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Unanswered questions for us at war

BY NAT HENTOFF

In his book, "Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century," P.W. Singer -- director of the Brookings Institute's 21st-Century Defense Initiative -- describes our use of lethal pilotless drone planes in Iraq and Afghanistan by noting that the pilots directing the drones are seated before a computer in Las Vegas.

Interviewed by National Public Radio's Terry Gross (Oct. 21), Singer said, "It's like a video game." And indeed, most of these robotic systems, he added, are "modeled after the Xbox or the PlayStation," which some of the younger pilots of the drone planes in Nevada enjoyed playing as they were growing up.

But video-game drones do not leave real corpses. Jane Mayer, author of the deeply troubling article "The Predator War" (The New Yorker, Oct. 6), also was interviewed by the always vigilant and challenging Terry Gross (NPR, Oct. 21) and she asked:

"If it's a low-level militant, are we justified in killing a number of bystanders that are killed with that person? These are very morally fraught, complicated questions." Very importantly, Jane Mayer added: "And again, the process of who's making those decisions -- and how -- is hidden, as far as the CIA goes."

At that point, Gross asked a question that our press and Congress should be asking:

"What questions do you hope President Obama is asking himself about the drones?"

We don't know. The president hasn't told us. And I would also ask him: "What if it's a high-level terrorist (I avoid euphemisms like "militants") that the drone plane has targeted? And that terrorist, as often happens, has strategically hidden himself or herself among civilians? Do our legal and moral values justify killing those civilians to prevent further killings by this wholesale murderer?"

I've learned not to expect an actual answer from this teleprompter president to these morally and legally fraught questions. But shouldn't at least some of We the People be debating where we go from here in this increasingly remote-controlled war?

How do you react to this further question raised by Mayer during the Gross interview: "If we can't feel the impact of the people that we're killing and we can't see them, and none of our own people (are) at risk, does this somehow make it easier to just be in a perpetual state of war because there's no seeming cost to us? ... My sense is that (with) this kind of technology, there's going to be no turning back."

In a real public service, National Public Radio (Oct. 21) ran a long excerpt from P.W. Singer's book, "Wired for War." Included is this dark warning:

"This is leading some of the first generation of soldiers working with robots to worry that war waged by remote control will come to seem too easy, too tempting. More than a century ago, Gen. Robert E. Lee famously observed: 'It is good that we find war so horrible, or else we would become fond of it.'

"He didn't contemplate a time when a pilot could 'go to war' by commuting to work each morning in his Toyota to a cubicle where he could shoot missiles at an enemy thousands of miles away and then make it home in time for his kid's soccer practice."

Singer goes deeper into future video game wars:

"Can the new armaments reliably separate friend from foe? What laws and ethical codes apply? What are we saying when we send out unmanned machines to fight for us? What is the 'message' that those on the other side receive?"

"Ultimately, how will humans remain masters of weapons that are immeasurably faster and more 'intelligent' than they are?"

Will any of these questions be asked of contenders in the 2010 elections -- and two years later when we decide who will be our commander in chief in the next stages of warfare?

There's another societal time bomb in Singer's book. When he quotes Gordon Johnson of the Pentagon's Joint Force Command about the splendid attractions of robots:

"They don't get hungry. They're not afraid. They don't forget their orders. They don't care if the guy next to them has just been shot. Will they do a better job than humans? Yes."

I have seen no polls about what Americans think about these "Star Wars" now. How many of us have yet to be informed? But at Yeshiva University in New York, students have been told by Gabriela Shalev, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations -- as reported in the Nov. 15 Jerusalem Post (New York Edition) that:

"You cannot apply the old norms of warfare to this kind of fighting terrorists. This is new warfare -- this is something the United Nations must confront." The United Nations? They don't confront. They pass resolutions.

Will there be new definitions of "war crimes?" But even with the YouTube wars ahead, P.W. Singer advises that "wars are complex, messy and unpredictable. And this will remain the case even as unmanned systems increasingly substitute for humans."

But will the definition of "humans" remain the same?
