



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 11, 2014

Revenge, Response, and Blowback: Lessons From Third Century B.C.

We see on the theater of the world a certain number of scenes which succeed each other in endless repetition: where we see the same faults followed regularly by the same misfortunes, we may reasonably think that if we could have known the first we might have avoided the others. The past should enlighten us on the future: knowledge of history is no more than an anticipated experience.



— Charles Pinot Duclos

Over two hundred years before the birth of Christ, a ruthless and ambitious Aetolian commander ordered an attack on the renowned Greek city of Dion (Latin *Dium*). Polybius, the famed Greek historian of immense influence on our own Founding Generation, described Dion as “rich and artistic,” a city noted for its many “rich and elaborate” buildings.

Polybius records that the Aetolian aggressors “demolished the walls, houses, and gymnasium, burning also the colonnade round the sanctuary and destroying all the other monuments of piety which served for adornment or for the convenience of those who frequented” the popular *polis* situated at the foot of Mount Olympus.

Back home, among many Aetolians, Scopas, the mastermind of the assault, was lauded as a hero, “just as if he had not been guilty of an impious outrage, but had done a great public service,” and he was “universally honoured and admired,” Polybius records.

A few years after this sudden and surprise attack on this Macedonian marvel, a young king of Macedon was anxious to prove his courage and cement his legitimacy as heir to the throne of Alexander the Great. He decided, therefore, to avenge the Aetolian atrocity by launching his own brutal and merciless attack on the terrorists’ home soil.

Philip V of Macedon carried out his vengeful attack on Aetolia, refusing to be bound by “laws of war,” believing he was “acting rightly and properly” in exacting his revenge on the perpetrators of the massacre at the mighty Macedonian city.

The king would teach the Aetolians the definition of brutality and barbarism. The cruelty of Philip’s strike against Aetolia matched that displayed by the latter in their earlier razing of Dion. He was anxious to “cure one evil with another,” believing his violation of the laws of war and basic tenets of humanity was justified by the level of savagery shown by his enemy in their actions on his homeland.

What Philip failed to recognize, Polybius writes, is that “by behaving in precisely the same manner he would earn the same reputation among the very people he was addressing.”

In other words, Philip was about to learn the definition of blowback.

The drone war begun by another young scion anxious to prove his strength and to exact revenge on a



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foreign foe for a surprise and savage attack on a rich and respected city has brought this two-thousand-year-old lesson home to the United States.

From funerals to weddings, the United States, in purported payback for the terrorist strike on New York City and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, has killed thousands of Pakistanis, Afghans, and Yemenis, not one of whom was ever accused, much less convicted, of any crime.

It's one thing, Polybius explains, to conduct war according to the "usages and laws of war," but "to do wanton damage" with "no prospect of any resulting advantage in the war to our own cause or detriment to that of the enemy must be characterized as the work of a frenzied mind at the height of its fury."

Polybius condemns Philip, as well, for indiscriminately killing so many Aetolians who unquestionably had nothing to do with the devastation of Dion. "Good men," he writes, "would not involve the guiltless in the fate of the guilty."

The fury of the U.S. drone strikes has summoned the hatred of hundreds of those who recognize and resent the wholesale homicide.

After a drone attack killed 13 Yemenis by "mistake" in September 2012, relatives of those killed in the strike spoke with the clarity and carelessness that comes from the mixture of mourning and rage. "You want us to stay quiet while our wives and brothers are being killed for no reason. This attack is the real terrorism," said Mansoor al-Maweri, whom CNN reported as being "near the scene of the strike."

Then there was this from "an activist" who lives near the site of the September massacre: "I would not be surprised if a hundred tribesmen joined the lines of al Qaeda as a result of the latest drone mistake," said Nasr Abdullah. "This part of Yemen takes revenge very seriously."

For President Obama and those pulling the triggers on the joysticks guiding the missiles toward their human targets, "suspected militants" are officially defined as "all military-age males in a strike zone."

For those of us concerned with the Constitution, due process, and the rule of law, however, "suspected militant" is just a euphemism for a person not charged with any crime, not afforded even the most perfunctory due process protections, but executed by presidential decree anyway. In this way, we are no better than those we kill in the name of safety.

The drone war began in Yemen in 2002. There have reportedly been 97 such strikes since that year. The number of dead is not verifiable, but LongWarJournal reports that 475 "al-Qaeda commanders" and 105 "civilians" have been killed during the duration of the program. Of course, the accuracy of those labels is questionable given the fact that not one of those killed by U.S. drone strike has ever been formally accused of any crime or been given the opportunity to answer any allegations of association with terrorists.

Regardless of the body count, however, Americans can expect the growth of anti-American sentiment to increase proportionally to the number of missiles fired from the powerful Predator and Reaper drones used to carry out the culling of the president's kill list.

Those slated for assassination are not allowed any rights — neither the due process rights given to those accused of crimes nor the rights of fair treatment given to enemies captured on the battlefield.

The White House has assumed all power over life and death — at home and abroad — and has created a brand-new category of individual — one who can be indiscriminately deprived of all rights altogether.

Perhaps Americans shouldn't worry about blowback, about the recruitment of battalions of new



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“militants.” There are some who argue that the goal of the drone war is not to reduce AQAP’s strength, but to increase the safety of the United States.

The problem with that premise is that there is no way to tell who is a “militant” and who isn’t. More to the point, when did militancy become a crime? If it is a crime, where is it defined? How can anyone know if he is guilty of militancy if such a crime is not defined? Could one hypothetically be a militant without knowing it, given that the crime is nowhere defined?

Philip’s armed assault on Aetolia, an operation that indiscriminately killed those presumed guilty as well as those known to be innocent, created an immediate blowback that in turn led to a near constant state of war for the next 30 years.

The popular young ruler didn’t learn his lesson after the Aetolian attack, however, and he continued launching one preemptive foreign military intervention after another until Macedon itself, once the sole superpower of the known world, was brought under the rule of the emerging Roman power.

This brief recounting of ancient Greek history should remind the people and leaders of the modern American empire of the circular trajectory of history and how even the mightiest of global powers can be brought to subjugation if it deploys its military in operations matching brutality for brutality and spreading itself abroad in one unnecessary and unwise conflict after another.

Photo: view of Mount Olympus from the ancient ruins of Dion

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