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Speaking out against US military drones

John Dear | Sep. 28, 2010 On the Road to Peace

On Sept. 14, thirteen others and I -- known together as the "Creech 14" -- went on trial in Las Vegas, Nev., for an action we committed in April 2009 at Creech Air Force Base to protest the U.S. military's use of unmanned drones in combat abroad.

The night before the trial the University of Nevada at Las Vegas Law School hosted an evening panel discussion on the use of the drones. Much to our surprise a large crowd turned out, including many law students and faculty, to hear from our all-star speakers. The speakers were invited by the Nevada Desert Experience -- a local organization which questions the U.S. nuclear weapons system -- to testify about the drones.

The panel featured Ramsey Clark, former U.S. Attorney General; Bill Quigley, legal director of the Center for Constitutional Rights; Ann Wright, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army and retired U.S. State Department diplomat; and Kathy Kelly, director of Voices for Creative Nonviolence and one of our co-defendants. All four of them also spoke at our trial the next day.

Kathy Kelly began her talk at the law school by reflecting on her recent visit to Pakistan, where she met survivors of a U.S. drone attack. Those survivors had told her ghastly stories of people being blown up around them. "Do people in your country know that your government is using these drones to kill us?" the survivors asked her.

"Last week in Afghanistan a drone bombed and killed six children who were rummaging through fields for food. A recent drone bombing raid may have killed as many as 125 civilians," Kelly said.

Under U.S. Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, we know the U.S. specifically targeted civilians for assassinations, Kelly added.

The Army's goal is to eradicate Al Qaeda -- by using the same methods of Al Qaeda. Yet according to National Security Agency Director Keith B. Alexander, there are only 100 Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. According to CIA Director Leon Penetta there are only 50 Al Qaeda members in Afghanistan.

Kelly asked: So why are there so many U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan? Imagine the cost for having one U.S. soldier there, when every single day, 850 children die of hunger and related illnesses in Afghanistan, she added.

"The drones protect our military, most people think," Wright said at the beginning of her talk. "But what does the drone program do when we implement it -- not only to the people in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, but to those who operate it? The Creech Air Force Base operators see the killings that occur when they bomb, and are psychologically damaged."

The subway system in Washington, D.C., Wright said, is full of advertising posters for General Atomics, one of the leading manufacturers of the drones. The caption under the photos of the drones used in each poster reads: "These make you feel safe."

"But how are drones different from B-52 or F-16 planes or cruise missiles?" Wright asked. "We should be debating the morality of all our weapons. But we are escalating the number of undeclared wars and the weapons themselves. And what other countries are getting drones from us? To whom will they then sell our drones? Israel recently sold 10 drones to Turkey and 14 to Brazil. This technology will inevitably come back and bite us."

"What we are talking about is assassination," Clark said at the beginning of his talk. "I know about assassination."

Clark then spoke movingly of his work in the U.S. Justice Department and as U.S. Attorney General while remembering the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy.

"The drones are extra-judicial executions," Clark continued. "And they're hardly precise?. This technology can destroy us. There is something singularly dangerous about using technology to assassinate. We should only use technology if it is for the good of children."

"How far do we want this technology to go?" Clark asked. "We will soon have the capacity to kill anyone wherever they are anywhere in the world. We have to stand up and say 'No' to these drones. These killings are criminal. And the ethical implication of this program is that we are condoning assassination, pure and simple. We are paying for and supporting assassination with our tax money.

"With all the suffering in the world, do we have nothing better to do than to assassinate people? We should get out of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. We should stop killing these people, help them, tell them we love them.

"I've never seen the political environment so chaotic, the people so angry, the future so uncertain. But the issues are crystal clear. There is no good war. We have to prevent war and reduce the U.S. military budget by 90 percent if there is ever to be peace on earth."

Bill Quigley spoke of two recent scholarly studies on the impact of U.S. military drones. One report said at least one third of the people who are killed by our drones are innocent civilians. The second claims that nine out of every 10 people killed by drones are civilians.

Last month, a Pakistani newspaper reported that for the first seven months of this year, 50 U.S. drone attacks killed 13 Al Qaeda- and Taliban-linked people and 476 innocent civilians. Only 13 of the 50 strikes actually hit their "targets." Bob Woodward's new book *Obama's Wars* reports that our drones have killed "many" from the global west, even U.S. citizens.

"Where are the checks and balances on these drones?" Quigley asked. "There are none. There is no prosecution, no indictment, no trial, no sentencing. The executive branch has decided that any person at any time can be annihilated. We have a responsibility to check our technology and our military so that human rights are respected."

"Will we allow other countries to use drones against us?" Quigley asked. "Would we be allowed to use drones elsewhere? We wouldn't be allowed to use them on China or Russia. It's a violation of law, of morality, of basic fairness -- that we treat others the way we would expect to be treated."

"Both Clinton and Bush used drones," Quigley noted, "but Obama has radically increased the number of drones. The issue of the drones is not about Democrats or Republicans. It is a human rights issue, a legal issue, a moral issue. No U.S. court has decided on the legality of targeted killing by drones. We have the right to live in safety; that's a legitimate quest. But these drones are used in so-called 'anticipatory self defense,' against people who

might someday participate with a group who might use violence. This is unethical.

"Even if you believe in the war in Afghanistan, why are we using drones in Pakistan? In Yemen? Why use the drones in places outside of the countries where we are at war?

"The U.S. claims it uses drones to kill drug dealers in Pakistan. Are we under threat from drug dealers in Pakistan? Then we have given a blank check to our government to kill anyone anywhere at any time and they don't have to give any explanation for it."

I was saddened to learn while lecturing and leading a retreat in Nova Scotia these past few days that the drones have even come to eastern Canada. It was heartening to reflect together with church friends about the nonviolent Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount and his great commandments: "Offer no violent resistance to one who does evil" and "love your enemies that you may be children of your heavenly God."

When we place the Gospel teachings in the context of our wars, nuclear weapons, and drone attacks it is clear that the God of peace calls us to stop the killings.

I hope that people of peace everywhere will rise up against the drones, vigil against them, and call for their dismantling and an end to drone warfare. The God of peace does not want us to fill the blue skies with these so-called unmanned aerial vehicles that bomb and kill our sisters and brothers.

"The greatest threat to life on this planet is our own country," Clark concluded that night in Las Vegas. "We've got a lot of work to do and time is short."

Indeed.

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This week John will speak, along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assistant Bernard Lafayette, at the "Carry the Vision" conference in San Jose, Calif., and at River's Edge in Cleveland, Ohio. John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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