

Drones and the Democracy Disconnect

By Firmin DeBrabander

With President Obama's announcement that we will open a new battlefield in yet another Middle Eastern country — in Syria, against ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) — there is widespread acknowledgement that it will be a protracted, complex, perhaps even messy campaign, with many unforeseeable consequences along the way. The president has said we will put “no boots on the ground” in Syria; he is wary of simply flooding allies on the ground with arms, for fear that they will fall into the wrong hands — as they already have. Obama wants to strike against ISIS in a part of Syria that is currently outside the authority of the Syrian government, which the president has accused of war crimes, and is thus, in our eyes, a legal no-man's land. He has also made clear that he is ready to go it alone in directing attacks on ISIS — he has asked for Congress's support, but is not seeking their authorization. All these signs point to drones playing a prominent role in this new war in Syria.

Increasingly, this is how the United States chooses to fight its wars. Drones lead the way and dominate the fight against the several non-state actors we now engage — Al Qaeda, the Shabab in Somalia and now ISIS. Drones have their benefits: They enable us to fight ISIS without getting mired on the ground or suffering casualties, making them politically powerful and appealing. For the moment, the American public favors striking ISIS; that would likely change if our own ground forces were involved.

If any group deserves drone strikes, it may well be ISIS.

This fundamentalist Muslim group, so brutal that even Al Qaeda shunned it, has taken to forcibly converting and exterminating Christians and other minority religious groups; one such minority, the Yazidis, may have narrowly escaped genocide at ISIS' hands. The West has received vivid proof of the group's ferocity. On Saturday it released its third video of a beheading — this time of a British aid worker — after two other such videos of the beheadings of American journalists within the past month.

The use of drones raises not just strategic and political problems, but ethical questions as well. In particular, what does our use of and reliance on drones say about us? How do drones affect the nation that endorses them — overtly, or, as is more often the case, tacitly? Are drones compatible with patriotism? With democracy? Honor? Glory? Or do they, as I fear, represent — and exacerbate — a troubling, even obscene disconnect between the American people and the wars waged in our name?

Writing in *The Guardian* in 2012, George Monbiot declared the United States' drone strikes in Pakistan cowardly. He echoed the howls of many Pakistanis on the ground, who suffer the drone onslaught firsthand, while those who carry it out are safely removed thousands of miles away. The new breed of warriors is strange indeed: They are safely ensconced here in the United States, often commuting to work like ordinary citizens, and after a day spent monitoring and perhaps striking enemy targets, they return home to kids, homework and dinner.

Drone apologists, and many defense experts, claim drones are a reasonable development in warfare technology. The *Slate* commentator Jamie Holmes argues that extreme complaints about military innovations are hardly new. To people like Monbiot, or the BBC commentator Jeremy Clarkson, who scoffs that medals for drone pilots “should feature an armchair and a Coke machine or two crossed burgers,” Holmes says, “the hyperventilating about heroism being killed by machines misses the point. For one, the list of weapons once considered ‘cowardly’ ... include[s] not only the submarines of World War I but also the bow and arrow and the gun. The point of each of these technologies was the same: to gain an asymmetrical advantage against adversaries and reduce risk.”

There are few philosophers more clear-eyed, frank, even cynical when it comes to war than Niccolò Machiavelli. In “*The Prince*,” he asserts that war is inescapable, inevitable. He praises the Romans for understanding the danger in putting it off. To the simple question of when you should go to war, Machiavelli's simple answer is, “When you can” — not when it is just, or “right.” And yet, in another work, “*The Art of War*,” Machiavelli reveals that how a nation goes to war, how a nation chooses to fight is just as critical, perhaps even more so. At this point, the issue of military technology is pertinent, and Machiavelli's discussion of the topic is highly reminiscent of our current debate about drones and character.

In “*The Art of War*,” Machiavelli again praises the ancient Romans, for their battlefield exploits, and states his worry that

newly introduced artillery “prevents men from employing and displaying their virtue as they used to do of old.” Machiavelli ultimately dismisses such fears — though he was only contemplating cannons at the time. But elsewhere he declares that “whoever engages in war must use every means to put himself in a position of facing his enemy in the field and beating him there,” since a field war “is the most necessary and honorable of all wars.” Why is this? Because on the battlefield, military discipline and courage are exhibited and forged, and your opponent gets a true taste of what he’s up against — not only the army, but the nation he is up against.

For Machiavelli, military conduct is a reflection, indeed an extension — better yet, the root and foundation of a nation’s character, the bravery and boldness of its leaders, the devotion and determination of its citizens. Military conduct is indelibly linked to civic virtue, which is why he argues that nations should reject a professional army, much less a mercenary one, in favor of a citizen militia. Every citizen must get a taste of military discipline — and sacrifice. Every citizen must have a stake, an intimate investment, in the wars his nation fights.

