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**Revisiting the remoteness of remote warfare:**

**US military intervention in Libya during Obama's presidency**

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to develop the study of remote warfare's constitutive "remoteness." It proposes a novel definition of remoteness as the degree of the American public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence fought at a physical distance from the continental United States, as mediated through spectatorship of the use of military force. The remoteness of remote warfare has physical, psychological, and social properties. We argue that it exists on a continuum subject to change over time and should not be approached as a fixed condition measured solely by the physical distance separating combatants involved in armed fighting or as the use of various weapons technologies. The numerous dynamics associated with the remoteness of remote warfare are illustrated through an examination of American military intervention in Libya during Obama's presidency. From the height of the 2011 NATO intervention in the country onwards, US military operations in Libya became more "remote" for the American public. Whilst other contextual factors contributed toward this outcome, we argue that the diminished spectacle surrounding the 2016 Operation Odyssey Lightning helps explain the American public's increasing remoteness from military intervention in Libya.

In recent years the concept of remote warfare has developed a "buzz" in certain academic and think-tank circles, encouraging debate on the character, costs, and consequences of Western security policy (Biegon et al. 2021). Its contributions to the study of contemporary political violence remain contested, however. Both the clarity and coherence of the notion have been questioned, with some arguing that it has generated more heat than light (Rauta, 2021). This paper aims to develop the study of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness. It intends to show how clearer thinking on remoteness can enhance our understanding of the empirical complexities which the study of "remote" warfare invites, and potentially help move the debate toward a clearer sense of the notion's analytical specificity within the wider study of contemporary political violence.

In contrast to the study of physical distance which has long been argued to "sap the strength" of an intervening military force (Boulding 1963; Hulme and Gartzke 2021), scholars have only recently begun investigating the character of "remoteness" in war. Existing studies have explored remoteness in the context of the legal issues generated by the use of various weapons technologies (Ohlin 2017a, 2017b; Crawford 2017), the sociopolitical effects of overseas military intervention on Western states (Demmers and Gould 2021: Riemann and Rossi 2021a), the experiences of drone operators (Gusterson 2016; Lee 2018) and the ways in which Western publics encounter remote warfare through various forms of popular culture (Brunck 2020; Nielsen 2020). This literature has enlivened debates on remote warfare, but gaps remain in our knowledge of its constitutive remoteness. As Adelman and Kieran argue, the "debates about the increasing remoteness of warfare itself too rarely account for another phenomenon: the increasing remoteness of the costs and realities of war from citizenries in the United States and other Western countries" (2020, 9).

This paper makes the case for a novel definition of the remoteness of remote warfare as the degree of the public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence fought at a physical distance from the continental United States, as mediated through spectatorship of the use of military force. As we understand it, the remoteness of remote warfare has physical, psychological and social properties. It exists on a continuum subject to change over time and should not be approached as a fixed condition measured solely by the physical distance separating combatants involved in armed fighting or reduced to the use of various weapons technologies. Instead, we argue for approaching remoteness as a fluid and changeable process, imbued with contingency. Although a more exhaustive investigation of the dynamics which influence how "remote" remote warfare becomes for the American public must be left for future research, as a starting point for further debate, our analysis highlights the role of spectatorship as an important mediating factor in this process. The relationship between remoteness and spectatorship has been alluded to in some existing remote warfare scholarship (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 9; Brunck 2020; Nielsen 2020). We build on these observations in two ways: by paying greater attention to the literature on spectatorship in war (Der Derian 2009 [2001]; Ignatieff 2001; Mann 1988; McInnes 1999); and by tracing the effects of spectatorship on the "remoteness" of American military intervention in Libya during Obama's presidency.

Within existing remote warfare scholarship, the Libyan case has been discussed in the context of the Obama administration's circumvention of legislative constraints over military action (Demmers and Gould 2021, 35) and the ways in which remote warfare can exacerbate the long-term drivers of instability (Watson and Mckay 2021, 16–17). Our analysis extends the study of this major site of recent

American military intervention (Poirson 2017; Wehrey 2018) by focusing on the dynamics of remoteness we feel warrant greater attention. We examine both the 2011 NATO-led Operation Unified Protector and the lesser studied Operation Odyssey Lightning, the latter a military campaign conducted in support of local militias during the final year of Obama's presidency to expel the Islamic State (ISIS) from the port city of Sirte. Drawing from a range of sources including the published accounts of key administration officials, we show how, in contrast to the 2011 NATO intervention, Operation Odyssey Lightning appears to have been somewhat of a "non-event" for the American public. Whilst other contextual factors contributed toward this outcome, we argue that the diminished spectacle around Operation Odyssey Lightning helps explain the American public's increasing remoteness from military intervention in Libya.

The timeliness of this paper's investigation of remoteness comes through the correctives it proposes to remote warfare scholarship. Yet, wider empirical trends also speak to the importance of studying remoteness as a feature of contemporary political violence. There is a long history behind the detachment of Western publics from knowledge of, and emotional investment in, faraway wars. Some historical figures worried that a reliance on locally-raised forces to police overseas colonies masked the impact of imperial violence on metropolitan societies, thereby reducing the threshold for military intervention. Lord Salisbury, later Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, argued during an 1868 Parliamentary debate that India should not be looked upon "as an English barrack in the Oriental seas from which we may draw any number of troops without paying for them . . . because it is always bad for us not to have that check upon the temptation to engage in little wars which can only be controlled by the necessity of paying for them" (Quoted in Chamayou 2015, 187). Since the introduction of all-volunteer armies however, there appears to be something qualitatively different about the Western public's detachment from the realities of political violence deserving of particular scrutiny. A 2011 poll, for example, suggested that half of the American public believed that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – the largest and most conspicuous of recent US military interventions – had "made little difference in their lives" (Pew Research Center, 2011a).

