts to face future security threats as a man – not as a man hiding behind a drone army. The symbolic point is effective, though many who watch the film ask two questions that screenwriter Shane Black clearly doesn’t want them to ask: 1) Why didn’t Stark deploy the drones earlier in the movie when he needed it most? and 2) Isn’t it a mistake destroying that army should he need it in the future? These questions are not in the spirit of the politics of the film, but they haunt the movie – and our society – nevertheless.

The summer 2013 blockbuster that deals most extensively and effectively with the drone question is not a superhero movie, but is, nevertheless, about a classic American hero confronted by the drone dilemma – Captain James T. Kirk. In *Star Trek Into Darkness*, Kirk is ordered to fire a long-range photon torpedo across the reaches of enemy space, thereby surgically striking the wilds of the Klingon home world and instantly killing suspected terrorist Khan Noonien Singh. In this allegory, the Klingon planet is *clearly* Pakistan, Khan is symbolically an Al-Qaeda operative, and Kirk is a stand-in for President Barack Obama. When Scotty resigns from his post on the Enterprise to protest that the Federation shouldn’t abandon its principals on this morally unjust mission, he is asking what has happened to the soul of the Star Trek universe (read: America) and wondering aloud why a “liberal” like Kirk/Obama would be tempted to the dark side like this and follow the example of Dick Cheney/Admiral Marcus. Spock does not join Scotty in his resignation, but vows to remain at his post to try to reform the Federation from within. When Kirk ultimately disobeys orders, disavows the use of drones, and decides to go to the Klingon home world personally with a strike force to arrest Khan to bring him to trial, the logical Spock all but cheers. Kirk is back! The Federation is back! Director J.J. Abrams and his screenwriters seem to be asking, “When will Obama follow suit? When will America follow suit? When will Americans get their country back?”

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