

Exposing the Killer Drones of Hancock Airbase's 174th Attack Wing

by Ed Kinane, Reprinted from Truthout.org Speakout, November 18, 2015

Every first Tuesday of the month since 2010 a handful of us have been protesting the weaponized Reaper drone at Hancock Air Base. In milder weather – from April to November – we also protest on third Tuesdays. We call this work, “street heat.”

Why such persistence? Hancock AFB, near Syracuse, our home town, hosts the 174th Attack Wing of the New York Air National Guard. Although its operations and the identities of its drone personnel are classified, several years ago in our local daily the then-base commander bragged that Hancock's hunter/killer Reaper drones operate over Afghanistan “24/7.” (And we must wonder where else.)

Hancock seems to know that its operations are both illegal and reprehensible. The base, closed to the public, bristles with armed guards. Its commanders have ignored our repeated attempts to communicate with them. Given its attack identify and its attack role, Hancock may be a legitimate target for those whom it attacks. That means those living near the base risk being “collateral damage.”

While seldom thought of as such in the US, abroad the Reaper is seen as an instrument of terror – maiming, assassinating and displacing human beings – mostly in the Middle East and west Asia, mostly in or near the Islamic oil lands. Drone terror contributes to the refugee crisis now convulsing those regions.

Often the drone assassins – or their chain of command – don't

know the names and affiliations of their defenseless targets. It seems the intelligence – whether derived from signals or from client governments and paid informants with their own axes to grind – is often faulty. Sometimes the targets are combatants, offensive or defensive; often however the victims are far from any combat zone. Some are armed males; far too often they are children and women. Frequently these innocents are in the wrong place at the wrong time – sharing with the target the same vehicle or compound or wedding party.

Sometimes when the Reaper's Hellfire missiles – missiles that dismember and incinerate – strike, the intended target is no longer present or never has been. In a tactic called "double tapping," those killed are first responders arriving shortly after the attack to aid the wounded or recover the corpses and body parts. Sometimes the missiles are deliberately aimed at those attending the funerals of the casualties of the two earlier strikes – "triple tapping."

Such drone strikes may be tactically clever; but – as even some high-ranking US militarists argue – strategically they are stupid. Although these pragmatic warriors may or may not respect international law, drone assassination violates and erodes such law. Generally the killing promotes hostility among the survivors toward the US (Can anyone – as in the wake of 9/11 – still wonder, "Why do they hate us?") And the killing also generates hostility among the victims' fellow tribespeople... and even among those in other nations horrified by the carnage, cowardice and iniquity of it all.

The killing undermines any efforts by our boots on the ground to win "hearts and minds." Some other nations and entities are building or importing (usually from Israel) their own drones. Proliferation makes no one safer; one day proliferation will endanger our own leaders and armed forces. US drones are already targeting US citizens overseas. As we keep getting desensitized to drone lawlessness and that lawlessness keeps getting normalized, domestic police and Homeland Security may

be tempted to target demonstrators, dissenters and minorities.)

We demonstrate outside Hancock on Tuesdays from 4:15 to 5 pm – rush hour. Our handheld signs, in bold, block letters, declare: DRONES FLY, CHILDREN DIE; or TO END TERROR, STOP TERRORIZING; or REAPER DRONES ARE INSTRUMENTS OF TERROR; or STOP HANCOCK WAR CRIME... Hundreds of vehicles drive past – some drivers and their passengers avert their eyes, some make rude gestures, others honk in support.

But we're not trying to reach only the public. We especially want those driving on or off the base at shift change to see us. In their controlled environment Hancock personnel surely have little exposure to criticism of drone killing, but our signs are hard to avoid. Maybe our steadfast – year in and year out – presence get drone operators thinking. We're all about sowing seeds, pricking consciences. We hope that eventually some base personnel will – as the post-World War II Nuremburg Principles require – refuse to follow their illegal orders. Ideally they'll go public with what they know.