The dynamics involved with such "remoteness" also speak to the seemingly everwidening temporality and geographic scope of some contemporary wars (Demmers and Gould 2021, 39–40; Riemann and Rossi 2021a, 80; Watson and Mckay 2021, 16). To put the global scale of American military activities into some perspective, as of 2018, counterterrorism operations were being supported in over eighty countries. This included air or drone strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen (Savell 2019). In many of these states, the US had participated in armed conflict against non-state groups since the 9/11 attacks. Prior to the September 2021 troop-withdrawal, the unending and seemingly unwinnable character of the US-led war in Afghanistan led President Joseph Biden to describe the conflict as a "Forever War" (Biden 2021). This term has gained a wider currency as a metaphor for illustrating how the US has been pulled into a seemingly perpetual state of armed conflict against transnational terrorist groups without a clear or achievable endpoint (Danner 2016). Andrew Bacevich (2016) has drawn a line between the global and seemingly endless character of recent conflicts and the public's insulation from their costs. As the realities of war have become more "remote" for the American public, fewer constraints appear to have been exercised over the use of military force.

Our analysis of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness unfolds in three stages. We first trace the history of the term's "everyday life" to make the case for paying greater attention to the study of remoteness. The second section reviews existing understandings of the remoteness of remote warfare to argue for moving beyond its study as principally the production of physical distance and/or the use of technology in war. The third section applies our revised understanding of remoteness to US military operations in Libya during Obama's presidency.

**Remote warfare: from "everyday life" to research agenda?**

Remote warfare is not a new term. Since the nineteenth century it has been used in a variety of contexts to highlight the difficulties of fighting wars over large geographical distances and to describe the development of new weapons technologies. Whilst the etymology of the term "remote" has received some attention (Riemann and Rossi 2021a, 81–82), the field has yet to explore the popular history of the phrase "remote warfare." Informed by a keyword search of the term in three online databases – Gale Primary Sources, LexisNexis and the Congressional Record House – we take the first steps toward addressing this strand of ahistoricism below. This provides a useful starting point for arguing why greater attention should be given to the study of remoteness, since a term's "everyday life" can "guide [the] thought and action of individuals and collectives across all sectors of society" (Berenskoetter 2017, 155).

One of the earliest recorded uses of the term remote warfare came in an 1853 editorial published in The Times of London. This piece emphasized the "hazards of remote warfare" that Britain and France faced in fighting the Crimean War against Russia (The Times 1853). The conflict's resolution on terms favourable to Britain, it was thought, was more likely to be achieved via diplomatic pressure from all of the European Great Powers rather than victory on faraway battlefields. In a 1925 edition of the Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs, David George Hogarth – then President of the Royal Geographical Society – reflected on the implications of the "remote warfare" being fought in what is now Saudi Arabia for Britain's geopolitical position in the region (Hogarth 1925, 70). Despite the growing power of Ibn Saud (Saudi Arabia's first king), Hogarth (1925) argued that the political situation "discourage[d] military penetration which for almost any conceivable end of practical politics . . . costs far more than any result can be worth."

In its various "everyday" usages the term remote warfare has most commonly been employed as a descriptor for the use of technology in war. This understanding of remote warfare has its roots in late nineteenth century American literature (Jelfs 2020) and remains a feature of the media dialogue on drone operations (Axe 2018). The popularity of this usage of the term increased around the time of the Vietnam War: a conflict in which early drone and precision guided munition technologies were used in combat (Chamayou 2015, 27; Ignatieff 2001, 165–166). Speaking in 1977, Democratic Senator Edward William Proxmire drew a line between the development of "smart" weapons technologies and remote warfare. According to Proxmire:

Just as the wooden sailing ship gave way to steam and armor, just as the armor of the battleship gave way to aerial bombing, just as nonmobile defensive positions were made obsolete by the tank, so has technology provided us with a bridge to another period of warfare - remote warfare - warfare at

distance, by proxy, the standoff weapon era (Congressional Record House 1977, 23537, emphasis added)


Academic debates on remote warfare cannot be disassociated from the term's "everyday life," as these have given meaning to its empirical study. The ethics and efficacy of drone strikes, as with the experiences of drone operators, have been studied under the label remote warfare (Chapa 2021; Lee 2018). Studies of remote warfare's legal (Ohlin 2017a) and cultural (Adelman and Kieran 2020) implications have also focused on the use of weapons technologies, including drones. Whilst retaining a degree of analytical focus on its technological dimensions however, another branch of the research field has pushed to reconceptualise remote warfare as a wider "approach used by states to counter threats at a distance" (Watson and Mckay 2021, 7; Watts and Biegon 2019). These contributions broadened the concept's meaning beyond its traditional focus on weapons technologies to include the analytical and policy challenges involved in working through local security forces and commercial agents. Echoing the term's "everyday life" as a means of highlighting the difficulties of fighting wars over large geographical distances, a theme of this literature has been to explore the challenges generated by remote warfare for the protection of civilians and legislative oversight over the use of force (Demmers and Gould 2021; Watson and Mckay 2021). More recently, there has been a push to examine the role of remote warfare in the security practices of states other than the United States and Britain (Stoddard and Toltica 2021), and to interrogate the role of self-perception as a driver of forms of intervention from a distance (Riemann and Rossi, 2021b).


