

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 7

Article 4

2015

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Recommended Citation

Craig, Bobby (2015) "Drones: Agents of Ethical Destruction," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol7/iss1/4>

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Drones: Agents of Ethical Destruction

By Bobby Craig

In March of 2013, United States Senator Rand Paul stood before the Senate and filibustered the nomination of John Brennan for Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (Ewing). As it stood, Paul opposed President Barack Obama's drone policy. Paul spoke for thirteen hours discussing his disagreement with the President's policy of using drones domestically for lethal purposes (Ewing). While significantly fewer Americans believe drones should be used domestically than abroad (Brown and Newport), it is shocking that the majority of Americans believe foreign drone usage is ethically and legally justified when the same principles apply.

Officially starting their service in 2004, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), often called drones, have killed thousands of foreigners, both combatants and civilians. Outraged by unlawful drone strikes in their countries, Middle Eastern citizens who have nothing to do with terrorist activities feel their rights are being infringed upon in a way that is not internationally legal or ethical ("Outrage in Pakistan"). Though American counterterrorism and drone experts claim that drones have "surgical precision" (Brennan), it is undeniable that there are still large amounts of collateral damage and civilian death involved with drone strikes. The psychological effects these indirect encounters can have on pilots are unmistakable and daunting (Martin). Pilots suffer from clinical stress and those not affected are often desensitized, raising more ethical questions (Martin). Drones are not the problem—the use of drones in military situations is the problem, and it needs to be confronted. The psychological aspects affecting all involved,

legal and political issues ignored by the United States government create an unethical, disproportionate scope of war.

Many groups are involved with the politics, tactics, and action of combat. Whether the party involved is a soldier or civilian, drones have a psychological effect on how armed conflict is perceived and carried out. It is arguable that pilots are the most affected by the use of drones. In carrying out the attacks, drone pilots quickly become desensitized to combat. It is not uncommon for United States drone pilots to sit in small rooms thousands of miles away from their intended targets (Bumiller “A Day Job”). Physical distance allows for a large emotional and ethical distance; not only do pilots not feel the same sense of brutality as they do in actual fighter planes, but they acknowledge the bizarre dichotomy between being in their dark drone room and being at home an hour later (Bumiller “A Day Job”). This emotional disconnect from prospective targets holds the pilots less accountable for their actions—due to this, apathy sets in and causes pilots to act in ways that would not be common if they were actually present. John Kaag and Sarah Kreps explain that due to the ease of using drone technology, this apathy leads to habitual actions, making them completely void of reason (“Opinion”). Robert Gresser’s conclusions add to this. He writes, “technology is replacing judgment and character” (78), which leads Americans down a confusing ethical path. Kaag and Kreps say in another article that if a soldier tries to justify his or her “moral legitimacy,” his or her scope of reason and ethical views become clouded—pinpointing enemies can never be an objective job (“The Use of Unmanned” 26). While these problems are evident with all warfare, they are multiplied when the soldiers are moved thousands of miles away from their intended targets.

History has seen relative proximity dictate the subjectivity of war; in medieval Europe, artillery was viewed as far more impersonal than engaging in close-quarters combat (Allmand 57-58). Bradley Strawser argues that this proximity has little affect on ethical decisions, merely being “an extension of a long historical trajectory of removing a warrior even further from his foe for the warrior’s...protection” (343), but there are problems with this mindset. It is far more personal to use force to impale an enemy rather than fire a projectile at them. The same applies to drone pilots in modern day warfare. Firing on enemy combatants while looking at a computer screen does not have nearly the same immediate effects as hearing and feeling huge explosions, people screaming, and smelling death in a warzone. This removal of distance also eliminates the fear of death or retaliation for pilots. While many would argue that this is a good thing, it must be understood that fear is a very important component of war. Fear holds soldiers accountable for their actions and is a key reason they often do not overstep ethical and moral boundaries. Without feeling like their lives are endangered, pilots are more likely to keep drones in combat zones and overstay their often already unwelcomed visit, engaging in arbitrary killing (“Drone Warfare”). This feeling of security also creates a power disparity; while the American pilots do not feel the need to retreat for fear of losing their lives, the enemy combatants have these worries, resulting in an unbalanced fight. This results in far more deaths than if both sides of a conflict had to fear for their lives. Soldiers respond to drone piloting much like they respond to video games, often being desensitized to killing remotely and even referring to those casualties as “bugsplats” (“Drone Warfare: The Dehumanization”), indicating just how much they value foreign lives when presented through a screen. Pilots “inflict civilian

