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The Drone War: Understanding Who Must Die From Above

By Tyler Wilch
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In late October of 2016, I took a break from reading for my various social science courses to work for a couple of hours at my work-study job at the Vassar College Athletics Communications Office. On this particular day, I had to provide commentary and audio for a video stream of the game which is played live online, largely for parents and family members of the players. At halftime, the parents of someone on the team approached my boss to talk, and in this conversation, one parent casually commented that the other loved to watch their child play while in their office at General Atomics. *General Atomics*, the defense contracting company which, among other things, manufactures the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper, the two most-used military drones.

This chance meeting with a General Atomics employee speaks to the larger context of drone warfare as well as the logics behind it. This person could, through a video image and the sound of my voice, be transported from an office in California to a sports field 3,000 miles away. At the same time, General Atomics was producing and selling military drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the U.S. military to be used in locations across the world, thousands of miles away, while being controlled remotely in places such as Creech Air Force Base in Nevada.

In the context of the game stream, one is completely aware of the rules of the contest and the bounds of play, the participants are numbered and their names are listed, they are in uniform, and their actions are occurring within a clear set of guidelines and norms. No one is trying to speculate on the loves, hates, future plans, or deep-seeded beliefs of players based on the

footage. Further, the contest is projected with my description and the assistance of statistics and information provided by a team of people there, who know the athletes, and the coaches, and can hear and see close up what is occurring. In the other context, the U.S. military takes control over decisions of life and death in places they do not and cannot understand, making decisions based on their understandings of patterns of life and metadata from thousands of feet in the air. There are not rules to what they are seeing, there are no uniforms, and there is rarely information in any fashion from people who are physically present. Instead, it is just the video, being watched from thousands of miles away, as people are targeted for death.

How do we begin to understand an outlook where an un-narrated stream of a sporting event would be self-explanatorily difficult to understand, but similar video footage gathered by unmanned aerial vehicles is sufficient to understand who below must die? The perceptions and lenses that enable this outlook must be picked apart in order to comprehend (and begin to resist) the pull of drone warfare.

Drone-use has become the United States' preferred way of waging war. Unmanned aerial vehicles are piloted remotely from thousands of miles away providing both surveillance in near-constant streams, and the ability to drop bombs. Through this new means of violence, Americans are not vulnerable, and are instead separated physically from the violence and death. The U.S. drone campaign is waged almost entirely in secret and without the hindrance of laws, international or domestic. The U.S. Executive and the various military and intelligence agencies involved are able to forward the drone war with unilateral power, with U.S. sovereignty extending globally.

In a short time in early 2016, the United States "deployed remotely piloted aircraft to carry out deadly attacks in six countries across Central and South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, and it announced that it had expanded its capacity to carry out attacks in a seventh," the ACLU's Jameel Jaffer explains. Drone bombs kill people not only in "hot war zones" like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but also in Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Pakistan.

A myriad of ethical and moral problems arise in the face of this new way of killing engaged in the United States. The dominant institutional justification for drone-use, as outlined by former President Barack Obama and others involved, asserts that the strikes of drones are safer, smarter, more efficient, more accurate, and cost less lives (American and otherwise) than the methods used in traditional warfare. They are the *civilized* way of waging war. Over the course of his eight years in office, Obama repeatedly asserted that he was not "opposed to all war" but instead "opposed to dumb wars," one of which being the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. He contrasted drone-use with "conventional airpower or missiles" and "invasions of these territories" saying that drones are more precise, cause less civilian casualties, and do not "unleash a torrent of unintended consequences" such as causing people to see the U.S. as an invading and occupying force.

However, an engagement with the realities of drone warfare proves these notions to be false. Instead of being ethical, drone-use has unleashed an often indiscriminate volley of bombs on thousands of people in many countries, and drone violence has become a go-to answer to the problem of American existential fear of terrorism.

This is displayed in the continuous and repeated failure of unmanned aerial vehicles and their operators to differentiate friend from foe, supposed-target from civilian. The lack of capacity (or care) to discriminate between people is repeatedly seen, whether it be in the 2011 murder of a Yemeni governor, the first Obama approved Yemeni strike which killed 14 women and 21 children, the first drone attack in Pakistan which left two children dead, the 2013 bombing of 12 Yemeni people in a wedding party, or the murder of American teenager Abdulrahman al-Aulaqi while failing to kill the bomb's target.

We are left in a present where the call for this somehow 'ethical' way of war becomes more and more enticing and normalized as the drone war rages on in the early days of the administration of Donald Trump with no end in sight.

The faith in powerful institutions and U.S. technological ability that enables the view of drones as ethical, as demonstrated by the General Atomics employee, is clearly astronomical. This discourse doesn't just enable an acceptance of the usage of drones, but an acceptance based on the claim that drones do not kill people but save lives. The new biopolitical and theopolitical sovereignty seen in U.S. drone-use is vulnerable because drones are constantly making mistakes. This is evidence of the incredible strength of the perception of U.S. sovereignty as all-moral and all-knowing, the belief in drone technology as mythically powerful, and the Orientalist view of people in the Middle East and Africa.

However, the indefensible imperial reality of drone violence also reveals that if these produced narratives are weakened, a different understanding of the drone war may emerge. This view could be one that elicits horror, shame, and revulsion, as well as profound fear of the state. But it could also be purposed to weaken the state apparatus that wage drone warfare.