Death from Above

UAVs and Losing Hearts and Minds

Jeffrey A. Sluka, Ph.D.

This article expresses the opinions of the author and does not reflect the official position of any agency of the Department of Defense.

Military Review expresses deepest condolences to the families of Navy Corpsman Benjamin Rast and Marine Staff Sergeant Jeremy Smith, who lost their lives in April 2011 in what may have been an accidental attack by a Predator drone flying in support of operations near Sangin, Afghanistan.

Jeffrey A. Sluka is an associate professor of social anthropology at Massey University, New Zealand. He authored *Hearts and Minds, Water and Fish: Popular Support for the IRA and INLA in a Northern Irish Ghetto* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1989) and edited *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

PHOTO: MQ-9 Reaper landing after a mission in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan, 2007. (SSgt Brian Ferguson, U.S. Air Force)

ARMED UNMANNED AERIAL vehicles (UAVs) or *drones* are in constant use over Afghanistan and the Pakistan tribal borderlands, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. As Washington and the U.S. military see it, the ideal use of Predator and Reaper drones is to pick off terrorist leaders. In 2007, hunter-killer drones were performing 21 combat air patrols at any one time, by the end of 2009 they were flying 38, and in 2011 they increased to about 54 ongoing patrols. In 2009, the Air Force reported that for the first time they would be training more joystick pilots than new fighter and bomber pilots, creating a "sustainable career path" for those Air Force officers who fly UAVs.

Wonder Weapons

Perhaps out of fear of strategic loss of national will over unpopular U.S. and coalition casualties, Central Command seems to have accepted drones as the current weapon of choice in the fight against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Drones are reportedly "knocking off the bad guys right and left."[1] According to one estimate, by March 2011 at least 33 Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders (high value targets) had been killed by the drones and from 1,100 to 1,800 insurgent fighters had been killed as well.[2] Tom Engelhardt observes in *Drone Race to the Near Future* that the UAVs are the "wonder weapon of the moment," and "you can already see the military-industrial-robotics complex in formation."[3] In fact, as James Der Darian describes in *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*, drones are already part of a massive and expanding "military-industrial-media-entertainment network."[4]

The hype and hubris surrounding this technology is immense, and the mainstream media has been full of glowing reports on the drones, some of which imply that their use could win the war against terrorism all by itself. For example, an April 2009 report claimed that the drones were killing Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders and "the rest [of their numbers] have begun fighting among themselves out of panic and suspicion." "If you were to

continue on this pace," counterterrorism consultant Juan Zarate told the *LA Times*, "al Qaida is dead."[5] In an uncritical *60 Minutes* report on U.S. Air Force drone operations in May 2009, the officer in charge was asked if mistakes were ever made in the drone attacks: "What if you get it wrong?" "We don't," was his response.[6]

The Air Force declares that its priority is to precisely target insurgents while avoiding civilian casualties. They strongly aver that they are very concerned about civilian casualties, that they take extreme measures to avoid them, and that "casualty avoidance can be the targeting team's most time-intensive task."[7] At the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, Middle East, a military lawyer (judge advocate) is always on duty to provide advice reflecting the Law of Armed Conflict, the international treaties that prohibit intentional targeting of civilians and require militaries to minimize risks to civilians. The Air Force also asserts that a strict NATO protocol requires high-level approval for air strikes when civilians are known to be in or near Al-Qaeda or Taliban targets, and when civilians are detected, strikes are called off. The U.S. military claims its targeting is extremely precise, and that it has called off many operations when it appeared that civilian casualties might result.[8] Such claims are consistent with counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics outlined in Field Manual 3-24.

