

The Ghastly, Remotely Piloted, Robotic Reaper Drone

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by Ed Kinane, Reprinted from Truthout, January 26, 2015

The MQ9 Reaper – now deployed 24/7 over Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere – makes killing too easy. It makes war easier to initiate and perpetuate. US drone wars are started with little or no public awareness or support – and with little apparent stake in the game. The weaponized drone cheapens honor. It cheapens life.

The Reaper kills and maims combatants and noncombatants, adults and children, infants and elderly. Drone victims are also those left widowed or orphaned, and those – in the hundreds of thousands – who flee the terrorized tribal countryside. Despite the propaganda that saturates US mainstream media, drones are not deployed in a “war on terrorism.” Weaponized drones *are* terror.

Reaper targeting is both precise *and* indiscriminate. *Precise* if and only if the intelligence on the ground is accurate – a very big if. *Precise striking* is too easily confused with *precise selecting*. On average, for every alleged high level adversary assassinated, dozens of family members, neighbors and other noncombatants are also killed.

The British human rights organization, Reprieve, notes that certain al-Qaeda leaders have escaped several drone attacks in which they have been reported killed. Many of those attacks result in “collateral damage,” i.e. other and innocent lives lost. Drone pilots and their chain of command often have no

idea who their victims are, or how many they have killed.

Aerial warfare is *cowardly*. The Reaper raises cowardice to new heights. Where there's no moral compass, where there's no risk, there's no courage. Despite the lack of physical risk, drone pilots reportedly often suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. These technicians stalk their human targets for hours or days before launching their Hellfire missiles and 500-pound bombs. From their ergonomic armchairs, they observe the assassination and its aftermath up close and personal. They watch "bugsplat" (pilot talk for victims) try to flee.

Minutes later, the pilot may "double tap" – attacking the first responders who converge on the rubble and carnage. Hours later, they may *triple* tap: targeting those attending the victims' funeral. Killing and maiming mostly civilians, often far from war zones, drones incite hatred, which can lead to blowback or what might be called *reactive terrorism*: retaliation against suspected informers, aid workers, journalists and US targets near and far. No one can calculate the half-life of such hatred.

Drones violate national sovereignty (Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Gaza etc.), thereby defying international law, thereby rendering the entire planet more hate-filled, anarchic and vulnerable. Drone attacks are racist: They almost exclusively target Muslims and people of color ("Christian terrorism").

US (and, let us not forget, British and Israeli) drone attacks spur proliferation – a drone arms race in which dozens of nations, if only in self-defense, are now acquiring or building weaponized drones. The barbaric use of killer drones creates markets: The deadly robots are first demonstrated eviscerating or vaporizing human flesh, then exported. The barbarity also creates precedents that make all of us, everywhere, less safe

The Pentagon's PR mantra is that "drones save lives." Yet the Reaper's advantages are negated by the larger truth that only in the *short-term* and within *narrow contexts* do they reduce US casualties. (Those casualties of other nations, of course, don't mean so much. Par excellence, the weaponized drone is the flagship of US exceptionalism.)

Summing up, the Reaper is tactically clever, but strategically stupid. The Pentagon is surely aware of this insufficiency. But the Pentagon doesn't necessarily seek to "win" its wars. The US military machine seeks to multiply enemies and keep the pot boiling, thereby devouring the national budget and perpetuating mega-profits for its corporate allies. The corporados laugh all the way to the bank.

On the Home Front

Reaper deployment from sites such as Niagara Air Force Base near Buffalo and Hancock Air Force Base near Syracuse in upstate New York extend the war zone to nearby civilian areas. Like it or not, without our consent, we've become part of the battleground. Upstate New Yorkers didn't enlist in these undeclared, clandestine wars. We are conscripts. Our federal taxes pay for these wars; vast slabs of our national treasure are diverted to the military and away from schooling, health care, mass transit and other infrastructure.

Reaper deployment is cloaked in secrecy, mocking democracy. Reaper security measures (as at Hancock, home of the 174th Attack Wing) lead to civil liberties abuse. Since 2010, recurring nonviolent anti-drone protests at Hancock have led to more than 150 arrests and multiple incarcerations of those exposing Pentagon and CIA Reaper lawlessness. We're arrested outside the base entrance as we assemble, speak out and petition the government for a redress of grievances – First Amendment rights, supposedly.

The drone assassination of non-US civilians has morphed into

the assassination of US citizens overseas. Will these criminal attacks – devoid of due process – morph into drone strikes against US citizens within the United States itself? The targets here one day may be antiwar activists or someone's political opponent, or simply those guilty of being young, male and black, or Muslim. Or, as in Afghanistan, someone's or some cartel's rival drug dealer.

The Federal Aviation Administration, charged with regulating the safety of our skies, can't keep up with the burgeoning drone industry and escalating domestic drone use. Even with adequate regulations, enforcement will at best be patchy. The more drones in the air, the more difficult the enforcement. Drones have a high accident rate. Drones accidentally or deliberately invading air traffic lanes are a threat to manned commercial passenger aircraft. The more drones in the air, the more collisions. Drones can be launched anonymously. Their origins can be faked. Drones can be hacked and misdirected.

Although a drone pilot's field of vision is like looking through a soda straw, drone surveillance technology is almost preternaturally sophisticated. Drones threaten personal privacy, undermining the Fourth Amendment. Police agencies are itching to deploy drones, leading to surveillance without warrants on a mass, indiscriminate scale – pervasive, persistent, wide-area, suspicionless surveillance. Police drones will also surely be used for crowd control, suppressing demonstrations and other First Amendment activity essential to democracy.

Police surveillance drones can be armed with so-called "non-lethal" devices (facial recognition technology, lasers, sound bombs, rubber bullets etc.). These chill public dissent. Non-lethal can morph into lethal crowd control. Do we really trust the increasingly militarized police and the US intelligence agencies to self-enforce constitutional restraints on their domestic spying? Think NSA.

Drone technology is rapidly evolving. As it penetrates the US economy and the US military machine, drone research in these two spheres will cross-pollinate. The Reaper and its successors are on their way to becoming ever more autonomous and unaccountable.

Domestic drone development has commercial and agricultural application. Drones will create jobs. But rarely mentioned is the fact that drones are a form of automation and that automation snuffs out jobs.

The glitz of consumer drone applications *here* is already displacing perceptions of the military mayhem *over there*. Mainstream media hype is already “normalizing” drones (à la the 1950s “Atoms for Peace” campaign providing cover for the then-emerging toxic nuclear industry). Such hype swamps coverage of the vile aspects of drones both domestically and internationally. The multibillion-dollar drone industry has already bought and bamboozled its engineers, its universities, its media and its representatives in Congress.