To date however, much of remote warfare's analytical utility has come through inviting critical discussion on the legal, cultural and political consequences of the trend within Western warfighting toward removing conventional ground forces from frontline fighting. The problem is that remote warfare risks becoming a concept which, whilst capturing the zeitgeist, says little which is new. One obstacle to remote warfare's study as a distinct category of warfare is its fuzzy boundaries of contrast vis-à-vis other "like" concepts (McDonald 2021). By orientating remote warfare scholarship around the analytical puzzles generated from the distancing of conventional ground forces from frontline fighting, it becomes difficult to differentiate remote warfare from other frameworks such as surrogate warfare (Krieg and Rickli 2018) and vicarious warfare (Waldman 2018). The relationship between remote warfare and proxy war (Rauta 2018, 2020) is also ambiguous, despite direct references to the use of "proxies" within some remote warfare literature (Riemann and Rossi 2021a, 79; Watson and Mckay 2021, 10).


As Gerring (1999) reminds us: "[n]o use of language is semantically neutral." The use of remote warfare rather than other concepts suggests that the notion has some unique properties or attributes. The introduction of new concepts can "drive reconsideration of pre-existing assumptions and spur interest in unexpected challenges" (Ucko and Marks 2018, 212). As Rauta argues however, remote warfare scholarship has largely failed to demonstrate which "pre-existing assumptions" about contemporary political violence are faulty (Rauta, 2021) . In this way, the analytical value of the concept has been taken as somewhat apriori. A critical reading of the recent literature highlights a problematic assumption: neither the push to expand remote warfare's empirical referents to include an ever-growing list of agents, practices and technologies nor the focus on the difficulties of

intervening at a geographical distance is a sufficient point of contrast in a field in which these dynamics are already widely studied.

We suggest that a clearer sense of remote warfare's analytical specificity could be reached through a more careful and deliberate consideration of "remoteness." In making this point, we echo calls to develop the study of remoteness as a central focus on the scholarship on remote warfare's legal (Ohlin 2017a) and cultural (Adelman and Kieran 2020) implications. In the context of the debates on contemporary political violence, paying greater attention to the subject of remoteness provides a pathway for moving the study of remote warfare beyond its current focus on the means and methods of military intervention toward an investigation of the theoretical puzzles which its study also invites. By shining a greater light on a property which connects the various practices of military intervention studied under its umbrella (i.e. their "remoteness"), it could also help strengthen the concept's coherence. This is an important feature of both conceptual utility and differentiation (Gerring 1999, 375–376). As a starting point for this dialogue, we now make the case for rethinking existing understandings of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness.

**Remoteness and remote warfare**

Remoteness is a multifaceted and complex notion (Bocco 2016, 178). The Cambridge English Dictionary (N.A.), for example, groups together its various definitions under three categories: distance, difference and behaviour. As a starting point for discussion, a brief review of some of the literature on remoteness and the associated notion of distance provides a starting point for revisiting existing understandings of the remoteness of remote warfare.

In an important contribution to its geographic study, Geraro Bocco (2016) has traced the measurement problems which the study of remoteness invites. There are physical and cultural positionalities at play in determining whether a location is classified as "remote." To better grasp these complexities, Bocco (2016) highlights the interplay of two dimensions of remoteness: its "absolute, geometric dimension" relating to the physical distance and obstacles separating any two particular locations; and its "relative, geographic dimension," which emerges from the social connectivity with, and knowledge of, a particular place. This speaks to an important property of remoteness: its fluid and shifting character. Remoteness is best approached as existing on a continuum subject to change over time rather than as a binary (and static) classification of "remote" and "nonremote" location.

The notion of remoteness is also a feature of recent scholarship on Western aid and development activities (Andersson & Weigand, 2015; Fradejas-García 2019; Sandstrom 2014). This literature scrutinises the causes of, and the problems created by, the "bunkerisation" of aid workers behind fortified aid camps, Green Zones and various risk management procedures. This process is understood to have underpinned an increasing separation between three groups of actors: international aid staff making aid and development decisions; local intermediaries tasked with delivering aid and development assistance on the ground; and aid recipients. Contributors to this debate generally draw from Duffield's definition of remoteness as "a simultaneous social, intellectual and emotional

withdrawal . . . of international aid workers from the societies in which they work" (2012, 478). Duffield's definition of the notion speaks to how remoteness has the effect of "physically and mentally walling off the aid worker" (Duffield 2012, 487, emphasis added). From this literature, we can begin to pull out another important property of remoteness. The physical separation of aid workers from the proximate sites of aid delivery provides a starting point for debate. However, remoteness should also be recognised as having social and psychological properties deserving of attention.