casualties...more easily draw[ing] the United States into conflict” (Bumiller and Shanker). This fact is minimized though; in order to continue public support, drones are offered to the public as a risk-free alternative. This additional support perpetuates violent acts, sending more and more soldiers (ground troops and drone pilots) to war, risking more lives and diplomatic relations between countries.

While pilots’ proximities to warzones affect their ability to make ethical decisions, it is important to note that this distance does eventually impact soldiers’ psyches, often resulting in unexpected psychological trauma. *After* missions, it is common for pilots to realize the effects of their unethical decisions, consequently weighing on their consciousness. One account by drone pilot Brandon Bryant details his task to “linger over a site for several haunting hours” where he would then attack and “watch people gather up the remains of those killed and carry them to the local cemetery or scrub the scene by dumping weapons into a river” (Power). In the same article, Matthew Power says that Bryant described this as a “voyeuristic intimacy” (Power), hardly the thoughts of a sane soldier. Little is completely known about psychological disorders in drone pilots since the area is such a new one, but according to Nancy Cooke, a professor of cognitive science and engineering at Arizona State University's College of Technology and Innovation, PTSD’s symptoms “may actually be intensified [with drone warfare]” (Chow). This conclusion is not extremely revolutionary, but it does refute the argument that drones are a safer alternative for our soldiers. When they are not abroad, they are still exposed to many of the dangers of war and are confronted with the results of their actions just as Bryant was. While it is simple to pull the trigger from thousands of miles away, it is just as hard to deal with having killed the subjects of lengthy periods of

observation. It is no more responsible to subject pilots to killing with drones, especially when it has been noted that the psychological damage can be increased—this decision is unjustified and unethical. The myth that drone pilots simply sit in a room and push buttons is obviously not true. Drone pilots experience an altered view of war. They see their targets as objects before a strike; when they finally see them as humans it is too late. While it would be assumed that pilots recognize these patterns, they do not.

Despite these obvious ethical and psychological faults in drone warfare, domestic civilians see drone warfare as something that is acceptable. Looking past the harm being done to soldiers, many Americans rationalize drone warfare by asserting that it is far more acceptable if American soldiers' lives are not in danger. Not only is this false, but it creates a new, irresponsible mentality that urges solving every single problem with violence instead of diplomacy. When this mentality perpetuates conflict and the use of drones, foreign civilians then become angered regardless of the United States' intent. For example, when the United States uses drones to target terrorist groups in Middle-Eastern countries such as Pakistan, the Middle Eastern civilians do not notice the terrorist threats that drones eliminate due to their stealth. However, when drone pilots make mistakes resulting in explosions near civilians and civilian casualties, other Middle-Eastern countries see that and develop animosity towards the United States. In her book, *Drone Warfare: Killing By Remote Control*, author Madea Benjamin notes that like soldiers, civilians in these drone attack areas start to develop PTSD symptoms. These issues were not as much of a problem prior to drones lingering, but now that they are in wide use, Hamdi Shaqqura, Deputy Director for the Programs Affairs of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, explains the conditioned fear of death associated with hearing drones

above (Wilson). Shaqqura states, “You can’t sleep. You can’t watch television. It frightens the children. When they hear it, they say, ‘It is going to hit us’” (Wilson). It is unethical to make civilians feel unsafe in their own homes, regardless of the motive.