Machiavelli was highly sensitive to the role military glory plays in inspiring the public and uniting, even defining, a nation. Great battles and military campaigns forged the identity, cohesion and indomitable pride of the Roman Republic, Machiavelli maintains — across the different social classes — and stoked the democratic energy of the people. Haven’t they served a similar purpose in our own republic? War has offered iconic images of our national identity: George Washington crossing the Delaware with his ragtag soldiers; marines hoisting the flag at Iwo Jima. These images are inherently democratic — they offer no king on his steed, lording over kneeling troops. To that extent, they nourish and reinforce our democratic identity and sensibilities.

This is no longer the case in the age of drones. I have strained to imagine the great battles drones might fight, which the public might rally around and solemnly commemorate. But this is a silly proposition — which cuts to the heart of the matter.

Never have the American people been more removed from their wars, even while we are the most martial nation on earth, and drones are symptoms, and drivers, of this troubling alienation. The United States has been engaged in two expensive and protracted wars in the past decade, as well as the seemingly endless war on terror spread the world over. The war in Afghanistan — where drones have made their mark as never before — is the longest in the nation’s history, and we have spent more money rebuilding Afghanistan than we did on Europe after World War II. Through all our recent wars in the region, however, most Americans have hardly felt a thing. Given the extent of our military engagement, unparalleled in the world, that is astounding, shameful even, and politically treacherous.

Critics have long warned that drones put too much war making power in the hands of few government actors, who increasingly operate on their own, or in the shadows. Many felt we saw a preview of political abuses to come when President Obama unilaterally ordered a drone strike against an American citizen in Yemen. This new technology has already emboldened our government to openly wage war in countries against which we have not officially declared war. We operate there with the tacit, and dubious, assent of a few ruling interests.

Perhaps it is not inevitable that drones are linked to arbitrary, centralized government; perhaps drone warfare can be waged transparently, democratically, legally, though it is admittedly hard to imagine what that would look like. What is certain, however, is that drone technology offers manifold temptations to those who would expand the borders of our wars, or wage war according to their own agenda, independent of the will, or interest, or attention of the American public. Most American citizens are quick to let someone or something else bear the brunt of our wars, and take up the fight. Hence there is less worry about whether a given incursion is necessary, justified, logical or humane. Drones point to a new and terrible kind of cruelty — violence far removed from the perpetrator, and easier to inflict in that regard. With less skin in the game — literally — we can be less vigilant about the darker tendencies of our leaders, the unintended consequences of their actions, and content to indulge in private matters.

The United State is gradually becoming a warring nation with fewer and fewer warriors, and few who know the sacrifices of war. Drones represent the new normal, and are an easy invitation to enter into and wage war — indefinitely. This is a state of affairs Machiavelli could not abide by, and neither should we. It is antithetical to a democracy for its voting public to be so aloof from the wars it fights. It is a feature, I fear, of a democracy destined to lose that title.

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author of "Spinoza and the Stoics" and a forthcoming book critiquing the gun rights movement.

Gemli, boston

People have been killing each other for a long time. The grim history of warfare is summed up succinctly in Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," when the film jumps in a single frame from a proto-human realizing that a thigh bone can crush a skull to an orbiting nuclear weapon. The intervening millennia are skipped because the details are unimportant. People will kill each other with whatever is handy. Thigh bones, drones, it's all the same if you're on the receiving end. It's hard to place a value on words like honor, glory and patriotism since I'm sure the Nazis used these as well. These words are rhetorical recruitment tools, employed whether we're actually defending ourselves from evil or merely taking other people's stuff. Sometimes it's hard to tell.

We allowed the "darker tendencies of our leaders" to get us into two wars. These wars were terrible and cruel, and the consequences were unintended but not unpredictable. Drones didn't lull us into these pointless and ruinously costly conflicts. We were drawn in the old fashioned way, with tales of WMDs and promises of a quick and easy victory. We ultimately left, but not before more soldiers were dying of suicide from moral injury than were being killed in battle. ISIS believes in beheadings, female circumcision and stonings for trivial offenses. Honor is off the table. Machiavelli isn't here. I don't think he'll mind if we send in the drones.

Steve Fankuchen Oakland, Calif.

There is absolutely no relationship one way or the other between the use of drones and democracy. Democracy is about the way decisions get made. Drones are simply a weapon with which some decisions, right or wrong, are carried out. One would expect DeBrabander, a professor of philosophy, to be more precise in the use of language.

Calling the use of drones "cowardly" is absurd! War and sanctioned killing is not about a "fair fight;" it is about winning, however that may be defined.

