

Talking to the Military about Drones: Some Tips

Military personnel are human. The Pentagon is a building; the people inside of it are humans. They have long workdays, difficult bosses, taskings – just like advocates do. They have emotions, families, experiences, and personal views – just like advocates do.

Though all answer to the President and the U.S. Constitution, military personnel hold individual beliefs and mores. Some are Republican; some are Democrat; some are neither. Some are religious; some are agnostic or atheist. Some joined the military because it offered an education while others joined out of duty to country. Some hated their deployments, while others hold their service as their greatest accomplishment. Some may believe U.S. counterterrorism missions are essential to national security while others feel the country is becoming morally bankrupt by using military force to solve problems.

It is always worth getting to know the person – not just the rank and role – before making assumptions about their beliefs.

Words can sting. Advocates rightly want to cut through euphemisms. “Lethal operations” means the targeting and killing of humans. “Collateral damage” means that civilians were killed, and families are mourning. “Second and third order effects” can mean an entire city was flattened to a pancake. It is important to call things what they are.

However, there are reasons the military uses obfuscating phrases. Many personnel have deployed multiple times since 9-11 and returned home with PTSD, civilian casualties on their conscience, or a feeling that their actions were either wrong or at least inconsequential. Using words like “kill” or “dead children” bring heavy emotions to a conversation. While forcing the military to confront the tragedies of drone strikes may be a goal for some advocates, the defensiveness it will cause takes the conversation away from rational problem solving.

Be careful with allegations. The phrases “war crimes” and “violations of international law” are conversation enders. That’s not to say that a possible violation of the law shouldn’t be flagged publicly or privately. However, advocates sometimes use these phrases *before* having conversations with the military, without necessarily being qualified to make such a determination, and often without enough information to make the determination regardless of expertise.

Note that under international law intentional and unintentional killing of civilians are different things. Civilian casualties are not necessarily violations of the law.

Find common ground. Advocates and military personnel may disagree on the specific issue of drone use, but there are plenty of other ways to find common ground.

Consider that many military personnel want the CIA out of the drone strike business. It's counterintuitive until one realizes that the military gets blamed for the effects of the CIA's actions and cannot set the record straight due to classification. Advocates could find an important ally here.

Military personnel may also agree with advocates that the U.S. is trying to solve too many problems by deploying its military. Secretary of Defense Bob Gates said that if State Department funding continues to get cut then he would "need to buy more ammunition." Partnering with the military is one way to push U.S. policymakers toward diplomacy and development and away from lethal operations – including drones – overseas.

To find common ground, one could even start a conversation with the most basic notion of all, which is that many military and advocacy groups essentially want the same thing: a safer, more peaceful world. They may simply disagree about how to get there.

Don't get stuck in the weeds. A sure way to lose an argument with a drone pilot is to debate precision or sortie data. Similarly, an advocate will never have more information on the defense budget than the Pentagon. It is useless to debate technicalities on which one cannot have the upper hand.

Rather, the advocacy community comes with a moral authority that is essential to use of force debates and should be voiced. In addition to delivering key messages about the problems of drone use, consider asking questions: Is this the kind of country we want to be? Are drone strikes proving effective in countering terrorism and where is the data? What does it tell us that drone pilots can be traumatized by their jobs?

The benefits of drones. Reasonable people on both sides of the drone debate can agree that there are benefits to drone use if the U.S. is going to use force. For example, drones can provide surveillance around the clock, establishing "patterns of life" that help military personnel understand where civilians are and when. Drones can be called in to protect troops who get into trouble on the ground without risking the lives of pilots. Drones can be used as an alternative to ground forces, saving American lives.

None of these benefits may resonate with advocates, but they should be acknowledged as valuable to military personnel.

Learn about the military, if possible. Many advocates don't understand where officers come from, why they joined the military, or what they think about human rights. These are important data points if one is to have a mutually respectful conversation. Some military personnel will be immediately defensive because they believe they are being disrespected, seen as "dumb grunts," or "just there to kill."

Advocates can be more effective when they come with a respect for and understanding of the military person, even if they do not respect the institution or its actions. Consider auditing a nearby college course on the military, or use an online guide such as: www.defense.gov/KnowYourMilitary/Our-Forces/. To go more in-depth, [A Civilian's Guide to the U.S. Military](#) by Dr. Barbara Schading is available as an eBook on Amazon.

Advocates may also make the mistake of taking messages to the military that belong elsewhere. For example, some policymaking around drones and civilian protection belongs with the State Department and Embassies. Advocates shouldn't forget about Congress, which has oversight responsibility for U.S. use of force.

Explain who you are. The US military *should* understand what an advocate is and what non-government organizations, including faith groups, do. But they don't and likely never will en masse. One day there's a humanitarian organization that doesn't want to talk to them because it will constrict their neutrality and independence, and the next they're being criticized for not responding to a human rights or faith organization. What they take away from those interactions is confusion and resistance to ongoing conversation.

This problem is easily solved by advocates themselves. At the start of every conversation or meeting, give a quick overview of who you are and what you do. If you've been to a war zone or two, say it. If you've been working with war victims for 20 years, say it. If you do this work because we believe in American values or human dignity or something else, say it.

Consider putting more effort into building relationships than hitting the talking points. The conversation may not end in agreement, but you'll know so much more for the next opportunity.