The Pentagon seems to be having a tough time recruiting enough personnel to maintain and operate all the killer and surveillance drones it hopes to deploy. The Pentagon dreams of expanding its drone fleet well beyond its current capacity; it dreams of achieving full spectrum dominance over the world's skies. Every state or non-state leader, friend or foe, can then feel their vulnerability, thereby muting resistance to the imperium's demands.

At our monthly and twice-monthly demos we stand directly across East Molloy Road from Hancock's main entrance and exit. In doing so we exercise our First Amendment right of expression and assembly (which, if unexercised, tends to wither). Once several years ago, exasperated with our

presence, Hancock summoned the sheriffs (who seem to know little about the First Amendment). A couple of us were arrested, but even in the hostile DeWitt Town court the charges were dismissed "in the interests of justice." Since then, during these demos, the police have left us alone – though scores of us have been arrested at other times when, in separate nonviolent actions, we've ventured across Molloy Road closer to Hancock's main gate onto what the base claims is its property. But that's a whole other story.

Our Tuesdays at Hancock help get us out of our armchairs and "into the street." Our demos tell the war machine that, whether or not it's in our name or with our tax money, we don't tolerate the killing. Arguably, world-wide it's the street, in crisis after crisis, that might correct regimes straying too far from decency and democracy.

Street heat is one kind of voting that may make a difference. Certainly there would be more impact if more of us participated, whether at Hancock or at other killer drone bases. But even if there were only one of us, s/he would send an essential message. However, if no one is ever there, that absence sends its own – fatal – message: that drone terror is somehow normal (and not cowardly and vile); that the US public is indifferent to killing, indifferent to international law.

Sadly the Hancock drone operatives, some barely out of their teens, allow themselves to become robots – deadly, amoral robots – in a vast imperial, oil-soaked enterprise. Hancock itself is only one of many hundreds of US military bases throughout the US and the planet. Fortunately, though generally ignored by the mainstream media (which rarely dare apply the phrase "war crime" to US military policy), protests like ours occur at various bases operating weaponized drones. Inshallah, such resistance will go viral.

Given that most US Congressional districts have military contracts – whether linked to drone research and development

and operations or to other weapons systems – there usually are sites (bases, research centers, factories) nearby to protest. These are opportunities for more of us to get out of our armchairs and into the street.

If our demonstrating can help de-glamorize the drone and diminish drone operator recruitment and re-enlistment, the souls and lives we save will surely be worth the few hours a month we spend exposing the operators' often naïve complicity.

Reaper Madness: Obama's Whack-A-Mole Killing Machine

*Guest post by **Doug Noble** of **Rochester Peace Action and Education**. Originally published on [Counterpunch Blog](#).*

*“Our entire Middle East policy seems to be based on firing drones,” Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told *The Intercept*. “They’re enamored by the ability of special operations and the CIA to find a guy in the middle of the desert in some shitty little village and drop a bomb on his head and kill him.”*

Targeted killing by drones remains the US weapon of choice, famously called “*the only game in town*,” by former CIA director Leon Panetta. This despite a decade of worldwide moral outrage over its overwhelming civilian casualties, violations of international law, disregard for national sovereignty, dismissal of due process, and continuing secrecy. The Obama administration recently announced that the drone killing program will in fact

be increased by 50 % in the coming two years.

Now government documents leaked to the Intercept show conclusively that the US drone program kills thousands of innocents on bad intelligence and careless targeting while being falsely portrayed as a program of impeccable planning and precision execution. The recently leaked "*Drone Papers*" reveal the extent of willful ineptitude in US drone operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, which rely on systematically faulty intelligence and astonishing inaccuracies in identifying targets. These revelations only further confirm what many of us already knew about the appalling failure, relentless deception and criminal lethality of the US drone program.

But it's even worse. Careless execution and public distortion are one thing. If the US were in fact relying on a proven military technology and strategy to defeat terrorists and "*keep America safe,*" despite setbacks and innocent lives lost, there are those who could justify the cost.

