By Doug Noble

From World Can't Wait | Original Article

Ever since becoming involved with the protest activities at Hancock Field I have been trying to get some clarity about my objections to drones. A new children's book on Predator Drones explains, "The US military is always looking for ways to reduce risks for soldiers and to keep pilots safe. This is why unmanned drones are important." This seems right, but consider that, due to overwhelming US air power superiority, there hasn't been a US Air Force plane lost in combat in nearly 40 years, and so there is negligible difference in risk between piloting a drone aircraft and flying a fighter jet. Add to this the fact that killer (Predator or Reaper) drones are used most frequently in sovereign nations – Pakistan, Yemen, Libya - with which the US is neither at war nor has any official boots on the ground. So there are no US soldiers to keep safe in these places. It seems that neither US pilots nor soldiers are made safer by most drone deployments. And still their use has skyrocketed.

What is different about this latest weapon of war that we oppose so stridently? True, they are remotely controlled by a risk-free videogame mentality that makes killing easy, even fun, with the trigger as far away our very backyard here in Upstate New York. But anyone who has viewed the Wikileaks footage of young helicopter gunship pilots picking off unarmed civilians, following orders issued in real time from afar, will recognize that this is not unique to drone pilots. Many of us cry out about the horrendous "collateral damage" of drones - the devastating civilian casualties and misidentified targets and technical disasters resulting in countless (because uncounted) innocent deaths. The targeted killing of Al Qaeda leader Baitullah Mehsud, for example, took 16 missile strikes over 14 months, with well over two hundred mistaken deaths.

But if the drones were made more precise and effective, with fewer casualties and more accurate target identification, would we then find them more acceptable? Would drones simply be seen as another weapon of war, whose casualties are not inherently different from such deaths caused by other horrendous weapons of war? Why do we focus on drones as somehow uniquely diabolical?

The answer is this: Predator Drones are not primarily weapons of war, as usually defined, but instead are automated technologies designed for convenient, targeted killing or assassination outside of war zones. As mentioned, the usual targets are in countries we aren't at war with, far from usual areas of armed conflict. .And killer drones in these countries are not even operated

by the US military, but rather by the CIA and its private contractors like Blackwater, acting covertly, without uniforms or legal code and beyond any accountability. The US military has its drones, too, of course, for surveillance and some bombing in Afghanistan, but the real show, now and in the future, is the covert use of Predator drones for large-scale extrajudicial assassination and targeted killing, under the cover of a global war on terror.

Drones, with their low cost and low risk, make targeted killing more convenient and more likely. The recent assassination of Osama bin Laden was carried out by elite special forces instead of drones in order to avoid collateral damage in a heavily populated area and to ensure positive evidence that bin Laden had been killed. But such elaborately orchestrated killings, without the host country's knowledge, are not feasible for the CIA's campaign of large-scale targeted killings. That is why drones are uniquely worthy of our attention, because their use has reconfigured war into a worldwide landscape of silent, targeted killings from above, whose victims could be anyone the CIA adds to its hit list of potential threats or terrorists.

There has been an unprecedented increase in CIA assassinations. In 2010 drone attacks occurred every 3rd day throughout the year in Pakistan. Under president Obama the use of drones in Pakistan has escalated dramatically, from once a week to every other day. Drones are now the weapon of choice, "the only game in town," And demand for drone technology has been called "insatiable."

The US keeps widening the definition of acceptable targets for drone killings. Though the CIA's methodology is secret and remains unknown, the Pentagon maintains a complex taxonomy of targets and elaborate formulas to determine its kill list, which includes mere foot soldiers, ordinary fighters as well as top commanders. Drone consultant Bruce Riedel likened the drone attacks to "going after a beehive, one bee at a time." A former National Security Council official has stated, "Not every target has to be a rock star."The Pentagon's list of approved targets in 2009 was even expanded to include Afghan drug lords funding the Taliban. More sobering still, the CIA requested and was given permission in 2008 to target not just individuals but also entire locations linked to al Qaeda, turning targeted killings into mass killings of suspected militants in an area.

Is any of this legal? Kill lists maintained both by the CIA and the covert military unit Joint Special Operations Command, using secret criteria, condemn even US citizens to summary execution - without charge, trial or conviction. No standards are disclosed under which someone becomes targeted for death, as the ACLU has found in trying unsuccessfully to obtain this information. Such killing violates US Constitution due process protections as well as international law, which labels premeditated killing of an individual by a government a homicide unless it takes place within an armed conflict. The UN Charter requires there be evident self-defense, Security Council authorization, or invitation by the sovereign host country, clearly missing in the case of Pakistan.

Prior to 9/11 the CIA director George Tenet argued that it would be "a terrible mistake" for the CIA to use a weapon like killer drones. But after 9/11, Bush's legal advisers modeled a new rationale on Israel's use of drones against terrorists in Gaza and elsewhere, arguing that the US had the right to use lethal force against suspected Al Qaeda terrorists in what it called

"anticipatory self-defense." Gary Solis, former director of the law program at US Military Academy, describes the Predator targeted killing program as a "sea change," a policy that the US had only recently abhorred in Israel. Of course, Israel's use of targeted assassination goes back at least as far as the 1970s, when it systematically went after and assassinated all the suspects behind the massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes, reenacted in the film Munich.

Israel claimed implausibly back then that its post-Munich assassinations were not for revenge but only for deterrence, as "pre-emptive self-defense." The US claims, too, that assassinations and targeted killings are very different acts. Assassination is defined as murder and is prohibited by US law. But targeted killing in self-defense is different. The killing of an al Qaeda member is technically not a revenge killing or an assassination, which applies only to politically inspired killings of people who are not combatants. Gary Solis of the US Military Academy says, "Nobody in the US government calls it assassination." It's all in the name of deterrence or self-defense.

Journalist Jane Mayer, who has studied the use of Predator drones extensively, insists they represent not just an extension of conventional warfare, but instead "a radically new and geographically unbounded use of state-sanctioned lethal force." Noam Chomsky, in his recent talk in Syracuse, reminded us that US leaders during World War II identified what they called a "Grand Area" that the U.S. would dominate in perpetuity, including much of the globe. Within this Grand Area, the U.S. would maintain "unquestioned power," while ensuring the "limitation of any exercise of sovereignty" by any nations that would dare to interfere. It would enable US military intervention at will to ensure "uninhibited access to key markets and resources" and "to shape events that will affect our livelihood and our security." The unbounded use of killer drones for targeted killing in the manner of Rambo or Terminator, justified as self-defense and deterrence in the so-called war on terror, carries this global strategy of world domination into the present moment.

The Center for Constitutional Rights warns of a "boundless war without end." But this is no longer war at all, as typically defined. And it will not just be perpetrated by the US. More than 40 countries currently fly drone aircraft, and within 20 years there will be swarms of bug-sized drones and many autonomous fighters and bombers in use around the globe.

A UN Human Rights report conceded in 2010 that "a missile fired from a drone is no different from any other commonly used weapon, legal so long as it complies with international law requiring discrimination, proportionality, necessity and precaution." But the report also states that drones are unique because of their "playstation mentality to killing" that makes "it easier to kill without risk" and so tempts commanders "to interpret who can be killed and under what circumstances, too expansively." Drone weapon systems, especially as they become increasingly autonomous to the point of making life and death decisions themselves, may well be uniquely dangerous. In fact the UN report concludes that drones might, like cluster bombs and landmines, be banned for being "so cruel as to be beyond the pale of human tolerance." We are absolutely correct to focus our energies opposing killer drones, and I hope it's now clearer why.