Today, UAV use is being hyped as "the future of war," the "only good thing to come out of the war on terrorism," and an effective and highly discriminate counterterrorism and counterinsurgency weapon. No one doubts that robots will eventually occupy a central role in the U.S. military. Surviving aspects of the Army's now-defunct Future Combat Systems modernization effort (now the Army Brigade Combat Team Modernization Program) call for a host of unmanned vehicles and combat drones. As P.W. Singer has shown in *Wired for War*, such modernization entails unprecedented changes in perspective.[9]

However, that UAVs are more cost effective in lives and money and the sunny view that they will someday take our soldiers entirely out of harm's way are now appearing to be questionable propositions. The extraordinary hype these weapons still garner as the "greatest, weirdest, coolest, hardware in the American arsenal" is beginning to look like

U.S. Air Force

MQ-1 Predator, armed with an AGM-114 Hellfire missile.

unexamined haste.[10] An article in *Newsweek* in September 2009 went so far as to categorize the drones as "weapons porn."[11] This view of surgical high-tech precision and effectiveness is beginning to wear thin in the face of available statistics.

Even if we question the statistics that seem to indicate that drone platforms are more inaccurate than thought, the data does point to a need to critique and reassess their use in COIN. The effects of drone-related mistakes could be undermining U.S. goals to have the Afghan security forces take over. Even if U.S. strategy shifts to counterterrorism, the Afghan National Army has to fight a counterinsurgency, and winning hearts and minds will be at the core of their struggle.

Critique of the Drone War

The evidence shows that the hyperbole surrounding UAVs and their vaunted precision is sheer fantasy, if not literally science fiction. There have been *many* mistakes, such as the one in June 2009 when "U.S. drones launched an attack on a compound in South Waziristan. Locals rushed to the scene to rescue survivors. A U.S. drone then launched more missiles at them, leaving a total of 13 dead. The next day, local people were involved in a funeral procession when the U.S. struck again" and 70 of the mourners were killed.[12]

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The drone strikes have already caused well over a thousand civilian casualties, have had a particular affinity for hitting weddings and funerals, and appear to be seriously fueling the insurgency.[13] Rather than presenting a picture of them as nearly single-handedly winning these wars, statistics suggest it would be more accurate to say that they are now almost single-handedly losing it. The question is whether tactics are serving strategy. A UN report in 2007 concluded that U.S. air strikes were among the principle motivations for suicide attackers in Afghanistan, and at the end of 2008 a survey of 42 Taliban fighters revealed that 12 had seen family members killed in air strikes, and six joined the insurgency after such attacks. Far more who have not joined have offered their support.[14]

The drone attacks in Pakistan, which have been touted as the most successful, have been responsible for the most civilian casualties. Of the 60

AP Photo/Shakil Adil

Supporters of a Pakistani religious group rally against the suspected U.S. drone missile strikes on tribal areas, April 2009, Karachi, Pakistan.

Predator strikes there between 14 January 2006 and 8 April 2009, only 10 hit their actual targets, a hit rate of 17 percent, and they killed 687 civilians. In total, Pakistan Body Count, which only tracks drone casualties, says that by the end of March 2011, 2,205 civilians had been killed and 909 seriously wounded, and that this represents just a three percent success rate against Al-Qaeda.[15]

Even David Kilcullen, the author of *The Accidental Guerrilla,*[16] dubbed by the media a "counterinsurgency guru," told Congress in April 2009 that the drone attacks in Pakistan were back-firing in the COIN fight and should be stopped:

> Since 2006, we've killed 14 senior Al-Qaeda leaders using drone strikes; in the same period, we've killed 700 Pakistani civilians in the same area. The drone strikes are highly unpopular. They are deeply aggravating to the population. And they've given rise to a feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists and leads to spikes of extremism . . . The current path that we are on is leading us to loss of Pakistani government control over its own population.[17]

Kilcullen pointedly observed that the "kill ratio" has been 50 civilians for every militant killed, a "hit rate" of 2 percent, or 98 percent civilian casualties, which can hardly be called "precision."