But what is perhaps most insidious of all is the fact that many studies long available to military planners have shown decisively that the use of weaponized drones in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts is both ineffective and counterproductive. Even more, the historical record and recent research shows quite clearly that the "decapitation" strategy driving such drone use – the assassination of high value targets – has itself been both unsuccessful and counterproductive in defeating insurgent or terrorist organizations.

So the drone warriors have known all along it wouldn't work: that killer drones and kill lists would slaughter thousands of civilians but never defeat terrorists. They've known this conclusively from decades of military experience and volumes of research studies. Yet they continue to do it anyway, ever more expansively, ever more mindlessly. Why?

Because they can (and because they have no Plan B).

Weaponized drones were in fact first proposed by the US military in 2000, prior to 9/11, as a means to both target and kill, with the same aircraft, the Number One high value target, Osama Bin Laden. For this purpose, Predator surveillance drones were fitted with Hellfire missiles still available from the Gulf War. The name "Hellfire," an acronym for "heliborne-launched fire-and-forget missile," was originally designed as an "anti-tank guided missile (AGM)," somehow now redeployed for remote precision killing of individuals, or, as one Air Force article called it, "warhead to forehead."

These weaponized drones have been used ever since, as the weapon of choice in US operations all over the Middle East and North Africa. Now, given all the moral and legal controversy surrounding their use, some have begun to question if these weaponized drones have even been effective in defeating terrorists. As Los Angeles Times columnist Doyle McManus asked recently, "Are we winning the drone war?"

It's hard to know since, as a recent Stimson Center Task Force on US Drone Policy report explains,

"after more than 10 years of use, the U.S. drone program remains so shrouded in secrecy that we do not have enough information to make an educated assessment of its effectiveness ... Without a clear understanding of the drone program's strategy, goals, and metric(s) used for evaluation, ... experts ... cannot make informed assessments regarding the program's efficacy."

The Stimson Report observed that "on May 23, 2013, President Obama delivered a major speech at the National Defense University in which ... he pledged to continue the difficult

task of ensuring that the use of lethal UAVs is .. strategically sound." The Report's authors recommend that the US government conduct a thoroughgoing evaluation of the impact of UAV strikes on terrorist organizations, with regard to capabilities, threats currently posed, morale and recruiting, as well as their impact on public opinion, litigation, and defense policy." Nothing is expected to be forthcoming any time soon.

President Obama did provide a metric of drone effectiveness in a major speech in 2014: *"Our actions should meet a simple test: We must not create more enemies than we take off the battlefield."* Though hardly a robust definition of victory, even by this measure, given the growing numbers of new recruits in Al Qaeda, ISIS and other groups, it would appear that the US strategy has been decidedly ineffective. But since there are no clear numbers from the Obama administration of enemies killed and new recruits created, this metric of effectiveness is decidedly unhelpful.

Historical precedent and longstanding military doctrine, though, offer insight into the potential effectiveness of Obama's drone war. What follows is a brief sampling of conclusions drawn by research scholars, both within and without the military, who have examined the historical record and the military evidence. These scholars all agree that drone strikes are useless to defeat counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, but they all concede as well that the US military will continue into the future to rely on them anyway, as *"the only game in town."*

James A. Russell, a researcher at the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, concludes in his article *"The False Promise of Aerial Policing,"* that

"the idea of aerial policing is dangerous and deeply flawed, yet mysteriously it has become a panacea for states seeking

to apply force in the modern era... Aerial policing is an intellectual and strategic house of cards built on shaky foundations ... [it] represents the triumph of tactics over strategy, turning fundamental truths about the nature of war on their head."

Aerial policing grew out of theories of airpower that the airplane had revolutionized war by making it unnecessary for armies to clash on the ground and destroy one another. Instead, they argued, an opponent's armies, his means of waging war, and even his will to fight could be destroyed from the air via strategic bombardment. The conduct of this strike war, they argued, reduced operations and warfare to an engineering problem of identifying and striking targets.

