

With God on our side

By [Patrick Mason](#)

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Nearly 50 years ago, Bob Dylan romped through a century of American warfare in his song "[With God on Our Side.](#)" From killing Indians to developing nuclear weapons, in Dylan's view Americans acted with the hubris of knowing they had divine approval. After all, "You never ask questions / When God's on your side."

Dylan's verses didn't mention the Revolutionary War, but they just as well could have. In a 1777 sermon entitled "[God Arising and Pleading His People's Cause,](#)" Presbyterian minister Abraham Keteltas praised the colonists' battle against malevolent Great Britain, claiming that theirs was "the cause of heaven against hell."

Historian [Thomas Kidd recently traced](#) how chaplains in the Continental Army frequently preached and published about war as a holy cause. Some even endorsed the brutal destruction of Iroquoian towns on the New York frontier. Though he's a historian quite friendly to religion, Kidd concludes that

providentialism has always been dangerous, to Americans and to other peoples, because it has a singular capacity for obfuscating injustice in war. If God is on your side, then how can you do wrong?

In the ensuing two and a half centuries, our killing technology has expanded at an ever-quickenning rate, but aside from a few [notable](#) exceptions, our theologies and ethics have largely failed to keep pace.

The latest development in our capacity to kill ever more people from an ever more distance is unmanned, armed drones. Since 9/11, the U.S. military and intelligence communities have dramatically increased their reliance on drones for surveillance and "targeted killings" of enemy combatants. Hundreds of civilians have been killed in these supposedly "surgical" strikes, including at least 176 children.

While experts debate the [utility](#), [strategic value](#), [morality](#) and [legality](#) of drone attacks, Christians have historical and theological reasons to join the [swelling chorus](#)

[of critics](#) of drone warfare. Notwithstanding the tremendous diversity of Christian views on war, peace and the state more generally, the very phrase “targeted killing” should make every Christian cringe.

Jesus was the victim of a targeted killing (and torture) by a state regime. As theologians such as [John Howard Yoder](#), [Walter Wink](#) and [Rene Girard](#) have shown, the targeted killing of Jesus on the cross unmasked the unjust violence of the state and revealed it to be of no moral efficacy. The cross of Jesus reveals the spiritual bankruptcy of political systems predicated on domination and violence. Preaching Christ crucified thus forces Christians into political territory, as they stand in prophetic judgment against the violence that killed their Lord—and any other violence that similarly takes the life of innocent noncombatants.

There are many historical examples of Christian critiques of state violence throughout U.S. history:

- [Frederick Douglass](#) and other abolitionists described violence against slaves by juxtaposing the “pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” against the “corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land.”
- [Jane Addams and other anti-imperialists](#) railed at America’s overseas expansion into Cuba, Guam and the Philippines as a new “gospel of Gatling guns.”
- [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) positioned himself against the war in Vietnam because of his commitment to the love described in the Gospel of John.
- Mormon church leaders [protested the placement of massive nuclear weapon](#) delivery systems in the American West.

Drone warfare operates in the sphere of *realpolitik*. It directly violates the fundamental ethics of Jesus, which are presumed to be something less than “real” and certainly not “politic.” Yet American drone warfare also relies in part on the same providentialism that allowed colonists to massacre Indians during the Revolution. The United States, the argument goes, is justified in both means and ends, because America is ordained by God with a special mission in the world. In this version of providentialist nationalism, God does not so much stand in judgment over the nation as offer it a blank check and a rubber stamp.

What would happen if Christians gave as much attention to targeted killings as they do to federal spending? What would happen if they testified that the targeted killing of a Pakistani Muslim is just as morally devastating as the prospect of a targeted killing of an American Christian? If we can begin to answer these questions, then it may turn out that God is on our side after all.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*