Like remoteness, distance is a multivariant concept open to multiple interpretations (Henrikson 2002; Porter 2015). Much of the wider literature on remoteness points to a connection between the notion and physical distance. Physical distance can be broadly defined as "intervals that can be measured and plotted on the appropriate map" (Henrikson 2002, 442). The study of physical distance in war has a long history. Carl von Clausewitz compared the strength of an invading army to the "light of a lamp; as the oil that feeds it sinks and draws away from the focus, the light diminishes until at last it goes out altogether" (quoted in Howard and Paret 1976, 212). In making this analogy, Clausewitz spoke to the widely held assumption that the degree of physical distance between an intervening agent's borders and the site of its use of force weakens the conversion of military power into desired political ends. Such thinking informs Kenneth Boulding's highly influential Loss of Strength Gradient. Whilst leaving open the possibility that technological advances could alter this equation, Boulding argued that military and political power decays the further it is exercised from the attacker's "home base" (Boulding 1963). Consistent with such thinking, the empirical record suggests that the degree of physical distance at which force is projected from the continental United States continues to influence the likelihood of military success (Hulme and Gartzke 2021).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the prominence of these debates within the wider study of war and security, some understandings of remote warfare's constitutive "remoteness" are oriented around the production of physical distance. It has been argued, for example, that "remoteness comes from a country's military planners and policy makers being one step removed from the frontline fighting – which tends to be carried out by local groups or regional coalitions" (Watson and Mckay 2021, 7). In order to better distinguish the notions of remoteness and covertness, others have called for remoteness to be understood as the degree of physical distance separating the combatants involved in armed conflict (Trenta 2021). Two problems with these understandings of remoteness are highlighted below: empirical inconsistencies; and an exclusion of the notion's recognised social and psychological properties.

Whilst conventional ground forces and drone operators may be removed from the risks of physical harm, the Special Operation Forces (SOF) tasked with supporting and working "by, with and through" local partners can be physically proximate to the sites of the use of force (Cragin 2020). These dynamics are clearly seen in the military response against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which some see as a "salient example of remote warfare" (Watson and Mckay 2021, 8). Airpower was central to the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve. It was used to provide real-time intelligence and close air support to local partners (Mumford 2021, 62–64). By itself however, airpower was unable to expel ISIS from the territory that it had captured. This task fell to local partners, which received support from American SOF sent to participate in "train, advise and assist" missions (Mumford 2021, 57–61). Remote warfare has an inherently asymmetrical character, with technology and practices of delegation being used to

minimise the risk of physical harm to some Western security agents. Yet, SOF personnel have been – and are – killed as part of these operations. This was the case in Operation Inherent Resolve (Mumford 2021, 56) as it has been in counterterrorism operations elsewhere (Philipps 2017). The first problem with reducing the study of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness to physical distance therefore is that the significant differences in the degree to which Western security agents can be separated from frontline fighting obfuscates the use of this measurement.

A second problem with understanding remoteness in terms of the physical distance separating combatants involved in direct fighting is that it downplays the social and psychological properties that are also essential to the notion. Parsimony is an important feature of conceptual utility (Gerring 1999, 371–374), and those calling for a narrower understanding of remote warfare's remoteness are right to highlight the risks of stretching its meaning too far (Trenta 2021). As already traced in the context of aid and development debates however, remoteness is a notion which blends physical, social and psychological properties. Physical distance and remoteness are connected, and untangling the notions is difficult. Yet the meaning of remoteness should include, but not be reduced to, a focus on the separation of various agents and places. The distancing of some Western security agents from frontline fighting on faraway battlefields provides a starting point for discussion, but remoteness has other features deserving of attention.

Technologically oriented understandings of remoteness also require qualification. In one influential definition, Ohlin (2017a) posits remoteness as that which "allow[s] operators to use ever more discriminating force while also receding further in time and space from the target of the military operation." This property, it is argued, is a shared feature of three weapons technologies: drones, cyber, and autonomous weapons systems. Ohlin's definition of remoteness not only informs studies of remote warfare's legality (Crawford 2017; Ohlin 2017b), but the temporal dimensions of remoteness. As Riemann and Rossi (2021a) see it, the "temporalisation of difference" that comes from imagining certain places as "backward" provides a pretext for remote warfare. By taking various weapons technologies as its referent object(s) however, Ohlin's definition of remoteness reproduces a narrow understanding of how remoteness is produced, of what it is and of who experiences it. This, we argue, limits its applicability beyond the debates on "remote" weapons technologies.

First, since the invention of the bow, evolutions in weapons technologies – the crossbow, musket, cannon, airplane, missile and more recently the drone – have increased the physical distances at which force can be projected without the risk of reciprocal harm (Adelman and Kieran 2020, 4–6; Ohlin 2017b, 18–21). Ohlin's focus on the relationship between physical distance and the use of such technologies is consistent with this historical trajectory. In recent years however, the practices studied under the label of remote warfare have expanded to include SOF, private military security contractors, intelligence sharing and military assistance (Watson and Mckay 2021, 8). Just as the meaning of remoteness should not be equated with physical distance, the production of this outcome should not be reduced to the use of drones and other weapon technologies.

Second, the technologies that are viewed as integral to remote warfare are deserving of careful, nuanced consideration with respect to remoteness. Ohlin's definition of remoteness obscures the

complex interplay of physical distance and psychological intimacy that is widely understood to shape how drone operators experience using these craft (Chamayou 2015, 114–124; Gusterson 2016, 59–81; Lee 2018). Gusterson, for example, argues that because drone operators can develop an intimate understanding of the daily routines and social interactions of their targets, the violence they experience is in "some ways more psychologically proximate than that of other soldiers, who are physically closer to the enemy but may get only a brief glimpse of, or never see at all, the people they kill" (2016, 72–73). Approached in this way, whilst drone pilots are geographically removed from the sites where force is used, to label their experiences "remote" would appear somewhat inappropriate or, at the very least, inconsistent with how remoteness is understood in other disciplines.

