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Time magazine sees drone as threat to U.S. moral authority

Tom Roberts | Jan. 31, 2013 NCR Today

Interesting piece in the most recent issue of Time magazine [1] on the growing prominence of drones ? over the battlefields and over lots of other types of terrain here at home. I first learned of the ubiquitous presence of drones several years ago while driving with a friend from Washington to the Virginia suburbs. One of his co-workers at the Federal Aviation Administration worked in a department that registers and licenses the unmanned flying whatevers, and they apparently come in various shapes and sizes and are employed for an increasingly long list of reasons by everyone from hobbyists to weather forecasters, law enforcement personnel to war pilots who fly their ?sorties? by remote control at a distance of thousands of miles from the target.

The jarring reality of how drones are changing not only the nature of war but, more ominously, our moral bearings in the conduct of war was eloquently expressed by Mary Ellen O'Connell, a University of Notre Dame Law School professor and an ardent critic of the use of drones outside of established conflict zones in a Nov. 5 story in NCR. [2]

O?Connel?s point was that the efficiency of drones is beside the point. If they are used to kill people outside of an acknowledged battlefield, that is, to pursue people in sovereign countries with whom we are not at war, those uses are a violation of international law. And the sense that the U.S. can simply engage in the practice at will because it is the most powerful nation at the moment, is a dangerous way to go about reforming international law.

She also believes the use of drones for such purposes (she is not opposed, by the way, to the use of drones in recognized ?battlefields? such as Afghanistan) are ineffective. She said the pursuit of international criminals by international law enforcement efforts is more effective and less destructive to alliances with countries such as Pakistan.

The Times piece notes that while drone attacks are viewed as having been ?an overwhelming success? when considering the results ?strictly by the numbers,? they also have led the United States ?into a labyrinth of confusion and moral compromise.?

Drones have flown, as it were, below the public radar for years, but the debate over their use and the consequences of conducting strikes against countries with whom we are not at war or that are even considered allies, is beginning to heat up.

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[1] http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2135132,00.html
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