

Chapter 20

Drone Warfare: Ethical and Psychological Issues

Robert Paul Churchill
George Washington University, USA

ABSTRACT

*The United States is now relying on Reaper and Predator drone strikes as its primary strategy in the continuing War on Terrorism. This paper argues for the rational scrutiny drone warfare has yet to receive. It is argued that drone warfare is immoral as it fails both the *jus in bello* and the *jus ad bellum* conditions of Just War theory. Drone warfare cannot be accepted on utilitarian grounds either, as it is very probable that terrorists will acquire drones capable of lethal strikes and deploy them against defenseless civilians. Moreover, by examining the psychological bases for reliance on drone warfare, as well as the message the United States is sending adversaries, we need to be concerned that, rather than reduce the likelihood of terrorists strikes, the U.S. reliance on drones strikes threatens to institutionalize terrorism as the status quo for the foreseeable future.*

INTRODUCTION

Drones have received considerable attention in the news lately as a promising but controversial technological innovation. Private corporations foresee new business possibilities and greater profits, small lightweight drones marketed as self-“piloted” gadgets have attracted recreational users, and police and law enforcement officials across America foresee the advantages of using the “unblinking stare” of surveillance drones to police us (Jayakumar, 2015). Of course, the most controversial use the new technology concerns the ways in which remotely-controlled, armed drones are now used as President Obama’s preferred way of responding to the perceived threats posed by al-Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS and other terrorist operatives. Not since public debates over President Regan’s proposed Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly dubbed “star wars,” has American military strategy been the subject for such widespread concern at home and abroad.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8365-3.ch020

Remotely “piloted” drones, or “unmanned aerial vehicles” (UAVs) known as Predators received extensive use for surveillance purposes during the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo. Subsequently armed with Hellfire missiles Predators as “unmanned combat air vehicles” (UCAVs) were first tested in February 2001. The first targeted death, authorized by President George W. Bush in June 2004 and supervised by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), occurred when a Predator armed with a Hellfire missile killed a suspected Pakistani al-Qaeda operative in South Waziristan (Coll, 2014, p. 102). Still, the Bush administration’s use of drones was rather restrained compared with President Obama’s. Bush allowed 49 drone strikes to be launched between 2004 and 2008. According to figures assembled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 2009 and mid-January 2015, there have been 364 drone strikes, mostly in Pakistan, but also in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and at least 1 in the Philippines (Kreps & Zenko, 2014).

While Amnesty International is concerned that lethal drone strikes may be war crimes (Boone, 2013), speaking at the Naval Defense University in Washington, DC, President Obama declared that drone warfare met the requirements of Just War theory (BBC News, 2013). Apparently Obama was encouraged by the greater precision of strikes by the Reaper, the Predator’s successor, which can fire a smaller two-foot missile known as a “Small Smart Weapon” (SSW). The Reaper, a larger and heavier drone the Predator has greater surveillance capabilities, longer flight times, and carries payloads than its predecessor. Allegedly, a SSW can “take out” a human target without harming persons in an adjoining room (Coll, 2014, p. 101), although no one has explained how drone surveillance can be certain which room a target is in or how many people are in it. In any case, lethal drone strikes are now not only the cornerstone of the U.S. response to the “war on Terror” Obama inherited from Bush, they are drone so widely regarded as the most promising way of eliminating the terrorists (and possibly dissidents) that they are avidly sought by other states, and the Obama administration has recently decided that manufactures could sell them abroad (Ryan, 2015).

What should we think about lethal drone strikes, and more broadly about the wisdom and morality of a technological “fix” to the problem of terrorism? These are the general questions I address in this paper. However, I will not be including in this discussion unmanned and non-piloted robotic warfare or cyber-warfare. Contrary to putting issues of robotic and cyber-warfare on the back burner, we badly need a more robust public debate about the possible (or likely) advent of these innovations. Such warfare would continue to explode our paradigms for ethical, and perhaps rational, thinking about the conduct of war. However, unless checked, armed drones are likely to presage the development of a more dangerous generation of robotic weapons; moreover, drone strikes are likely to set important precedents about moral beliefs or intuitions about distance-operated and unmanned weaponry. Consequently, although some of the issues considered here pertain to more technological innovations more advanced than drones, there is a compelling case for focusing at present on the ethics and psychology of drone warfare.

In what follows I will give relatively little attention to the technological features of unmanned (but piloted) combat air vehicles, or drones (UCAVs). My purpose will be to advance two related arguments. I shall argue that armed drone strikes as they are being used by the Obama administration are unethical. They are unethical for two major reasons. First, contrary to Obama’s claims, their use does not conform to the principles of Just War theory; on the contrary, efforts to apply make drone warfare conform to the principles of Just War theory fail completely. Second, I argue that the use of UCAVs produces effects far worse than the problem for which they are the presumed ‘solution.’ As the history of weaponry shows, the technological innovations give one side only a temporary advantage; for this reason and others, the

15 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/drone-warfare/226847

Related Content

War 2.0: Drones, Distance and Death

Jai Galliot (2019). *Unmanned Aerial Vehicles: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (pp. 469-486).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/war-20/226848

Mission Performance Aid for Aerial Combat

Kevin M. Smith (2016). *International Journal of Aviation Systems, Operations and Training* (pp. 1-19).

www.irma-international.org/article/mission-performance-aid-for-aerial-combat/176721

Intelligent Expert Decision Support Systems: Methodologies, Applications, and Challenges

Abdel-Badeeh M. Salemand Tetiana Shmelova (2018). *Socio-Technical Decision Support in Air Navigation Systems: Emerging Research and Opportunities* (pp. 215-242).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/intelligent-expert-decision-support-systems/196098

A Centralized Autonomous System of Cooperation for UAVs- Monitoring and USVs- Cleaning

Salima Bella, Assia Belbachirand Ghalem Belalem (2019). *Unmanned Aerial Vehicles: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice* (pp. 347-375).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-centralized-autonomous-system-of-cooperation-for-uavs--monitoring-and-usvs--cleaning/226841

Evaluating Psychological Aircraft Accident Reports for Differences in the Investigation of Human Factors

Marco Michael Nitzschnerand Michael Stein (2017). *International Journal of Aviation Systems, Operations and Training* (pp. 15-31).

www.irma-international.org/article/evaluating-psychological-aircraft-accident-reports-for-differences-in-the-investigation-of-human-factors/214886