And third, whilst the experiences of Western drone operators are an important area of academic inquiry, their study can tell us little about how others experience the "remoteness" of remote warfare. Given the unique sense of "perceptual proximity" (Chamayou 2015, 116) which remote-controlled technologies provide their users, the experiences of drone pilots are unrepresentative of other audiences. This is particularly the case for the American public, who have "effectively opted out of war" (Bacevich 2016, 40). Unlike drone operators, who acutely experience the psychological intimacies of killing at a distance, Western publics are largely insulated from these realities.

**Revisiting the remoteness of remote warfare**

Existing understandings of remoteness as either physical distance or the use of weapons technologies provide a useful starting point for discussion, but the study of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness is deserving of further elaboration. We define the remoteness of remote warfare as the degree of the public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence fought at a physical distance from the continental United States, as mediated through spectatorship of the use of military force.

Whilst the remoteness of remote warfare should not be reduced to the study of physical distance alone, this spatial dimension represents a logical starting point for further exploration. The public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence is underpinned by the physical distances at which force is projected from the continental United States. Interest "dwindles" with distance. The fighting on far away battlefields is generally perceived as being less important than fighting which is closer to home (Hulme and Gartzke 2021). In order to capture this dynamic, we approach the spatial dimensions of remoteness in terms of the physical distance separating the continental United States from the sites of military force. This focus is consistent with the wider understanding of remote warfare as a form of intervention conducted "over there," in places like Africa and the Middle East, rather than "over here," in Western states (Biegon and Watts 2020a, 2020b). To be sure: the distancing of some Western security agents – drone operators and conventional ground forces – from the risks of physical harm is an important component of remote warfare. Given the unevenness with which such distances are produced however, with American SOF sometimes supporting local forces on the frontline of fighting, this measurement of physical distance is not centred in our definition of remoteness.

In highlighting the public's socio-psychological detachment from the realities of political violence, our definition of remoteness seeks to capture what Brunck (2020) labels "psychological remoteness." This refers to the public "feel[ing] neither connected to nor responsible for war and violence bestowed upon the enemy." A similar understanding of remoteness informs what Demmers and Gould (2021, 34) have coined the "remote warfare paradox": the trend within some Western states for the realities of political violence to be "rendered so remote and sanitised, that it becomes uncared for, and even ceases to be defined as war" (Demmers and Gould 2021, 34). Our use of the notion of remoteness to examine these factors is deliberate and contrasts with the narrower understandings of psychological distance used in drone scholarship (Lee 2018). As others have argued, whilst the notion of psychological distance has its value, "it is limited in that it refers only to the effect violent actions have on the aircraft crews" which operate these craft (Chapa 2021, 201). The notion of remoteness, in contrast, is used to amalgamate the psychological effects which military intervention on faraway battlefields has on the American public: a more disparate audience insulated from the emotional intimacies of killing at a distance.

Whilst the psychological aspect of remoteness captures the emotional detachment and absence of care which Western publics can develop regarding the use of force, its social properties are somewhat distinct. These refer to the knowledge which the American public develops about the use of military force and the degree to which this permeates their daily lives (Nielsen 2020, 204). For some observers, the end of conscription weakened the social bonds historically connecting the American public to the military. This gap widened in the years after 9/11, when the George W. Bush administration set about fighting a Global War on Terror with minimal disruption to life at home (Bacevich 2016, 39–40). In addition to "relocating" traditional understandings of sacrifice, the outsourcing of participation in faraway wars helped insulate Western publics from the social realities of political violence (Riemann and Rossi, 2021a). To be sure: the counterterrorism and stabilisation operations fought since 9/11 have fed into the militarisation of American politics and society (Brooks 2016). Aside from the small percentage of the American population who serves in the military and their families however, the social aspects of these conflicts have largely been experienced at a remove by the American public, and with a degree of choice (Nielsen 2020, 201).

The American public can develop different degrees of an emotional attachment to, and knowledge of, the violence intrinsic to remote warfare. In this way, the remoteness of remote warfare is not fixed but exists on a continuum which can be subject to change over time. One factor which influences how "remote" a given operation becomes for the American public is spectatorship (or lack thereof) over the use of military force. To be clear: the argument developed here is not that spectatorship is remoteness. Rather, building on existing observations (Brunck 2020; Nielsen 2020), it is that spectatorship is an important and often overlooked mediating factor which influences how remote the public can become from the realities of political violence. In other words, spectatorship is not a property of remoteness but a factor which can influence it.

Discussions of war-as-spectacle predate recent remote warfare scholarship. Based on his observations of the US-led intervention in Kosovo during the late 1990s, for example, Michael Ignatieff argued that new forms of "virtual war" were supplanting the "old wars" of the kind traditionally fought by the US and its allies. The NATO bombing of Kosovo represented a change not only in how wars were fought,

with there now being little physical risk to Western service personnel, but how they were observed and experienced by the American public. The use of military force had become a spectacle observed from afar rather than something directly participated in, requiring little personal risk or sacrifice. Western publics were not, however, kept in the dark about the causes or conduct of the military intervention. They were activated through forms of "virtual consent" and "virtual mobilization" (2001, 176–191). Key here was keeping the associated costs of military intervention below the threshold of public opposition.

Although spectatorship may suggest passivity, the very nature of spectacles invites attention. This can be plotted on a spectrum from an individual's passive engagement with the media coverage of a conflict through to the active support of the use of military force (McInnes 1999, 160). For Michael Mann, who popularised the notion, spectatorsport militarism conveyed a sense of indirect participation (1988, 184). It was bound-up in the nationalism of liberal democracies and the need to mobilize popular support for conflicts that involve sacrifice, however limited or symbolic. The dynamics of spectatorsport militarism require elites to justify interventions in accordance with the honour of the nation, particularly when the military venture is at risk of failure and/or potentially destabilizing (Mann 1988, 184–7). According to McInnes (1999), states involved with "spectator sport warfare" were compelled to minimize casualties and collateral damage; win quickly to avoid attrition; and avoid public protest. Beyond this, the public's participation in these conflicts was limited. As with Ignatieff (2001, 191–201), McInnes (1999) highlighted the media's crucial role in facilitating the spectatorship of the use of military force.

