

# DRONE WARFARE, ETHICS and FAITH

## Workshop Presentation

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In an article on [“The Moral Hazard of Drones”](#) John Kaag and Sarah Kreps appeal to an ancient story relayed by Plato to point to the moral pitfalls of using for one’s advantage a tool against which others are helpless.

Once upon a time, in a quiet corner of the Middle East, there lived a shepherd named Gyges. Despite the hardships in his life Gyges was relatively satisfied with his simple existence. Then, one day, he found a ring buried in a nearby cave.

This was no ordinary ring; it made it possible for the wearer to become invisible, quite like the Ring of Power in *The Lord of the Rings*. With this new ability, Gyges became more and more unhappy with his simple life. He became increasingly bold. Before long, he seduced the queen of the land and began to plot the overthrow of her husband. One evening, Gyges placed the ring on his finger, sneaked into the royal palace, and murdered the king.

In his “Republic,” Plato recounts this tale, but doesn’t relay the details of the murder. Nevertheless, we can be confident that, like any violent death, it was an ugly affair. Though the story doesn’t end well for everyone, it does for Gyges. He marries the queen and assumes the position of king.

A comparison can be made between the myth and the moral dangers of employing armed drone technologies to target suspected terrorists. What is distinctive about the tale of Gyges is the ease with which he can commit murder and get away without repercussions. The unique advantage provided by the ring ends up becoming the justification for its use.

UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), or what is more commonly called drones, have given the U.S. a great advantage over other nations of the world. While some of them are already trying to play catch-up –about a dozen other nations have

armed drones- it is unlikely they will outstrip America's drone program anytime soon. In fact it's "full steam ahead" for weaponized drones development in the American military. Domestic use for police departments may not be far behind.

Now I am not going to condemn the use of all kinds of drones, as I heard done in a workshop at Ecumenical Advocacy Days early this year. Such a position makes no sense to me. I believe drones can be wonderful tools in search and rescue efforts, tracking severe weather, helping protect endangered species from poachers and other such peaceful endeavors. But today we don't have time to discuss all the positive possibilities for drones. I want to keep the focus on the military applications.

Some of the talk about drones in the past few years has had science fiction overtones. Countless times there have been references to the "Terminator" movies as drones have been discussed. But drones are not entirely new. They have had predecessors all the way back to the nineteenth century when pilotless balloons were used to deliver bombs in Italy. In 1916, during World War 1, a [military](#) scientist conceived of an "aerial torpedo" designed to be loaded with explosives and steered into the deadly Zeppelins on their bombing runs over southern England. In the 1930s, the British Royal Navy [developed the Queen Bee](#), a radio-controlled pilotless plane. With varying degrees of success, other efforts at developing drones have been done since that time.

The MQ-1 Predator was first introduced in 1995 as a surveillance and intelligence gathering tool, and was later customized to launch weapons like Hellfire missiles. The next generation and larger brother of the Predator is the [MQ-9 Reaper](#).

Though unarmed drones had been used in Afghanistan since 2000, in February 4, 2002, the CIA first used an unmanned Predator drone in a targeted killing in Afghanistan, near the city of Khost. A Hellfire missile was fired at what was believed to be Osama bin Labin. It wasn't in fact but the government still claimed that all the dead were "legitimate targets." Eventually the identities of the three men killed were determined. They were innocent very poor men who had

climbed to the mountainous area to forage for leftover metal from the US airstrikes, bits of shrapnel and bomb tail fins—that could fetch about 50 cents per camel load. At this time the program was officially a secret.

Later that same year in November, a US drone strike against Al Qaeda operatives took place in Yemen. The attack, conducted by the CIA, destroyed a car carrying six suspected militants, including Abu Ali, a former security guard for Osama bin Laden wanted for playing a critical role in the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*. This was the first acknowledge targeting killing since President Gerald Ford implemented a ban on political assassinations in 1976.

After 2002 there were dozens of other drone strikes during the President George W. Bush time in office . His administration slowly increased the frequency of drone strikes, and then [drastically ratcheted](#) up the rate of drone strikes in Pakistan in the final year of his administration.

Under President Obama, the program has grown larger and more deadly. Looking at Pakistan alone, our current President ordered [five times as many](#) drone strikes in his first term as his predecessor did in eight years. Or, as Peter Bergen [noted last year](#):

During the Bush administration, there was an American drone attack in Pakistan every 43 days; during the first two years of the Obama administration, there was a drone strike there every four days.

Presently, almost a third of all US warplanes is a drone.

Of course we need to ask whether that is a good thing or not. When it comes to instruments of war, drones are about as good as it gets. As one [reluctant defender](#) of drones put it, “They’re the worst form of warfare in the history of the world, except for all the others.”