Kilcullen argues that the appeal of the drones is that their effects are measurable, killing key leaders and hampering insurgent operations, but their costs have far outweighed the benefits for three reasons. First, they create a "siege mentality" and casualties among civilians, which leads to support for the insurgents. Second, they generate public outrage not only in the local area, but throughout the country, as well as internationally and at home in the United States. Third, their use represents a tactic—more accurately, a form of technology—substituting for a strategy. Killcullen concludes, "Every one of these dead noncombatants [creates] an alienated family, a new desire for revenge, and more recruits for a militant movement that has grown exponentially even as drone strikes have increased."[18]

Furthermore, even when the air strikes have succeeded in killing militant leaders, in many cases this has simply turned them into martyrs. For example, over 5,000 people attended the funeral of rebel commander Ghulam Yahya Akbari, killed in a U.S. air strike in October 2009. Reports said that "thousands wept" and "women wailed from the rooftops" as a long procession of over 5,000 accompanied his body to the grave site near his native village in Herat Province.[19]

A poll in Afghanistan in November 2009 reported that 76 percent of respondents were opposed to Pakistan partnering with the United States on missile attacks against militants by drone aircraft.[20] The reliance on air power has served to undermine public support in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and continued aerial bombing will result in more civilian casualties, leading to more resentment, resulting in more support and recruits for the insurgents, leading to a long, losing war. As Engelhardt argues:

> Force creates counterforce. The application of force, especially from the air, is a reliable engine for the creation of enemies. It is a force multiplier. Every time an air strike is called in anywhere on the planet, anyone who orders it should automatically assume that left in its wake will be grieving, angry husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, relatives, friends—people vowing revenge, a pool of potential candidates filled with the anger of genuine injustice. From the point of view of our actual enemies, you can't bomb, missile, and strafe often enough, because when you do so, you are more or less guaranteed to create their newest recruits.[21]

Singer agrees, saying, "We are now creating a very similar problem to what the Israelis face in Gaza. They've gotten very good at killing Hamas leaders. They have in no way shape or form succeeded in preventing a 12-year-old in joining Hamas."[22]

Implications for Moral and Strategic Efficacy

In military operations, targeting decisions must be made to minimize civilian casualties; a decision made otherwise is a war crime—this point is uncontroversial. The further point is that not minimizing civilian casualties is highly counterproductive strategically. Because most drone victims are civilians, hunter-killer drones appear, prima facie, to be criminal weapons of state terror on one

hand and strategically wrongheaded on the other. In the UK, Lord Bingham has compared them to cluster bombs and land mines, weapons that have been deemed too cruel for use. Kilcullen judged their use as "immoral."[23] Such naming does not bode well for attaining COIN objectives. Robert Naiman, in "Stopping Pakistan Drone Strikes Suddenly Plausible," has observed:

> Since it is manifestly apparent that, 1) the drone strikes are causing civilian casualties, 2) they are turning Pakistani public opinion against their government and against the US, 3) they are recruiting more support for insurgents and 4) even military experts think the strikes are doing more harm than good, even from the point of view of US officials, why shouldn't they stop?[24]

The answer appears to be because the military argues that they are the only game in town, and they are seen as an alternative to more troops on the ground, thereby reducing U.S. casualties—a strategic concern over national and international will. A further related reason appears to be because now there is a huge and very powerful multi-billion dollar "military-industrial-media-entertainment" complex driving it. The degree to which this influence shapes policy is anyone's guess, but it likely helps not at all in determining the best strategic approach. Instead, the drive to technology often creates an inertia that works against developing sound strategy. Colonel Douglas MacGregor has observed that, "[American] politicians frequently substitute a fascination with direct action in the form of air strikes or special operations killings for strategy."[25]

Perspective is everything in making moral and strategic assessments. To President Obama and most Americans, the drones are seen as terrorist-killers, but on the ground among the civilian populations of Afghanistan and Pakistan they are viewed as fearsome and indiscriminate assassins. From the "top down" perspective, remote controlled hunter-killer drones are perceived as a fantastically successful new weapon, right out of science fiction. But from the "bottom up" perspective of the targeted populations, they have been experienced as a flawed weapon which is feared, resented, and despised because of the collateral damage they have caused. They have been prime recruiting agents for the militants and have alienated the "hearts and minds" of the population.[26]