Underpinning much of this literature on war-as-spectacle is the particular political and strategic context of the late twentieth century in which airpower was used by Western states to conduct humanitarian interventions at minimal risk to their own security forces. Because of this, there are limits to how far aspects of this literature can travel to the study of the more recent counterterrorism and stabilisation operations, the focus of most existing remote warfare scholarship. For our purposes however, when understood in terms of the publics engagement with the media coverage given to, and the official justifications given for, the use of military force, these earlier debates on spectatorship remain useful.

When attached to certain counterterrorism efforts, spectatorship can increase the knowledge and psychological resonance of "remote" warfare. We get a sense of these dynamics through the coverage given to the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. At the time that American forces began entering the country, the media played a key role in "explaining to audiences where the Middle East was located, which countries and cultures it contained, and what kinds of relationships the United States maintained with them" (Brunck 2020, 182). Similar spectacles can be seen in the news coverage that followed the 2011 killing of Osama Bin Laden (Brunck 2020) and, to a lesser degree, the 2019 SOF raid in Syria which killed ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Negative media coverage can also cultivate a sense of spectacle which raises the public's awareness of a particular military campaign. This can be seen in the media coverage given to the 2017 Tongo-Tongo ambush in Niger. This focused attention on the controversial role of American forces in

conducting train, equip and advise missions in the country. American counterterrorism activities in the Sahel grew steadily in the years after 9/11, generating little public or legislative scrutiny. Yet, the 2017 Tongo-Tongo ambush prompted even prominent American senators such as Lindsey Graham and Charles Schumer to concede that they were unaware of the size or character of the US's military presence in the country (Callimachi et al. 2018). As a relative of one of the four American soldiers killed in the incident put it: "You don't think of your military in Africa . . . [w]e had to look it up on the map to see exactly where it happened" (Quoted in Callimachi et al. 2018).

To be sure, spectatorship is not the only factor mediating the remoteness of remote warfare. The executive branches of Western governments have, on occasion, obfuscated public scrutiny of remote warfare practices through the centralisation of decision-making processes and the exploitation of gaps in legislative oversight (Watson and Mckay 2021, 18–22). It is also conceivable that after twenty years of war against transnational terrorist organisations, Western publics have ceased caring about the violence enacted in their name (Demmers and Gould 2021). Further research is needed to scrutinise the precise effects and relative weight of these dynamics on remote warfare's constitutive remoteness. In order to provide a starting point for such discussions, our aim in the remainder of this paper is more focused. We examine the Obama administration's military intervention in Libya to show how the remoteness of remote warfare is, at least in part, contingent on the public's socio-psychological relationship to the use of military force.

**Remoteness as a continuum: US military intervention in Libya during Obama's presidency**

Popular protests in Libya began in mid-February 2011 against the backdrop of the "Arab Spring," with Benghazi – the country's second-most populous city – quickly falling to rebel forces. Following Gaddafi's public pledge to "purify Libya inch by inch," the pressure for an American military response increased, with some members of Obama's National Security Council referencing the Responsibility to Protect framework (Rhodes 2019, 113) and the United States' failure to have stopped the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Clinton 2014, 302; Gates 2014, 511). Despite opposition from several key officials, including Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who considered resigning over the issue (2014, 522), Obama ultimately agreed to military action in Libya. This followed the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising the use of "all necessary measures to protect civilians."

At over six-thousand miles from the continental United States, Libya is geographically "remote" for most Americans. To this end, Obama has described Libya as a "distant country" (2020, 655). The names of some of the Libyan towns threatened by Gaddafi's forces were initially unfamiliar to key administration officials such as Rhodes (2019, 112). Obama's chief of staff Bill Daley similarly advised the president that nine out of ten Americans were unlikely to "even know where the heck Libya is" (Obama 2020, 656). Despite the comparatively recent history of Operation El Dorado Canyon – the retaliatory series of air strikes authorised by Ronald Reagan targeting Libyan military installations following the 1986 terrorist attack on a Western Berlin disco hall which killed two American soliders – there appears to have been little pre-existing knowledge about Libya or its people.

The intervention to impose a no-fly zone over Libya would also be fought at a physical distance. No "boots on the ground" became something of a "mantra" within the administration (Clinton 2014, 304). Rhodes (2019, 118) would euphemistically describe the operation as a "kinetic military action." According to Gates (2014, 518), American ground forces would only enter Libya to conduct search-and-rescue missions to recover downed American pilots or to prevent Gaddafi from using chemical weapons. European partners, namely France and Britain, both early proponents of military action, were encouraged to shoulder most of the burdens of fighting in Libya once American forces had destroyed Gaddafi's air defence network. The US media characterised this as "leading from behind," a phrase the White House viewed as inaccurate (Clinton 2014, 306; Rhodes 2019, 122). On 23 March 2011, twelve days after the first US air and cruise missile strikes on the country, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assumed command of the bombing campaign under the codename Operation Unified Protector.