Considering how horribly destructive and indiscriminate some weapons systems are, drones count as good news. Philosopher [Bradley Strawser](#) gushed, “It’s all upside. There’s no downside. Both ethically and normatively, there’s a tremendous value.” So, what counts as the upside?

First, no American pilot of a drone will be shot down, wounded or taken captive. Drone operators sit behind a console thousands of miles from those they target. They can count on returning home to their families at the end of the day.

Second, drone strikes are less costly in terms of noncombatant lives lost. While some opponents of drone warfare have complained that thousands of innocent lives have been lost in Pakistan and elsewhere, there is no basis for such numbers. The highest realistic estimated figures of noncombatant killings come from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. Even these figures indicate a much lower ratio of civilians to combatant deaths than seen in any recent war.

Third, drone strikes are less financially costly than other forms of warfare. And anything that reduces the dollars and cents cost of war strikes me as a good thing. Money can better be spent on things that support life.

Fourth, because drone operators are able to target individual leaders, they can cause greater damage to enemies with less overall violence. Does “leadership decapitation” work? Perhaps it does. Time will tell. But there certainly is [evidence](#) that targeting leaders shortens the lifespan of terror organizations.

Fifth, [an argument](#) for drone warfare is that “drone strikes are less costly in terms of objections in the court of public opinion. Insulated by technology, the strikes appear to us — and more important, to those around the world — on our TV screens as little more than a scene from *24*.”

Admittedly, all that is quite a bit of an upside.

That doesn't mean I'm in harmony with the Obama administration's [claim](#), “These strikes are legal, they are ethical and they are wise.” But we need to be honest about the fact that a case can be made for the use of weaponized drones. Nevertheless, there are several strong reasons to oppose the use of them. In fact, some of the upsides of drones have downsides hidden within them.

First, the very ability that allows long-term surveillance of suspected terrorists creates a situation in which entire populations get terrorized. Clive Stafford Smith, from the human rights group [Reprive](#), remarked: “An entire region is being

terrorized by the constant threat of death from the skies. Their way of life is collapsing: kids are too terrified to go to school, adults are afraid to attend weddings, funerals, business meetings, or anything that involves gathering in groups.”

Certainly, in all wars civilian populations experience a degree of terror. When the sound artillery rumbles or the overhead noise of approaching aircraft on a bombing mission is heard, fear is the immediate response from the people living nearby. But this comes and goes. With drones the threat is discernible and ongoing, like a clinched fist cocked back and poised in front of your face.

Ghulam Rasool, a stooped elderly man who choose to leave behind his home and cattle to escape the threat of drones, [said](#), “They are evil things that fly so high you don’t see them but all the time you hear them. Night and day we hear this sound and then the bombardment starts.” In some areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan drones are an inescapable presence, a looming specter of death from above. This traumatizes innocent populations and creates an environment conducive to the radicalization of people who otherwise would not be inclined to be radical.

Second, in an essay that largely justifies drone warfare, [Mark McKinnon](#) writes , “Drone attacks subvert the rule of law — we become judge, jury, and executioner — at the push of a button. This seems an acceptable risk right now, when the technology for drone strikes is *ours*, not the enemy’s.” In April of this year the Obama administration refused to send anyone to a Senate hearing on targeted killings, though the President more recently has again promised greater transparency.

Still, the criterion for the “hit list” that has been generated at the highest levels of government has not yet been disclosed. Neither has there been a publicly disclosed statement of the safeguards that have been put in place to protect the innocent. There is no judicial review of the process. This has led a former legal adviser to the State Department, [Harold Koh](#), to declare that the targeted killings by drones is a program that is “illegal, unnecessary and out of control.”

Targeted killing differs little from assassinations, though the Obama administration argues otherwise. What is particularly disturbing about this is that it represents a very intimate sort of violence –a specific person is hunted down. But then the killing is done from a great distance. This is not combat governed by rules of war.

Now it has always been the case that as military technology has developed, greater and greater distance has come between the operators of weapons and those who are killed, and with the distance, the killing becomes less personal and more general. In contrast, drones increase the distance but at the same time seek out particular people. The targets become more like prey mechanically pursued by an untouchable predator before whom there is no opportunity to surrender.

A third, and perhaps the biggest reason, for concern about drone warfare is that it removes a very important deterrent to war, the loss of American lives and the negative public reaction to this loss. The United States is surely right to seek to minimize American casualties, but if war can be waged by one side without any risk to the life and limb of its combatants, a vital form of restraint been removed. It is very likely that military intervention will be used where it would otherwise never be considered.

