Drones: The Opposite of Nukes

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Cato Unbound's new January 2012 edition is on the effects of drone warfare and the implications for future American policy. (For those of you unaware, Cato Unbound is run by the Cato Institute, and is a scholarly project that solicits papers from academics and intellectuals on a monthly theme. Scholar A will write a lead essay, the other scholars respond, and then there's a conversation. It's sort of like a presidential debate, only intelligent.)

The lead writer for this month is David Cortright, Director of Policy Studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. (Try saying that five times fast.) He argues that having drone weapons increases the likelihood that political leaders will start conflicts, because they're easy to use:

The rise of drone warfare has stirred strong passions and sparked a vigorous debate about the morality of unmanned weapons systems. The first and most important question is whether drone technology makes war more likely. Are decisionmakers more prone to employ military force if they have accurate weapons that are easier to use and do not risk the lives of their service members? The use of these weapons creates the false impression that war can be fought cheaply and at lower risk. They transform the very meaning of war from an act of national sacrifice and mobilization to a distant almost unnoticeable process of robotic strikes against a secretive "kill list." Do these factors lower the political threshold for going to war?

On the surface the question seems naïve. Political scientists argue that decisions about going to war are made on the basis of strategic necessity and perceived threats to security. The act of war is not determined by the type of weapon available. As the eminent political theorist Hans Morgenthau famously said, referring to nuclear weapons, people "do not fight because they have arms. They have arms because they deem it necessary to fight."[5]

On the other hand, the availability of a particular class of weaponry can influence judgments on the likely costs and viability of military action. U.S. political leaders are able to imagine intervening militarily in other countries because they have advanced weapons systems designed for that purpose.[6] The possession of drone technology increases the temptation to intervene because it removes the risks associated with putting boots on the ground or bombing indiscriminately from the air. Drone systems are "seductive," writes law professor Mary Ellen O'Connell, because they lower the political and psychological barriers to killing.[7] They induce a false faith in the efficacy and morality of armed attack that could create a greater readiness to use force.

A March 2011 report from the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre of the U.K. Ministry of Defence concluded that the availability of drone weapons was indeed a factor in the decision of British leaders to participate in military operations in Pakistan and Yemen. In its study the Center found that manned aircraft and commando raids could have been used for the selected missions but were rejected as too risky. The decision to use force was "totally a function of the existence of an unmanned capability—it is unlikely that a similar scale of force would be used if this capability were not available." The report urged "removing some of the horror" of these weapons so that "we do not risk losing our controlling humanity and make war more likely."[8]

A greater readiness to use force may also result from the physical and psychological distance that separates the launching of a strike from its bloody impact. Robotic technology removes the person from the emotional equation of war, reducing human targets to images on a computer screen. This has stretched to the maximum what writer P.W. Singer describes as the disconnection between war and society.[9] Scholar Mary Dudziak agrees, "Drones are a technological step that further isolates the American people from military action, undermining political checks."[10] U.N. Special Rapporteur Philip Alston warns against "a 'PlayStation' mentality to killing" that may induce public callousness and susceptibility to claims about costless warfare.[11]

I like the quote from Ms. O'Connell, that drones are "seductive," because that's what they are: they allow you to kill your enemies from afar, and get all that action vibe that politicians apparently crave, without actually shedding American blood. In that respect, they're the exact opposite of nukes.

Everyone who has graduated from high school prior to the 21st century should know the phrase "Mutually Assured Destruction," or MAD. It was MAD that kept the Soviet Union and the United States from blowing each other off the face of the planet during the 20th century. It served as a deterrant, and actually helped to keep down the levels of violence and restrain war (as strange as that sounds.) Anyone who contemplated using their nukes figured they would probably be obliterated immediately after, so there was no point. The Cold War, in a way, was really a hot peace.

Drones, however, have none of those advantages. For the moment, they're largely restricted to the United States and its allies, though as Cortright notes, they are starting to fall into the hands of other powers and "violent non-state actors" such as Hezbollah. If you launch a a drone strike, leaders don't worry about a retaliatory strike wiping them out. There is no mas destruction, everything concentrated, and, from the viewpoint of decision makers, "neat." Thus, there's every excuse to go to war and kill other people.

Are there instances where the use of drones is appropriate? I believe that is an unequivocal "yes." We should not artificially limit ourselves when we need to engage. If we do go to war, we should not do it half-hearted, but go full bore and get the job done. However, the use of drones just encourages leaders to go to war willy-nilly, a new variation on the "Playstation" mentality that its easy (a viewpoint that was encouraged by the actions in Kosovo and was behind the Bush administration's thinking of Afghanistan and Iraq. You can see how well that turned out.) We already are too warlike and militarist. We only *just* left Iraq after eight years there, and we've been in Afghanistan since 2001, and yet we're expanding military operations around the globe. We're causing untold grief and hardship to millions of people, yet we don't care because we're completely insulated from the effects.

Well, almost insulated. One consequence we are dealing with is the creeping security state at home. As Chris Preble of the Cato Institute explained, war is terrible for freedom, and war takes away civil rights at home just as it takes lives abroad. Government expands during war, and does not voluntarily give up those powers afterwards. Having drones increase this likelihood of conflict means our civil liberties will dissappear just that quickly.

And drones will not bring piece. As Cortright writes:

The White House claims its policies are reducing the chances of another terrorist strike in the United States, but drone strikes are fomenting greater anti-American hatred and creating support for the very militant movements their proponents claim to be suppressing. Former Australian military officer and Pentagon adviser David Kilcullen testified before Congress in March 2009 that drone strikes arouse "a feeling of anger that coalesces the population around the extremists" who vow to fight against such

attacks.[24] Drone attacks also may be motivating so-called "lone wolf" extremists who have attempted terrorist strikes in the United States. Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani immigrant who failed in his attempt to bomb Times Square in 2010, testified that, "…until the hour the U.S. pulls it [sic] forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and stops the drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen and in Pakistan … we will be attacking [sic] U.S., and I plead guilty to that."[25]

So drone attacks actually *encourage* more terrorism and attacks against the United States, and make us less safe. This is not surprising if you've followed US security policy for the past decade. The entirety of US security policy is based around "security theater," which is the illusion of making the country safe so that they can convince the public to agree to give up more of their rights and allow the government to expand more of its power. Is taking off our shoes and throwing out all liquids at airports, never mind being groped by cashiers in pseudo-military uniforms making us safer? The evidence very strongly suggests no.

Now, of course, we're also using drones in domestic instances, such as the use by Border Patrol agents to track illegal immigrants, even though their utility is questionable at best. What happens after that? Will drones be floating over every intersection in the Heartland? Quite possibly.

We need to set hard limits on what we should and should not do with drones. I think they simply should not be used in domestic affairs—they're too expensive, they're not really that effective, and having cameras staring at us 24/7 has some real problems with a notion called "civil liberty." In foreign uses, they should limited to only when absolutely-frickin-necessary, and only against high-level leaders or infrastructure targets (like a bridge.) Cortright notes that most of the strikes in Pakistan were against low-level Pashtun insurgents, who really have no impact on US national security. And that's when the targeting info is correct.

Otherwise, you're killing innocent women and children.

Of course, this plays into a larger theme of demilitarization, a topic which only Ron Paul seems to be touching on in the presidential debates. We need to scale back our military-industrial complex, hold our leaders accountable, and stop the warmaking. Drones are just one part of that.

At least in the 20th century, when we developed a new toy, it kept us from slaughtering each other. Now, we're developing toys that encourage us to do just that. This is not a good thing, not for America, not for the world.