World War II was the great laboratory to try out these ideas, as the United States and Britain sought to pound Germany into submission via strategic bombing. The lessons of the war for strategic bombardment, however, went unlearned. The allied bombers missed most of what they were aiming at, did not end Germany's means to wage war, and did not convince the German people to give up the fight.

The mythology of the airpower advocates endured through the Vietnam War, despite another failure of airpower to achieve strategic effect. More recently, America's special forces set about creating an insurgent targeting methodology that had its roots in the engineering approach employed by the airpower advocates. The targeting methodology was eagerly seized upon by airpower enthusiasts to assassinate suspected terrorists around the world with America's new generation of robots in the sky.

America's strategic retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan after 15 years is a monument to the failure of ... clever tactics championed by counterinsurgency advocates and their precise targeting methods. Yet America's response to this strategic

failure has been to double down, showering more money and responsibility on the Special Forces and similar organizations that achieved no positive strategic effect in battle over the last 15 years.

James Igoe Walsh, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, wrote a comprehensive article entitled, "[The Effectiveness of Drone Strikes in Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism Campaigns](#)". He concludes that

"... drones are at most, weak substitutes for traditional counterinsurgency operations. While drones have the capability to punish and deter insurgent organizations, they do not alone contribute to the establishment of effective state authority in direct and meaningful ways, which ... requires large numbers of ground forces and civilians to provide services to, and gain intelligence from, the local population."

The groups targeted by drones operate in areas where the United States and the [local] national government cannot or will not engage "on the ground" in large numbers. Drones are most useful in precisely such areas, since they allow the United States to project force when it and the national government have few other options

But the absence of boots on the ground makes it more difficult to gather human intelligence on the activities of militant groups that can be used to target drone strikes. Ungoverned spaces also can allow armed groups to proliferate and form complex and short-lived alliances that are difficult for outsiders to understand, increasing the challenge of targeting only militants who oppose the United States. Drones, then, are most useful for counterterrorism in precisely those settings where the challenges of counterterrorism are the greatest, and the ability to collect intelligence is the weakest. This means that the bar for the successful use of drones to counter

terrorism is set quite high.... The evidence from the most sustained campaign to rely on drone strikes to deter and punish insurgent organizations in Pakistan suggests this technology has limited capacity to achieve these objectives. Despite these limitations, drone technology seems very likely to spread both within the U.S. Armed Forces, the armed forces of other countries, and even insurgent organizations.

Philosopher and historian Gregoire Chamayou, in his book, *A Theory of the Drone*, cites a 2009 op-ed by David Kilcullen, influential US military advisor on counterinsurgency, which called for a moratorium on drone strikes in Pakistan. Kilcullen viewed them as dangerously counterproductive, driving the population into the arms of extremists. Kilcullen drew direct parallels between the current drone program and the infamous failures of earlier French and British aerial bombardment campaigns in Algeria and Pakistan. He also opposed the technological fetishism of drone use, which *"displays every characteristic of a tactic – or, more accurately, a piece of technology, – substituting for a strategy."*

Gregoire notes that *"air force strategists are well aware of the objections that [counterinsurgency] theorists never fail to raise, ...that what is being presented as a new strategy has already been tried out, with remarkably disastrous results."* He cites in military doctrine the *"truism that COIN [counterinsurgency] is about boots on the ground and that airpower is counterproductive."*

Gregoire observes, *"Dronized manhunting represents the triumph... of antiterrorism over counterinsurgency. According to this logic, the total body count and a list of hunting trophies take the place of a strategic evaluation of the political effects of armed violence. Successes become statistics."* Never mind that drone strikes multiply new enemies. The strategic plan of drone counterinsurgency now seems to be that an armada of killer drones is capable of

eliminating new recruits as fast as they are created: “as soon as a head grows back, cut it off,” in a pattern of ongoing eradication.