In a recent New York Times [editorial](#) Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry and David Kennedy observed that war has been made easier since the end of the Vietnam war. One important factor is that less than a half percent of the population serves in the armed forces and far less among the wealthy and powerful, including the children of those in Congress. Furthermore, the public has been shielded from immediate financial impact of wars that would be felt if there was a levying of special taxes, rather than borrowing, to finance “special appropriations” for wars. Additionally, reliance on technology has made war less costly militarily and has fostered apathy and complacency about the use of force.

They note that the Congressional Research Service has identified 144 military deployments in the 40 years since ending the Selective Service draft in 1973, compared with 19 in the 27-year period when the draft was in effect following World War II. “An increase in reliance on military force traceable is in no small

part to the distance that has come to separate the civil and military sectors. The modern force presents Presidents with a moral hazard, making it easier for them to resort to arms with little concern for the economic consequences or political accountability. Meanwhile, Americans are happy to thank the volunteer soldiers who make it possible for them not to serve, and deem it is somehow unpatriotic to call their armed forces to task when things go awry.”

The use of weaponized drones is another way to make war easier. Citing the oft-quoted adage of Gen. Robert E. Lee, reportedly uttered after the battle of Fredericksburg, “It is well that war is so terrible, otherwise we would grow too fond of it.” What happens when war is no longer so terrible for those one on side in the war. Will we grow too fond of it, as if American history doesn’t already suggest too great a fondness for war?

Already drones are not simply being employed instead of “boots on the ground” to more effectively protect civilians. Drones are used where the U.S. would otherwise never send in ground troops (Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan), where wars have not been declared and where the U.S. would not consider intervening by conventional means. As a result, drones are *expanding, not limiting* killing. And without American casualties being reported in the news and with the violence being inflicted far from the eyes of reporters, it is likely that the threshold against lethal action and war will be lowered.

In response to this concern, Strawser has argued, “There could be an upside. There are cases when we should go to war and we don’t, especially in humanitarian cases like Rwanda.” However, in an essay that seeks to vindicate the right of humanitarian interventions, Harvard Law School scholar [Ryan Goodman](#) concedes, “Leading public international law scholars and the great majority of states – including states that have engaged in humanitarian intervention – refuse to endorse the legality of humanitarian intervention for fear of its abuse as a pretext.”

This reluctance is understandable. We should recall that after the WMD rationale for the invasion of Iraq fell apart, the Bush administration advanced the dubious

claim that the war was necessary for a humanitarian reason, to “liberate” the Iraqi people from the oppressive dictator Saddam Hussein. Given this ugly piece of deceit -and similar war-justifying falsehoods- hopes for weaponized drones as tools for humanitarian ends should not be high. And Iraq is only one of many U.S. interventions purportedly for humanitarian reasons that were in fact anything but.

Daniel Bell, one of the more interesting scholars currently reflecting on the meaning of the just war tradition, in a *Christian Century* [article](#) wrote of the harm the use of drones has on counter-insurgency efforts. The most important aim of counter-insurgency is not in killing as many of the enemy as possible. The military aim is secondary to the political aim. Bell writes, “The clear tactical advantage of being able to reach more bad guys while optimizing force protection is overridden by the damage such weapons do to the political aims of counterinsurgency, which is protecting the population and winning hearts and minds.”

Victory is not achieved simply by killing a sufficiently large number of the enemy or even –more selectively- eliminating the current leadership. Thus, Bell concludes, “In just war terms, drones may violate the criterion of ‘reasonable chance of success’ because they undermine the political goals of the war.” Protecting the noncombatant population must be at the forefront to achieve victory. This requires a more rigorous application of just war standards and a more tightly controlled use of force. “Shock and awe” campaigns are the surest way to fail at securing victory.

Now we could go on and talk about the possibility of autonomous drones operating to identify targets without a human operator in control at all. Theoretically programmers could put in protocols and perimeters and let the drones fly to do terrorist search and destroy work. Of course they would be operated by algorithmic ‘ethical governors’ replacing human decisions in warfare. But where is real judgment in this? What will this do to our ideas about just war and ethics in battle? Who is responsible when things go wrong? Lots of questions have yet to be answered!



Whatever virtues they might have, the downside is much more ethically troubling. And while I believe it is important to be conversant with the just war tradition, I am not convinced it represents a way that can reliably guide those committed to Christ-centered discipleship. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," (Matthew 5:9), we can be reasonably certain that he didn't have in mind the operators of even the most sophisticated weapons capable of the most effective surgical strikes from thousands of miles away. Rather the blessed peacemakers of which he spoke were to be like him. That entails a love that does not allow us to stand afar with weapons that allows us to kill at a safe distance but demands that we come near to our enemies, even within their reach, not so we can harm them, but to bless them, as Jesus did.