

Danger Ahead: The Game Changer Drone

by Michael Curtis



Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. The unease of rulers may result from personal factors, constant worry, lack of sleep, feeling of guilt for past odious actions, but also often from fear of assassination. The list is long of the sad stories of the death of kings, all murdered. Many of the victims in different countries and different eras have been well known, and been historically important. Even the Bible tells the story of Joab, commander of King David's army who killed the King's rebellious son and rival Absalon.

A quick survey of some of the well known victims illustrates the targeted killings. Phillip II of Macedonia was assassinated in 336 B.C. and Julius Caesar on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. For a number of centuries, 8-14th, an Islamic sect called the *Assassins* was active in the areas of what is now Iran and Syria, killing, often under influence of

hashish, caliphs, viziers, sultans and Crusaders, for political and religious reasons.

The Renaissance illuminates a catalogue of tyrannicide. Rulers or challengers for power continued to be subject to assassination, which then influenced official policy. Henry IV in France in 1610, Russian Tsars, Paul I and Alexander II, and Rasputin in 1916, Prime Minister Spencer Perceval in May 1812, the only British prime minister to suffer this fate, Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, and Leon Trotsky in Mexico City on August 21, 1940.

The U.S. has lost four presidents to assassins, and Huey Long in Baton Rouge on September 10, 1935, Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis on April 4, 1968. In recent years other countries have lost leaders or leading figures: among them are Mahatma Gandhi in Delhi on January 30, 1948, Anwar Sadat in Cairo on October 6, 1981, Olaf Palme in Stockholm on February 28, 1986, Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv on November 4, 1995, Benazir Bhutto, prime minister in Pakistan and the first woman to head a democratic country in a Muslim majority nation, in Rawalpindi on December 27, 2007.

Though some attempts at assassination failed, the most memorable and significant being *Operation Valkrie*, the attack on Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944 in his Wolf's Lair field headquarters, most assassinations, successful or not, throughout history have been well planned with perpetrators using weapons, crossbows, knives, firearms, bombs, car bombs or poison. An event in Venezuela on August 4, 2018 showed a new departure, the newest attempt at targeted killing of leaders, ominous in its implication. At a military rally, celebrating the National Guard, in Caracas attended by President Nicolas Maduro at which he spoke, an attack, or alleged attack on him was made by two drones equipped with explosives. Minor damage and casualties were caused in the failed attempt but what is important is that the world is now

aware of this technique of assassination.

Few would mourn the loss of the 56 year old Maduro, former bus driver, trade union leader, member of the Venezuela National Assembly, vice president and protege of Hugo Chavez, whom he succeeded as president in April 2013. In the election, widely seen as a "show election," on May 20, 2018 Maduro was reelected president for a term of six years. His victory was predictable and inevitable since opposition candidates were prevented from running, were arrested, or in exile. Maduro's government had arrested the critical mayor of Caracas in February 2018, and the government controlled the electoral council.

Under Maduro's rule, the rights of citizens have been abused by human rights violations, use of violence, repression, criminalization of demonstrations, arbitrary detention on false charges of conspiracy, rule by decree, drug money laundering, profits from the cocaine business, military prosecution of civilians, and assault, torture, and assassination of critics.

Though Venezuela has large oil reserves, estimated to be the largest proven oil reserves in the world, the country has been plagued by economic mismanagement, by corruption, crime, high inflation, poverty, hunger, bad health, malaria outbreaks. Because of the poor conditions, a considerable number, reaching a million at one point, have left the country.

On July 31, 2017 the U.S. Department of Treasury, calling Maduro a "dictator," who disregards the will of the Venezuelan people, imposed sanctions on him, froze his assets, and asserted that U.S. persons were prohibited from dealing with him. This action came a day after Maduro held elections for an assembly that would replace the democratically elected National Assembly, and would revise the constitution.

Already Maduro has blamed others for the attack, the ultra-

right, U.S. citizens in Florida, and individuals in Bogota, the Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, Yankee imperialism, though not Russian collusion or Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, in spite of this absurdity, his experience, genuine or a stage farce intended to dispose of political opponents held responsible and possibly charged with murder, treason, and terrorism, is important because of the first use of drones as an instrument of assassination, and the knowledge of accessible technology to produce drones.

Pilotless drones have some time been used for surveillance and are more recently as risk-free remote killing instruments used in military warfare. They have been used against terrorists, and for the most part they are accurate and reduce the risk of civilian casualties. The U.S. has Predator drones in bases in Kuwait, Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, in Irbil airbase in Turkey, and has used them in Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia. The UK in Syria has used "vacuum bombs" (thermobaric missiles) that suck oxygen to create a powerful high temperature explosion. Russia has used drones to jam U.S. signals. Hamas has used drones against Israel as has Hezbollah which at an airstrip in North Lebanon has deposited and later used various drones, Ababil-3, small with limited range, and the larger Shahed-129, similar to the U.S. Predator, Hezbollah boasts it is a constant threat to Israel.

The danger to the world is immediate as drones, unmanned flying objects, are proliferating. Technology to produce them is accessible and does not require any considerable funding. Commercial drones are available to be used for violence. The significance of the event in Venezuela is that it demonstrates use of drones is increasingly possible as a threat of assassination of political leaders. The democratic world recognizes that safety and security measures are vitally needed. U.S. technology is responding with appropriate counter-technology. Radio frequencies can be jammed. Safety nets can be used to grab a drone near a high risk area. High

powered microwaves and compact laser weapons systems are being developed to dispose of drones. It is comforting that the U.S. is beginning to see the light.