During the 1980s, the use of helicopter gunships by the Soviets in their war in Afghanistan and by the militaries armed by President Reagan in El Salvador and Guatemala generated discussion of the psychology of the *fear* of aerial attack–of death from above experienced as "state terror": "Many Afghans now say they would rather have the Taliban back in power than nervously eye the skies every day."[27] A villager who survived a drone attack in Pakistan explained that "even the children, at play, were acutely conscious of drones flying overhead."[28] Psychologically, Afghans and Pakistanis in the tribal zone view the drones as dangerous predators, and they are never going to see them as their protectors. Ignoring this psychology would likely prove to be strategic folly.

For many, the much touted sophistication of UAV technology only makes the civilian deaths more galling. They ask, if it's so sophisticated, how come in practice it's so indiscriminate and kills so many innocent people? That is the experience on the ground. As one local politician in Afghanistan expressed it: "They are bombarding villages because they hear the Taliban are there. But this is not the way, to bomb and kill 20 people for one Taliban. This is why people are losing hope and trust in the government and the internationals." Like many Afghans and Pakistanis, he was starting to suspect a more sinister meaning behind the civilian deaths: "The Americans can make a mistake once, twice, maybe three times," he said. "But twenty, thirty times? I am not convinced that they are doing this without intention."[29] True or not, this is a perception that is growing in the region, and the trajectory of the perception is making the information realm of coalition efforts nearly untenable.

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(AP Photo/Fraidoon Pooyaa, File)

An Afghan woman and her daughter wail after their relative was killed in an air strike in Azizabad, a village in the Shindand district of Herat Province, Afghanistan, 23 August 2008.

Michael Ignatief warns that virtual war is a dangerous, seductive illusion: "We see ourselves as noble warriors and our enemies as despicable tyrants. We see war as a surgical scalpel and not a bloodstained sword. In so doing we mis-describe ourselves as we mis-describe the instruments of death. We need to stay away from such fables of self-righteous invulnerability."[30] Virtual war dehumanizes the victims, desensitizes the perpetrators of violence, and lowers the moral and psychological barriers to killing.

As a counterinsurgency weapon, therefore, hunter-killer drones appear to be losers. They are creating more militants than they kill, and their escalating use is alienating or "losing the hearts and minds" of the civilian populations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Drones killed more than 700 civilians in 2009 alone.[31] In October that year, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions warned that U.S. drone strikes that kill innocent civilians violate international laws against summary execution and represent extra-judicial killings.[32] In other words, they can be viewed as a terrible and terrifying new form of state-sanctioned "death squad."

The dark psychology of state terror in the use of unmanned assassination drones is revealed in their names: "Predators" and (Grim) "Reapers." These names in themselves suggest a willful obtuseness about the efficacy of information operations. Civilians hear these names and are psychologically conditioned by them: they are not only terrified by hunter-killer drones overhead, many are radicalized. Polls in Afghanistan and Pakistan show that a desire to strike back against the United States increases after every drone attack, and when Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani-American who tried to plant a bomb in Times Square in May 2010, was asked at his trial how he could justify planting a bomb that could kill children he answered: "When the drones hit, they don't see children, they don't see anybody. They kill women, children, they kill everybody. . . I am part of the answer . . . I'm avenging the attack."[33]

Similarly, while the Israelis now routinely use UAVs to bomb the Gaza Strip, this has only served to radicalize more Palestinians: "Robot drones have successfully bombed much of Gaza from secular Fatah to Islamist Hamas to fanatical Jihad."[34] By losing hearts and minds, the UAV war in Afghanistan and Pakistan is losing the fight against and increasing the threat of terrorism, and making further terror attacks on America more likely, not less. ***MR***

NOTES

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