

Airmen prepare to land MQ-1B Predator UAV from control room at Ali Base, Iraq



Controversial Contrails

The Costs of Remotely Piloted Foreign Policy

By HOUSTON R. CANTWELL

It is well that we find war so terrible—lest we would become fond of it.

—Robert E. Lee

As six unsuspecting young men drove their nondescript van across the vast Yemeni desert on November 3, 2002, a small piston-driven aircraft covertly monitored their activities from roughly 3 miles overhead. Following a great deal of intense data collaboration and synthesis, intelligence confirmed that one of the vehicle occupants was involved in the 2002 bombing of the USS *Cole*. The aircraft set up for an attack. Minutes later, an AGM-114 Hellfire air-to-surface missile carrying an 18-pound warhead scored a direct hit on the vehicle, killing all occupants.¹

Located in an air-conditioned Predator ground control station over 100 miles away

sat the individual responsible for this violence. From this comfortable vantage point, during the time leading up to the engagement, the operators of the lethal MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) ensured minimal collateral damage, precise weapons effects, and positive target identification.² The strike was a politician's dream—objective, neutralized at low risk with no visible collateral damage.

Though this was not the first time a UAV employed lethal force, the 2002 Yemen strike showcased the unique strengths of armed UAVs—a persistent surveillance platform capable of precise and lethal engagement at a moment's notice. This successful strike helped pave the way for increased

reliance on unmanned strike capabilities by the U.S. Government. This article questions the increasing reliance on armed UAVs by the United States as a foreign policy tool. Though the use of armed UAVs continues to expand, this unabated trend could prove detrimental to U.S. national interests.

Questioning the UAV Trend

Today, the voracious appetite for UAV capabilities remains strong. The recently released fiscal year 2013 Department of Defense (DOD) budget proposal cut a sig-

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nificant number of programs, yet increased UAV investment, directing the Air Force to expand from a current level of 61 Predator/Reaper orbits to 65 with a surge capability of 85.³ But as the United States continues to send unmanned machines to execute national security policy, some have begun to question this trend—most notably the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA’s) regular use of lethal force through unmanned aircraft.

Nowhere have unmanned airstrikes become more prolific than in Pakistan. In a 2011 *Foreign Affairs* article, Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann report that:

*from June 2004, when the strikes in Pakistan began, to January 2009, the Bush administration authorized 44 strikes in the rugged northwestern region of Pakistan. Since assuming office, Barack Obama has greatly accelerated the program. . . . In just two years, the Obama administration authorized nearly four times as many drone strikes as did the Bush administration throughout its entire time in office—or an average of one strike every four days, compared with one every 40 days under Bush.*⁴

Though these strikes have employed solely precision-guided munitions, they have still resulted in tremendous destruction, killing an estimated 300 to 500 people in 2009 alone.⁵

Congress passed an important piece of legislation on September 18, 2001, that indirectly supported this increased use of UAVs. The Authorized Use of Military Force permits the President to use “all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States.”⁶ After years of projecting lethal force under this authority, the dependence on armed UAVs has grown. In terms of government efforts at targeting al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in their tribal areas, then–CIA Director Leon Panetta went as far as to say UAVs are “the only game in town.”⁷

Given that politicians continually strive to minimize the number of casualties in our Armed Forces, the increased use of unmanned aircraft should not be surprising. While serving as Secretary of Defense, Richard Cheney was asked if he felt there

were any disadvantages to using precision standoff weapons. He responded:

*We’d be damned fools if we didn’t take advantage of our capabilities and use our technology to the maximum extent possible. Why would you want to get somebody killed if you don’t have to? . . . If we can prevail in a conflict by imposing maximum damage on the enemy at a minimal cost to ourselves, I can’t think of a better way to pursue.*⁸

But public concern has risen given the emerging trend of using machines to fight our enemies while safely distanced from the battlespace.

Peter Singer, renowned author of *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, recently published an article entitled “Do Drones Undermine Democracy?” His concerns focus on the growing disconnect between the U.S. public and government regarding decisions to employ deadly force in defense of national interests due to the increased use of unmanned aircraft. According to Singer,

wars, even those fought via technologically advanced machines, are not costless endeavors

“When politicians can avoid the political consequences of the condolence letter—and the impact that military casualties have on voters and the news media—they no longer treat the previously weighty matters of war and peace the same way.”⁹ As an example, he cited the recent combat operations in Libya where unmanned aircraft executed airstrikes several months past the War Powers Resolution 60-day deadline without congressional approval. Arguably, the absence of ground troops reduced congressional scrutiny over the operation. Mary Dudziak, a law school professor at the University of California, puts it this way: “Drones are a technological step that further isolates the American people from military action, undermining checks on . . . endless war.”¹⁰

