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Drones are cheap, localized and wrong

Mary Ann McGivern | Oct. 18, 2012 NCR Today

The New York Times public editor Margaret Sullivan wrote a column [1] about drones a couple of weeks ago. I've let it sit on my desktop, meditating every few days on what to say about the column, about drones, about President Barack Obama and about the bishops.

Sullivan is writing about drones in the contest of New York *Times* coverage. That's as good a starting place as any, because we don't know much about how drones are being used. We depend on good journalism to tell us. Sullivan says the journalists don't know a lot, either.

Drones are cheap, and they are local. If you weren't there, they don't matter so much. The coffins don't get delivered anywhere else. So it is easy to ignore them.

But they are the new tool against terrorism, striking terror in communities where "militants" live. "Militants" is the term the U.S. administration uses. I'm sure others would call them freedom fighters, or maybe by-standers.

Whether the cause is just depends on whether you see these militants as terrorists who could not be persuaded to lay down their arms. Me, I've always been in favor of delivering refrigerators and surgical equipment in lieu of bombs and guns. But then, I'd recommend throwing money at the problem of poverty throughout the world, instead of throwing it at the Pentagon.

But back to drones. Because they are indiscriminate in their damage, drones are a disproportionate tool. And the fear they inspire is as likely to engender new participants as to successfully end violence.

Obama has found drones to be a much more effective tool than troop deployment or foreign aid: It's cheaper, it doesn't need congressional approval, and it's mostly ignored by his political friends and foes alike. Again, I wonder, where are the bishops?

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Links:
[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/public-editor/questions-on-drones-unanswered-still.html?src=recg&_r=0