



USAF Drone Control Center, Holloman AFB, New Mexico

Game of Drones

*“Ever step on ants and never
give it another thought...?”*

Former US military drone operator

THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL DRONE strike on a U.S. military target occurred in Afghanistan in late 2001—only five weeks into America’s post-9/11 war on al-Qaida—and it wasn’t long before the new weapons technology was being blamed for all sorts of unintended collateral damage and traumatic physical and psychological harm.

And that’s just for the drone operators.

Apparently, surveilling human targets thousands of miles away for weeks at a time with a Predator drone, obliterating them in an instant with a Hellfire missile, and then dutifully cataloguing the gory details of the resulting carnage for your superiors could produce undesirable psychological effects.

Who could possibly have known?

A 2011 study by the Air Force determined that despite being safely seated thousands of miles away from the battlefield, drone crews routinely suffer from the same high levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD, alcohol and drug abuse, and contemplation of suicide as airborne combat pilots.

In some respects, the psychological toll is actually worse for the drone operators. Unlike aircraft pilots—who usually operate far removed from their targets—drone pilots track their targets for long periods of time, often becoming intimately familiar with them as individuals before being ordered to kill them. They also witness closeup the havoc and destruction their weapons create.

In fact, drone warfare has precipitated an entirely new concept known in the military as *moral injury*: ‘a traumatic psychological state resulting from feelings about what one has done to an enemy victim in wartime.’

Drone operators are quick to dispel the idea that they are glorified video game players—selected on the basis of their proficiency in handling a joystick—but the controls for drones more closely resemble a video game than flying an actual jet. The Air Force itself has found that a 19-year old high school drop-out skilled with video games tends to be a better drone operator than a seasoned pilot. In fact, the Air Force often uses video games as a recruitment tool, with a game on its website allowing users to practice their skill at drone-bombing Iraqis and Afghans. Players who perform well are prompted to consider drone operation as a career choice.

While these young ‘Nintendo warriors’ are no doubt acutely aware that once they launch a weapon, they can’t hit replay, declassified conversations between drone pilots and support personnel are sprinkled with slang from video game culture, along with derogatory terms like ‘bugspat’ (direct hit), ‘fun-sized terrorists’ (children), and ‘no-doubters’—the latter suggesting a certainty of enemy status that in fact rarely exists.

Without dismissing the hardship endured by drone operators working long shifts in windowless shipping containers in New Mexico, Florida, and other war-torn fronts before wearily retreating home to suburbia, we might spare a moment’s thought for those on the receiving end of their workday.

Since 9/11, drones have been employed in thousands of clandestine attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and other far-flung regions. Drone ‘sensors’ (camera operators) often have to quickly distinguish between a group of women or children and enemy combatants, and it’s estimated that about a third of all deaths from drone attacks are in fact civilians—a casualty rate far higher than that from manned aircraft.

Some ‘high-value’ U.S. targets are recorded as having been killed as many as 7 times.

The innocent victims of this unintended but completely predictable murder include not only the hapless participants of ill-timed weddings, funerals, and grocery shopping trips, but the very people whose peace and security is the stated purpose of the attacks.

For every innocent person killed in a drone strike, an unknown number of new terrorists—enraged, grief-stricken husbands, fathers, sons, and neighbors—are inevitably created. And for every handful of terrorists eliminated from the safe distance of a domestic drone base, entire populations of faraway towns and villages are terrorized by the incessant, maddening buzz of drones flying overhead and the constant fear of an imminent, violent death.

While Americans debate the wisdom of sacrificing their remaining privacy to an expanding swarm of domestic law enforcement drones, that tradeoff for a dubious bit of increased security can hardly compare with the threat of being obliterated without warning by an omnipresent eye in the sky.

Opponents convincingly argue that the upside of drone warfare—in essence, allowing a president to kill bad guys and ward off potential dangers without putting American troops in danger—are more than offset by the disadvantages: the predictable blowback, the inevitable proliferation, and the creeping suspicion even among their proponents that drones make war too easy.

Ironically, the ultimate collateral damage may be to the host country’s own population, as drone weapons increasingly become available to nearly everyone. Like chickens coming home to roost, drones deployed in battle will no doubt one day return to haunt those who so recklessly sent them aloft.