Wars, even those fought via technologically advanced machines at distances of hundreds or even thousands of miles, are not costless endeavors. All wars have costs. Joshua Foust, columnist for *The Atlantic*, argues that drone operations “come at an enormous cost: to our reputation, to our morals, to our relationship and status with

countries we need to work with to contain and defuse terrorism, and in the lives of the many innocent people we’ve killed through either sloppiness or ignorance.”¹¹ According to Foust, “In Yemen the insistence on drone strikes in the absence of any broader political engagement with the opposition political movements has created the mass perception that the U.S. is intimately tied to the oppression of the Yemeni people.”¹² Estimates of civilian casualties, though extremely difficult to measure with any degree of accuracy, also cast a troubling light: “According to [a] survey of reliable press accounts, about 30 percent of all those killed by drones since 2004 [through 2010] were nonmilitants.”¹³ In making an interesting science fiction analogy, Noah Shachtman points out that sending machines abroad to kill on our behalf “makes us look like the Evil Empire [from the *Star Wars* movies] and the other guys like the Rebel Alliance, defending themselves versus robot invaders.”¹⁴

Arguably the most troubling effect of the proliferation of unmanned systems relates to the frequency of and decisionmaking

calculus toward future war. UAVs may lessen the terrible costs of going to war, and in doing so, make it easier for leaders to go to war.¹⁵ The danger, as Christopher Coker argues, is that leaders can:

*become so intoxicated by the idea of precise, risk-free warfare that we believe what we want to believe. Unfortunately, we may slip down the slope and find ourselves using violence with impunity, having lost our capacity for critical judgments. We may no longer be inclined to pay attention to the details of the ethical questions which all wars (even the most ethical ones) raise.*¹⁶

The trends emphasizing the increased use of unmanned aircraft are unmistakable. As one of the last military growth industries, companies work feverishly to design the military’s newest unmanned systems. Though unmanned systems reduce the personal risk shouldered by American Servicemembers on the battlefield and reduce the political risk to politicians, as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, the employment of unmanned



U.S. Air Force (Jeffrey Hall)

MQ-1 Predator UAV, armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles

combat aircraft must be carefully evaluated to ensure that their continued use remains congruent with overall national security objectives. Their proliferation around the world affects foreign perceptions of America and reflects our societal values. No group is better positioned to ensure continued close scrutiny than our elected officials. James Madison envisioned a chosen body of elected officials “whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice, will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.”¹⁷ Continued development and use of these technologies will further test their wisdom. Unmanned systems reduce the costs of war, making war significantly less horrible for the side employing the technology. America must not lose the capability to discuss the difficult ethical questions that come with any type of war, or, as General Lee observed, we risk becoming fond of it. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Craig Hoyle and Andrew Koch, “Yemen Drone Strike: Just the Start?” *Jane’s Defence*

Weekly, November 13, 2002, available at <www4.janes.com.ezproxy6.ndu.edu/>.

² The official U.S. Air Force designation for an aircraft flown via datalink is *remotely piloted aircraft* (RPA). The author chose to use the term UAV due to its acceptability by wider audiences. The term *drone* has also gained recent popularity.

³ Kate Brannen, “SecDef: Smaller Military will be ‘Cutting Edge,’” *Airforcetimes.com*, January 26, 2012, available at <www.airforcetimes.com/news/2012/01/defense-leon-panetta-says-smaller-military-cutting-edge-012612w/>.

⁴ Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, “Washington’s Phantom War,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67939/peter-bergen-and-katherine-tiedemann/washingtons-phantom-war>.

⁵ Jane Mayer, “The Predator at War,” *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2009, available at <www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/10/26/091026fa_fact_mayer>.

⁶ Joshua Foust, “More Than Just Drones: The Moral Dilemma of Covert Warfare,” *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2012, available at <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/more-than-just-drones-the-moral-dilemma-of-covert-warfare/251827/>.

⁷ Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, “The Drone Wars,” *The Atlantic*, December 2010,

available at <www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/12/the-drone-wars/8304/>.

⁸ Timothy Sparks, “The Dawn of Cruise Missile Diplomacy” (Master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, June 1997), 57.

⁹ Peter W. Singer, “Do Drones Undermine Democracy?” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012, available at <www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/opinion/sunday/do-drones-undermine-democracy.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁰ Mayer.

¹¹ Joshua Foust, “Unaccountable Killing Machines: The True Cost of U.S. Drones,” *The Atlantic*, December 30, 2011, available at <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/12/unaccountable-killing-machines-the-true-cost-of-us-drones/250661/>.

¹² Foust, “Unaccountable Killing Machines.”

¹³ Bergen and Tiedemann, “The Drone Wars.”

¹⁴ Peter W. Singer, *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 310.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹⁷ James Madison, Federalist #10, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 66.