These Middle-Eastern citizens are not just angry about the collateral damage that is killing hundreds of civilians or the decreased sense of security in their own homes; they are upset about the United States violating international law to do so. The United Nations (UN) Charter argues against the United States’ current use of drones, especially for lethal purposes in the Middle East. The United States takes advantage of the ambiguity the international community has left surrounding drone legality. For example, Pakistan has had many problems with the United States micromanaging their tasks; the United States has consistently exploited international law loopholes by exercising missions in Pakistan without consent to fulfill their political and military goals by saying there is a “perceived violation of sovereignty” (Rosen). While this may not seem like a major problem, it becomes extremely problematic when the United States’ drones’ attacks account for a great deal of collateral damage. Furthermore, the United States is willfully ignorant about their attacks. In an effort to play dumb, the United States alters the method by which combatant deaths versus civilian deaths are tracked, “systematically underestimating” civilian casualties to appear more efficient (Friedersdorf). This allows the military to further justify their means. While Pakistan has not necessarily publicly denounced United States’ drone usage, Pakistanis become increasingly upset with their country’s inability to stand up to the United States. It is illegal by international law for Pakistan to “consent to...extrajudicial killing[s]” by United States drone strikes “unless it itself is engaged in an armed conflict with individuals or groups that are being targeted by

US drones” (Mahmood 66-67). Due to these secretive foreign drone strikes, both the United States and the countries it infiltrates violate international humanitarian laws. The cost of these civilians’ lives was an easily fulfilled political agenda. This would not be nearly as simple with ground troops, which would force the United States to be more accountable with their attacks and plan strategically rather than acting rashly.

In his speech unveiling the myths surrounding President Obama’s drone policy, John Brennan suggests that the United States’ drone policy “conform[s] to the principle of distinction” (Brennan). However, as the American Civil Liberties Union Deputy Legal Director Jameel Jaffer states, Brennan’s speech does not supply anyone with “legal analysis” or reason—most of Brennan’s claims are unjustified, unsupported “legal conclusions” (“ACLU”). In addition, Brennan’s claims appear to be untrue. According to research conducted by the Stanford and New York University Law Schools, the United States engages in “double tap” exercises where they hit targets in rapid succession, often not letting up for first responders (Cavallaro, Sonnenberg, and Knuckey 74). To justify these attacks, the United States uses the argument of “guilt by association,” which clearly violates the immunity that non-combatants are allotted in International Humanitarian Law (Mahmood 70). These problems are not present with manned aircraft due to the unwillingness to linger after attacks in fear of retaliation, again proving the necessity of fear and personal risk in warfare to ensure ethics.

As if the present nature of drones is not already unethical, the future of drones presents even more ethical qualms—these policies must be curbed before drone usage is continued and automated. The United States Department of Defense has already developed drones that takeoff, land, and refuel in mid-air, and international figureheads

are already anticipating and denouncing the automation of weapon systems (Cohen). As Noel Sharkey states in her 2011 publication, “There will be a staged progression towards autonomous operation; first for flight then for target selection” (1-2). This means that facial recognition and threat detection algorithms could one day be behind the firing of explosives, entirely eliminating humanity from combat. Not only is this unethical, but it is extraordinarily dangerous. While human-made decisions are not always perfect, it is questionable how accurate these algorithms can really be in “assess[ing] individual intention” (Cohen). As Lucius Seneca once stated, “[a] sword is never a killer, it is a tool in the killer's hand”—it appears it will not be long before the validity of this sentiment is questioned (Cohen).

Being the world’s pioneer of drone technology, the United States will have a profound impact on the future decisions made internationally. It is the responsibility of Americans to safeguard their own rights, and the rights of other individuals globally, and to protest the injustices they see their government committing. If the United States implements legal and ethical standards, it is likely that precedent will be established for countries that choose to adopt drones in the future. The issues surrounding drones are not problematic for one party involved—they are negatively affecting all parties and threaten to damage relations in families, civilians, and other countries. As other countries begin to adopt drones, extremely limited use must become the norm. Drones need to be thoroughly examined before they are accepted as any sort of widely used lethal weapon; with a technology so young, it is risky and unethical to learn about it as it is used. If the apparent problems are fixed and the drone policy is replaced with a more effective

alternative in the future, it could be a viable option; however, in their current state, drones are violating laws and ethics and should not be used.

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