As to being removed from intimate contact with the effects of one's weapons, drones are nothing new. Two thousand years ago catapults were wrecking mayhem within walled villages, the results not immediately apparent to those who launched projectiles with them. Guns allowed individual soldiers not to see the close-up damage, and artillery, whether on land or on boats, carried the removal further. With the advent of planes and bombs, especially the B-52s and high altitude bombers, you could look in a gadget, push a button, and be done with it. Drones merely go a little step farther in a well-established continuum.

The author claims drones are cruel. How in the world is getting blown up by a drone any worse than getting shot by a gun, turned to hamburger by a mine or a V-2 rocket, or having one's head cut off?

A fair fight? That is called sports unless, of course, you think Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr had the right idea, and we should bring back American honor and glory with duels.

MLP Pittsburgh

If Machiavelli was right, if military conduct is indeed a reflection of a nation's character, then drone warfare may well be the quintessential expression of contemporary American character: a nation of couch potatoes playing "video games" where real flesh and blood human beings are the targets but who are too insensitive and clueless to comprehend the inevitable consequences of their actions. Sooner or later, others will have drone technology capable of inflicting harm upon the United States, and when that happens the couch potatoes will call it "terrorism" and moan "why do they hate us?"

Bob Garcia Miami

Drones are an example of our self-blindness, which is an important element of our Exceptionalism. For example, why aren't drones considered weapons of terror? Look at the parallels between the use of hijacked planes on 9/11 and our now routine use of drones. The main difference is that by definition nothing we do is considered terrorism, whether with drones, torture, or kicking in doors of peasants at midnight. Or widespread use of contractors who are outside all law of accountability, just possible recall by their employers.

And have we legitimized the use of drones? For example, if the Chinese unilaterally decided to use drones to kill alleged Uighur or Tibetan terrorists in the United States, would it be reasonable for them to carry out such strikes in the United

States -- limited only by the practical matter of avoiding being shot out of the sky? Would it be accepted that sometimes they'd make a mistake and blow up a wedding party? Would it be OK for them to negotiate with Mexico or Honduras to site drone bases?

Harold V. McCoy Pinehurst, NC, USA

If Mr. DeBrabander is looking for glory, honor and national character in war, he has obviously never been in one.

Chuck S C

I can't help but think of what Robert E Lee said:"It is well that war is so terrible, otherwise we would grow too fond of it." The further our technology removes us from the God-awful stench of war, the more likely we are to grow fond of it. That will lead to greater hubris and the nemesis that will inevitably follow will be devastating.

PogoWasRight Melbourne Florida

It appears that The President, as many others before him, is continuing to weave a tangled web, one in which we ourselves could become entangled. As an old retired career military person, I have never been able to understand that if we drop a bomb on a home or factory or office in some foreign country, will we create a friend or will we create an enemy? All I am sure of is what I would become if it were done to me. A situation most times called "a no-brainer". And that is not the end of all possibilities. Consider what is in store for us in the future when missile-armed drones become affordable and available to terrorists around the world, as they certainly will. Instead of flying from "here" to "there", those drones will be flying from "there" to "here". Not a pleasant thought. But an inevitable outcome. As Eliza Doolittle said: "Just You Wait!"

Hoff Philadelphia, PA

The author neglects the reality of the modern battlefield when bemoaning our lack of intimacy with the opposition. The enemy we face doesn't form ranks and march across the desert. He hides in civilian homes in areas removed from global society and conspires to release his own versions of remote weapons; theology-addled recruits on consciencless suicidal missions to achieve a glorious afterlife. And he does not hesitate to use his tools to their maximum range and effect. This is fundamental asymmetry to 'honorable' war-making, and to match the threat we spend multitudes of fortunes trying to stay on the high road.

To say that we feel nothing in the West is absurd in the extreme. We reap daily harvests of horrors through the press, our economy struggles to overcome the \$trillions we spend on these conflicts, and our politics have devolved to fighting over the bloody scraps from administration after administration of strategic losses to nearly invisible enemies. You'll have to forgive me for my lack of guilt over finding a way to score a win out of range of the stench of my adversaries' death.

Bruce Balfe Valparaiso

I fail to see the distinction between drones and ships lobbing ordinance from 30 miles out at sea or planes dropping bombs from 35000 feet. It is all long distance warfare. If we can conduct our wars, however distasteful they are in the first place, in a way that minimizes putting our troops in dangers way, then why not?

Chris Koz Portland, OR

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there needs to be a distinction made between the utilization of words like Patriotism, Honor, Glory by civilian leadership and military personnel. Civilians often use these words, even with the best of intentions, as a recruitment tool, a source of rhetoric, and to beat the drums of nationalism. The jingoism sold by politicians, the military industrial complex, and armchair warriors is largely self-serving.

Conversely, these words are the very vehicle by which the military chain of command survives and to argue, as some commentator's have, honor does not matter when fighting an honor less enemy simply do not understand this code; the "disconnect" the writer speaks of grows out of the former.