

Drone Warfare Needs To Be Regulated

By John Grant

The idea scared me. I'm a Vietnam veteran and have struggled, often futilely, in the anti-war movement for 35 years. I had signed up for a conference in Princeton, New Jersey, on the morality of drone warfare. I paid my entrance fee. Then, I learned it was a religious affair. And I'm an atheist.

I emailed the conference leader -- retired reverend Richard Killmer -- and told him of my situation. He said it was not a problem; there would be a few others like me.

The weekend conference was a powerful gathering. There were people from every corner of the nation; they were all colors and from every denomination one could imagine: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and Sikhs. My spiritual reality might be summed up with the famous lines from Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? So be it; I contain multitudes."

"I really felt part of a beloved community," was how Reverend Robert Moore, executive director of the Coalition For Peace Action and also an organizer of the conference, summed up the weekend. (I've been in a number of antiwar demonstrations with Rev. Moore, including a monthly vigil near a drone base in Horsham.) Three of us were veterans of US wars; me from Vietnam, a chaplain who had served in Afghanistan who resigned his commission for moral reasons, and an Iraq vet who worked in intelligence and map-making, who now did clever agit-prop events using drone mock-ups.

The conference was held at the Princeton Theological Seminary, a few blocks from Albert Einstein's home. This brought to mind the famous dialogue between Einstein and Sigmund Freud as WWII was brewing. Both these brilliant men were troubled as they witnessed the rise of violence in Europe and the world.

Freud's thinking shifted from the sub-conscious to culture; he developed the ideas of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, the life-instinct and death-instinct, respectively. These two "instincts" can be confusing to people, since *Eros* is so connected in people's minds with the *erotic*. Freud saw cultures becoming over-saturated with a self-destructive death instinct. The life instinct, by contrast, was about human connection and community, emphasizing impulses toward cooperation, understanding and caring for others. *Thanatos* was about violence, cruelty and the domination of others, drives often rooted in fear and insecurity. "The impulse of cruelty arises from the instinct for mastery," Freud wrote. *Thanatos* might be reduced to hate and vengeance, while *Eros* is focused on love and forgiveness.

The Princeton drone conference was very much on the *Eros* side of things. While in Princeton, Einstein also wrote a lot about these ideas. For him, we humans were "part of a whole called the universe." The problem was: We live our lives limited in time and space, and our sense of separateness is an illusion. Excessive ego and toxic tribalism are examples of that illusion.

"Our task," he wrote, "must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

These ideas were developed almost 100 years ago in a world coming unglued. The fact the world in 2019 is similarly coming unglued is what coaxed me to attend *The Princeton Conference on Drone Warfare*. The future looms as a confusion of cyber warfare with drones, armed robots and all sorts of weapons utilizing artificial intelligence an integral part of the mix. One speaker after another envisioned a future where secret, complex algorithms will decide who lives and who dies. The beautiful human complexity Walt Whitman so powerfully wrote about is being overwhelmed by technological complexity.

Right now, over 100 nations and non-state actors operate some kind of weaponized drones. Consider the recent drone attack against Saudi Arabia's oil distribution system, attributed to Houthis and Iran. Drones are sold at Barnes & Noble and through Amazon as toys. The current generation of weaponized drones evolved from surveillance drones when someone had the insidious idea to add Hellfire missiles to these drones. Non-state actors (those we call *terrorists*) can easily do the same thing. It's only a matter of time before we living in America will have to face this problem.

General Stanley McChrystal told an audience at the Philadelphia library that our enemies see drone warfare as cowardly. Sitting 12,000 miles away in air-conditioned comfort with a Diet Pepsi on the console directing Hellfire missiles to kill people is morally indefensible when estimates suggest 20 percent of those killed are innocent civilians. Drone bases are proliferating across the nation. Young drone operators who watch on video the final, excruciating moments of those they kill are suffering more and more from Post Traumatic Stress; some are becoming suicidal.

"They [the military] cannot fill these positions fast enough," Dr. Maryann Cusimano Love told the conference.

The need for international regulation is dire. Drones should be an issue in the presidential campaign. Congress needs to hold serious hearings. International organs like the United Nations should be re-mandated to address the crisis. Ordinary citizens need to pay attention and act.

Before it's too late.

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