By Operation Unified Protector's formal end on 31 October 2011, NATO forces had conducted almost 10,000 strike sorties and destroyed almost 6,000 military targets (NATO 2011). In support of these efforts, Obama also reportedly authorised covert military support to Libyan opposition groups (Tapper et al. 2011). According to Leon Panetta, who succeeded Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense in July 2011, Operation Unified Protector was "resoundingly successful." Among other things, it demonstrated that "not all American military engagements need to become quagmires or occupations" (Panetta and Newton 2014). By physically distancing the bulk of American forces from frontline fighting, the Obama administration could claim a victory of sorts. Gaddafi's regime would no longer threaten civilians, even as the country's security situation quickly deteriorated.

Similar to the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, Operation Unified Protector exhibited several qualities of a spectacle. The public would need to be mobilised, and their consent won, but virtually, as Ignatieff argued in the Kosovo case (2001, 176–191). Even before the images of his brutal killing circulated across the global media, Gaddafi's bombastic rhetoric had captivated Western audiences. As Secretary of State Clinton described him, Gaddafi cut a "sometimes chilling figure on the world stage, with his colourful outfits, Amazonian bodyguards, and over-the-top rhetoric" (2014, 297). The spectacle was not reducible to Gaddafi's idiosyncrasies or the macabre nature of his death (Kellner 2012, 51–55); it also played out as a component of the physically distant character of the American-led intervention.

As James Der Derian argued in his work on "virtuous war," the technological dominance of Western military forces – fully on display as part of the NATO air campaign in Libya – serves to mesmerise those "back home," the stark outcome of what he labelled the "military-industrial-media-entertainment network" (2009 [2001]). The advances in networked weapons technologies that all but eliminated risk to American service-personnel ran parallel with changes in information technology that allowed ordinary American "viewers" to spectate on violent events that transpired far from home, but which, through the logic of spectatorship, were brought closer to their everyday experiences. The risk-asymmetry and "virtuousness" speaks to the need for legitimation here; politicians are challenged to justify decisions to use force and/or otherwise respond to security threats and political violence in far-

flung places. The ability of domestic audiences to easily "watch" these events only strengthens this dynamic.

In the case of Libya, the Obama White House grappled with not only media pressure to intervene to prevent civilian harm but with a perceived need to "say something public about the war" (Rhodes 2019, 116). Officials were tasked with giving press briefings (Rhodes 2019, 118) and appearing on network television shows (Gates 2014, 520) to explain the intervention to the American public. On March 28th, Obama (2011) delivered a televised address from the National Defense University. As summarised by Secretary Gates, Obama "explained why he had decided to intervene in Libya, offered justification for acting there and not in such conflicts elsewhere, and described the limited nature of the U.S. military mission" (Gates 2014, 520). Obama's speech created "a torrent of media analysis" (Holcomb 2011). At the height of the intervention in April 2011, thirty percent of the American public reported following the news about Libya "very closely" – an unusually high figure for a foreign affairs issue. This dropped to seventeen percent by September 2011, as the NATO campaign neared its end Pew Research Center (2011b). Although Americans were not necessarily exposed to the human costs of the use of force, they were certainly aware of the fighting in Libya, and this awareness was connected to the media coverage given to the NATO campaign.

Libya-as-spectacle resurfaced the following year. In September 2012, jihadists attacked a US diplomatic compound in Benghazi, killing four Americans, including the American ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. This generated a media firestorm and led to considerable controversy. Coming at the height of the 2012 presidential election campaign, the attack – and the administration's handling of it – became a partisan political issue. The scandal embroiled Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and provided fodder for Republicans in Congress, who used investigative hearings to cast aspersions on Obama's leadership, the prudence of American policy toward Libya, and the administration's commitment to countering "Islamic terrorism." Although Benghazi did not inflict lasting damage on Obama's approval ratings, it created a political headache for the administration (Clinton 2014, 313–346; Rhodes 2019, 360–4). If only episodically, it also brought public attention back to the deteriorating security situation in Libya.

**Operation Odyssey Lightning**

As the situation on the ground evolved, the Obama administration's focus in Libya shifted from the protection of civilians toward counterterrorism. The collapse of Gaddafi's dictatorship created political chaos, in time producing a civil war which invited a great deal of foreign involvement (Poirson 2017; Wehrey 2018). By 2014, Libya had two governments: the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), backed by the US and its allies; and the House of Representatives, headed by Khalifa Haftar of the Libyan National Army and based in Tobruk. Coupled with the institutional weakness of the Libyan state, the collapse of political order undermined the efficacy of national counterterrorism efforts (Poirson 2017, 946). ISIS, then expanding in much of the Levant and North Africa, was quick to exploit this security vacuum. By 2015, ISIS had declared a wilayat (overseas province) in Libya. Strongest in the coastal city of Sirte, it also maintained a presence in Tripoli and in the Barqa and Fezzan regions (Kilcullen 2016, 127).

With ISIS becoming the focal point of global counterterrorism efforts, US Africa Command commenced Operation Odyssey Lightning in August 2016. Authorised by President Obama on the advice of Defence Secretary Ash Carter and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, the campaign aimed to "deny ISIL a safe haven in Libya from which it could attack the United States and [its] allies" (Cook 2016). Whilst British and American SOF were reportedly active in coordinating airstrikes, as was the case in 2011, the large-scale deployment of conventional ground forces was ruled out (Wehrey 2018, 240, 260–261). Logistical assistance and intelligence would instead be shared with militias affiliated with the GNA who were tasked with clearing out ISIS positions on the ground (Cragin 2020, 325–327). Operation Odyssey Lightning ended in December 2019. By this time, American forces had conducted 495 airstrikes against ISIS targets, primarily from attack aircraft operating from amphibious assault ships (Cragin 2020, 326). In support of this operation, the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Carney also fired 285 rounds from its five-inch gun at targets within the city (Snow 2019). Speaking to its scale, Operation Odyssey Lightning was described in the chronology of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit as "one of the largest counterterrorism campaigns to be conducted from amphibious shipping" (Snow 2019).

