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## Obama's favorite weapons

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By: Nat Henthoff, First Amendment, The Jamestown Sun

With President Barack Obama's firm approval, CIA pilotless Predator and Reaper drone planes — firing Hellfire missiles — are killing actual and suspected high-level terrorists. As Jane Perlez reports (New York Times, April 4), "flying overhead, sometimes four at a time" in Pakistan, the drones are also engaged in targeted assassinations in Afghanistan. It has been reported — but the CIA and Obama give us no facts — that in his first year, Obama has authorized more of these strikes than in President George W. Bush's eight years.

Operated half a world away by remote control in Langley, Va., and outside of Las Vegas, the deaths sometimes unintentionally include those of innocent civilians, and are criticized here and in the targeted countries as "extra-judicial executions."

Amid the growing controversy, State Department Legal Adviser Harold Koh insists that these drone attacks "comply with all applicable law, including the (international) laws of war." ("Legality of Drone Strikes Still in Question," InterPress Service, April 3).

The United States, he explains, "is in armed conflict with al-Qaida as well as the Taliban and associated forces in response to the horrific attacks of 9/11."

Koh, when he was Dean of Yale Law School, was a strong critic of the legal rationalizations of the Bush-Cheney war on terrorism. He is now part of what I call "The Obama Metamorphosis," along with such other vehement opponents of the previous administration's "dark side" as Attorney General Eric Holder and CIA Director Leon Panetta. These former critics are now loyal members of the Obama team.

There is some concern within the Obama administration that the drone planes' corollary termination of civilians may aid our enemies' recruiting efforts, as did the Bush torture policies at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. But Koh claims it is required that "the damage to civilians caused by those attacks ... not be excessive."

However, The Economist in England speaks of "a moral quandary" when "drone attacks often kill civilians," pointing to "June 23, 2009, for example, an attack on a funeral in South Waziristan" (in northwest Pakistan, bordering on Afghanistan.) Those Hellfire missiles "killed 80 non-combatants."

Does Koh regard that "damage" as "excessive?" Does Panetta? The ACLU has filed a Freedom of Information Act request for answers to such questions, along with many other acutely relevant queries on what the Predators and Reapers are doing in our name. As of this writing, there has yet to be a reply to this uncomfortable FOIA request.

The Economist's report on "remote-control warfare" refers troublingly to an ongoing refinement in automated warfare aimed at answering those here and abroad who are questioning the ethics of this futuristic form of combat. Cited is Ronald Arkin of the Georgia Institute of Technology's School of Interactive Computing.

He "proposes involving the drone itself — or rather, the software that is used to operate it — in the decision to attack.

"In effect," the article continues, "he plans to give the machine a conscience."

Is this science-fiction? As I will demonstrate next week, Arkin is not alone among American high-tech explorers devising non-human target killings in attacks on terrorism. To elaborate on the inventive Arkin approach, "The software conscience that Dr. Arkin and his colleagues have developed is called Ethical Architecture."

During attacks, the judgment of the automated and autonomous Predator or Reaper drone "may be better than a human's because it operates so fast and knows so much. And — like a human but unlike most machines — it can learn." After a strike, this ever-alert machine can indeed learn from other sources whether the damage it caused — including dead civilians — exceeded its intentions.

With this information, a drone with a conscience can more precisely tailor future attacks and instruct other drones on how to more carefully direct their Hellfire missiles. Thereby, these ethical drones can provide support to future American officials defending the use of killer drones by showing how carefully the United States is working to be humane in its self-defense against international terrorism.

On March 23, in testimony before the House National Security subcommittee's largely pro-drone panel. John Edward Jackson, professor of unmanned systems at the U.S. Naval War College, warned:

"If trends in computer science and robotics engineering continue, it is conceivable that autonomous systems could soon be developed that are capable of making life and death decisions without direct human intervention." (Dan Froomkin, [commondreams.org](http://commondreams.org), March 24).

Another witness, Edward Barrett — director of research for the U.S. Naval Academy's ethics and military policy think tank at the Stockdale Center — focused on whether these autonomous drones would make waging war too easy as this intensive research on robotic warfare continues.

He asked whether these nonhuman attacks “reduce the vigor with which nonviolent alternatives are pursued, and thus encourage unnecessary — and therefore unjust — wars.”

Added ethicist Edward Barrett: “Would a self-conscious and willful machine choose its own ends?”

Next week: More specific factual information on the active planning to make robotic warfare more “humane” and, indeed, human. It would be very helpful if President Obama would tell us — at a nationally televised press conference — what his own concerns are about this rapidly developing global technology.

Will there be any mention of drones by candidates of either party in the midterm elections?

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Cato Institute, where he is a senior fellow.

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