

Do Drones Undermine Democracy?

By PETER W. SINGER< NYTimes, January 21, 2012

IN democracies like ours, there have always been deep bonds between the public and its wars. Citizens have historically participated in decisions to take military action, through their elected representatives, helping to ensure broad support for wars and a willingness to share the costs, both human and economic, of enduring them.

In America, our Constitution explicitly divided the president's role as commander in chief in war from Congress's role in declaring war. Yet these links and this division of labor are now under siege as a result of a technology that our founding fathers never could have imagined.

Just 10 years ago, the idea of using armed robots in war was the stuff of Hollywood fantasy. Today, the United States military has [more than 7,000 unmanned aerial systems](#), popularly called [drones](#). There are 12,000 more on the ground. Last year, they carried out hundreds of strikes — both covert and overt — in six countries, transforming the way our democracy deliberates and engages in what we used to think of as war.

We don't have a draft anymore; less than 0.5 percent of Americans over 18 serve in the active-duty military. We do not declare war anymore; the last time Congress actually did so was in 1942 — against Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. We don't buy war bonds or pay war taxes anymore. During [World War II](#), 85 million Americans purchased war bonds that brought the government \$185 billion; in the last decade, we bought none and instead gave the richest 5 percent of Americans a tax break.

And now we possess a technology that removes the last political barriers to war. The strongest appeal of unmanned systems is that we don't have to send someone's son or daughter into harm's way. But when politicians can avoid the political consequences of the condolence letter — and the impact that military casualties have on voters and on the news media — they no longer treat the previously weighty matters of war and peace the same way.

For the first 200 years of American democracy, engaging in combat and bearing risk — both personal and political — went hand in hand. In the age of drones, that is no longer the case.

Today's unmanned systems are only the beginning. The original Predator, which went into service in 1995, lacked even GPS and was initially unarmed; newer models can take off and land on their own, and carry smart sensors that can detect a disruption in the dirt a mile below the plane and trace footprints back to an enemy hide-out.

There is not a single new manned combat aircraft under research and development at any major Western aerospace company, and the Air Force is training more operators of unmanned aerial systems than fighter and bomber pilots combined. In 2011, unmanned systems carried out strikes from Afghanistan to Yemen. The most notable of these continuing operations is the not-so-covert war in Pakistan, where the United States has carried out more than 300 drone strikes since 2004.

Yet this operation has never been debated in Congress; more than seven years after it began, there has not even been a single vote for or against it. This campaign is not carried out by the Air Force; it is being conducted by the C.I.A. This shift affects everything from the strategy that guides it to the individuals who oversee it (civilian political appointees) and the lawyers who advise them (civilians rather than military officers).

It also affects how we and our politicians view such operations. [President Obama](#)'s decision to send a small, brave Navy Seal team into Pakistan for 40 minutes was described by one of his advisers as “[the gutsiest call of any president in recent history](#).” Yet few even talk about the decision to carry out more than 300 drone strikes in the very same country.

I do not condemn these strikes; I support most of them. What troubles me, though, is how a new technology is short-circuiting the decision-making process for what used to be the most important choice a democracy could make. Something that would have previously been viewed as a war is simply not being treated like a war.

THE change is not limited to covert action. Last spring, America launched airstrikes on Libya as part of a NATO operation to prevent Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's government from massacring civilians. In late March, the White House announced that the American military was handing over combat operations to its European partners and would thereafter play only a supporting role.

The distinction was crucial. The operation's goals quickly evolved from a limited humanitarian intervention into an air war supporting local insurgents' efforts at regime change. But it had limited public support and no Congressional approval.

When the administration was asked to explain why continuing military action would not be a violation of the [War Powers Resolution](#) — a Vietnam-era law that requires notifying Congress of military operations within 48 hours and getting its authorization after 60 days — the White House argued that American operations did not “involve the presence of U.S. ground troops, U.S. casualties or a serious threat thereof.” But they did involve something we used to think of as war: blowing up stuff, lots of it.

[Starting on April 23](#), American unmanned systems were deployed over Libya. For the next six months, they carried out at least 146 strikes on their own. They also identified and pinpointed the targets for most of NATO's manned strike jets. This unmanned operation lasted well past the 60-day deadline of the War Powers Resolution, extending to the very last airstrike that hit Colonel Qaddafi's convoy on Oct. 20 and led to his death.

Choosing to make the operation unmanned proved critical to initiating it without Congressional authorization and continuing it with minimal public support. On June 21, when NATO's air war was lagging, an American Navy helicopter was shot down by pro-Qaddafi forces. This previously would have been a disaster, with the risk of an American aircrew being captured or even killed. But the downed helicopter was an unmanned Fire Scout, and the story didn't even make the newspapers the next day.

Congress has not disappeared from all decisions about war, just the ones that matter. The same week that American drones were carrying out their 145th unauthorized airstrike in

Libya, the president notified Congress that he had deployed 100 Special Operations troops to a different part of Africa.

This small unit was sent to train and advise Ugandan forces battling the cultish Lord's Resistance Army and was explicitly ordered not to engage in combat. Congress applauded the president for notifying it about this small noncombat mission but did nothing about having its laws ignored in the much larger combat operation in Libya.

We must now accept that technologies that remove humans from the battlefield, from [unmanned systems](#) like the Predator to cyberweapons like the [Stuxnet](#) computer worm, are becoming the new normal in war.

And like it or not, the new standard we've established for them is that presidents need to seek approval only for operations that send people into harm's way — not for those that involve waging war by other means.

WITHOUT any actual political debate, we have set an enormous precedent, blurring the civilian and military roles in war and circumventing the Constitution's mandate for authorizing it. Freeing the executive branch to act as it chooses may be appealing to some now, but many future scenarios will be less clear-cut. And each political party will very likely have a different view, depending on who is in the White House.

Unmanned operations are not “costless,” as they are too often described in the news media and government deliberations. Even worthy actions can sometimes have unintended consequences. Faisal Shahzad, the would-be Times Square bomber, was drawn into terrorism by the very Predator strikes in Pakistan meant to stop terrorism.

Similarly, C.I.A. drone strikes outside of declared war zones are setting a troubling precedent that we might not want to see followed by the close to 50 other nations that now possess the same unmanned technology — including China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran.

A deep deliberation on war was something the framers of the Constitution sought to build into our system. Yet on Tuesday, when President Obama talks about his wartime accomplishments during the [State of the Union address](#), Congress will have to admit that its role has been reduced to the same part it plays during the president's big speech. These days, when it comes to authorizing war, Congress generally sits there silently, except for the occasional clapping. And we do the same at home.

Last year, I met with senior Pentagon officials to discuss the many tough issues emerging from our growing use of robots in war. One of them asked, “So, who then is thinking about all this stuff?”

America's founding fathers may not have been able to imagine robotic drones, but they did provide an answer. The Constitution did not leave war, no matter how it is waged, to the executive branch alone.

In a democracy, it is an issue for all of us.

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