Although the onset of Operation Odyssey Lightning was reported in specialist news publications such as Defence News (Tilghman 2016) and Inside Defence (Bertuca 2016), it received scant attention from mainstream media outlets. President Obama did not deliver a televised address to explain the need for Operation Odyssey Lightning to the nation. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter did not appear on network television shows to discuss the intervention or its objectives as Robert Gates had done in 2011. To be sure, the Defence Department provided some public information about the operation, with Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook giving periodic updates (see Cook 2016). During the early stages of the operation, the Pentagon released press briefings listing the targets of several airstrikes conducted against ISIS positions in Sirte (Department of Defense 2016). On 19 January 2017, Secretary Carter announced follow-up airstrikes on two camps outside of Sirte conducted by B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, which killed an estimated eighty ISIS fighters (Carter 2017). Overall, however, debate in Washington was muted when it came to the anti-ISIS campaign in Libya.

In effect, the Obama administration's military intervention in Libya had "evolved" along a continuum of remoteness. Both campaigns involved forms of "intervention from a distance" but Operation Unified Protector gave way to a more "remote" form of warfare under Operation Odyssey Lightning. There were contextual conditions that allowed the latter (stages of the) Libya intervention to be marginalised as a topic of public concern, both for ordinary Americans and their political representatives. As measured in the number of airstrikes conducted and coalition partners involved in the fighting, Operational Odyssey Lightning was smaller in scale than the earlier NATO-led campaign against Gaddafi. Whatever its exact causes, Operation Odyssey Lightning appears to have been effectively a "non-event" for the news media and the American public. In contrast to not only Operation Unified Protector but also the high-profile investigations over Benghazi, the American public – and its representatives – appeared disinterested with later counterterrorism operations in the country. This may be partly attributable to the fact that, with Gaddafi out of the picture, the Libyan conflict no longer registered with American "audiences." Yet, the furore over Benghazi would have seemed to suggest that the American public was "primed" for a long-term psychological investment in the unfolding drama in Libya, which in the first instance had been facilitated by NATO's support for

regime change. As the intervention in the country became less of a spectacle, it thus appears to have become more "remote."

**Conclusion**

Whilst the debates on remote warfare have grown significantly over the last decade, its analytical utility remains contested. The concept's growing popularity would seem to promise something distinct. Yet, as has been pointed out (McDonald 2021; Rauta, 2021), its contribution to the study of political violence remains somewhat unclear. We have called for researchers to further develop the study of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness as a potential pathway for addressing this ambiguity. A more nuanced understanding of remoteness also holds relevance for researchers interested in wider trends, including the seemingly ever-widening geographic scope and temporality of contemporary conflict.

To date, the remoteness of remote warfare has largely been understood in terms of new weapons technologies and/or the physical distance separating combatants involved in armed conflict. Having highlighted the analytical shortcomings of these approaches, we have defined remote warfare's constitutive remoteness as the degree of the public's sociopsychological detachment from the realities of political violence fought at a physical distance from the continental United States, as mediated through spectatorship of the use of military force. Remoteness, we argue, exists on a continuum, and is subject to change over time. We applied this understanding of remoteness to a study of US military intervention in Libya during Obama's presidency. The Libya case suggests that, while the physical distancing of American forces from frontline fighting contributes to remoteness, spectatorship is an important factor which mediates how "remote" military campaigns become for the American public. Although both Operation Unified Protector and Operation Odyssey Lightning could conceivably be seen as remote warfare, the differences between them are important. The spectacle of the anti-Gaddafi campaign gave way to an anti-ISIS campaign that barely registered with Congress, and which was all but ignored by the American media. From the height of the 2011 NATO intervention onwards, as the spectacle of the intervention weakened, the American public appears to have become further detached from knowledge of the ongoing political violence in Libya.

Moving forward, the continued study of the remoteness of remote warfare could support a more rigorous and theoretical research agenda. Further investigation of the causes and degrees of the public's detachment from the realities of war will hinge, in part, on greater conceptual clarity. In drawing out its socio-psychological features, we have argued that remoteness is inherently bound up in the public's awareness (or lack thereof) of the use of military force. This raises questions about the deeper societal and political forces which may be at play in this process, and the degree to which these can be managed and potentially shaped by defence officials.

The fledging practitioner dialogue on remote warfare presents further reason to continue the study of remote warfare's constitutive remoteness. With a handful of exceptions in the context of British politics, the notion has yet to be taken up by policymakers . As the field advances to tackle more

complex theoretical and conceptual puzzles, it is conceivable that remote warfare's use as a strategic policy concept grows. Terminological clarity is important not only to knowledge accumulation, but to the processes of policymaking (Rauta 2018, 451). New labels can influence the worldviews, opinions, and heuristic perspectives of those responsible for forming and implementing policy. Even if remote warfare remains primarily an analytical concept however, the study of remoteness can enhance understandings of the empirical complexities which its study invites. Moving forward, we therefore hope that the study of the history, character and production of remoteness in war emerges as a more prominent feature of remote warfare scholarship.

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