This assessment coincides with the Stimson report conclusion that “the availability of lethal UAVs has fueled a ‘whack-a-mole’ approach to counterterrorism.”

The whistleblower source for the Drone Papers concludes:

“The military is easily capable of adapting to change, but they don’t like to stop anything they feel is making their lives easier, or is to their benefit. And this certainly is, in their eyes, a very quick, clean way of doing things. It’s a very slick, efficient way to conduct the war, without having to have the massive ground invasion mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. ... but at this point, they have become so addicted to this machine, to this way of doing business, that it seems like it’s going to become harder and harder to pull them away from it the longer they’re allowed to continue operating in this way.”

In addition to research on drone killings, some scholars have been researching the strategy underpinning US drone strikes, namely, the “*decapitation*” strategy (our own manner of beheading the enemy). This strategy assumes that the assassination of leaders and other key players – so-called “high value targets” (HVTs) – within an enemy insurgent or terrorist group will eventually defeat the group itself.

Scholars, though, come to the opposite conclusion.

RAND researcher Patrick B. Johnston, in his article “*Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns*,” notes:

“Regardless of whether a government’s adversary is a state, a

terrorist organization, or a guerrilla insurgency, the scholarly opinion has been that high-value targeting is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. The data also show conclusively that killing or capturing insurgent leaders is usually not a silver bullet, since governments were only around 25% more likely to defeat insurgencies following the successful removal of top insurgent leaders."

In his review of the relevant literature, "*The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns Against Insurgents and Terrorists*," Matt Frankel of the Brookings Institution, concludes:

"The final implication for the United States is that it is vital that any HVT campaign take place as part of a larger strategy, not merely as an end to itself. Remote strikes and targeted raids need to be combined with broader operations, both military and non-military, to achieve maximum effectiveness.

The United States will face an uphill battle in utilizing HVT campaigns successfully, since it will always be operating as a third-party force. If the goals of the host government and the third-party force are divergent, there is little chance for success.

It is clear that as long as Al Qaeda remains a global force, U.S.-sponsored HVT operations will continue. But if the United States continues to conduct HVT operations in a vacuum, ...it will continue to be doomed to failure."

Professor of International Affairs Jenna Jordan, concludes in her article "*Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes*"

"The targeting of terrorist leaders affiliated with al-Qaida has been the cornerstone of U.S. counterterrorism policy

since 2001. ..Targeting al-Qaida is not likely to result in organizational decline or long-term degradation [since] its bureaucratic organization and communal support have allowed it to withstand frequent attacks on its leadership."

However, she cautions,

"Regardless of the effectiveness and potential for adverse consequences of its decapitation strategy, the United States is likely to continue targeting al-Qaida leaders because U.S. policymakers view the killing of high-level targets as successes in themselves."

Conclusion

The publication this year of the Drone Papers reveals that the Obama administration, the US military, and the CIA have been lying all along about the drone assassination program, its targets and its civilian casualties. These documents also expose the obscene disregard for human lives pervading the entire operation, as the drone warriors pursue their technological dreams. *"Throughout human history,"* the Stimson Report reminds us, *"the ability to project force across significant distances has been a much sought-after military capability... and since the dawn of mechanization, militaries have sought to replace people with machines."* In this context, drones are the unholy grail. The Drone Papers reveal that in its pursuit these Dr Strangeloves have been well aware of the horrific human costs of their enterprise and that they couldn't care less. □

What I've tried to show here is something more: that these military miscreants have also known all along that their drone technology and targeting strategy are militarily bankrupt. They could not but be aware from military history and doctrine that these approaches have absolutely no possibility of defeating terrorist groups or keeping America safe. They must

know that in fact the opposite is true, that their nefarious enterprise only further endangers us all. And yet they will continue ever more brazenly their Reaper madness, the scholars here all agree, until we find some way to stop them.

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