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DROP THE DRONES

Remote Attacks Inflamm Afghan Anti-Americanism

Ted Rall

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SAN FRANCISCO--"The killing of Afghan civilians, usually caused by inadvertent American and NATO airstrikes, has become the most sensitive issue between the Afghans and their Western guests." So reports *The New York Times Magazine* in the latest installment of its ongoing "There's a new general in charge and he's cool and maybe he can win the war" series. This decade's war: Afghanistan. This week's star: General Stanley McChrystal. Alas, poor Petraeus, we hardly knew ye.

As a World War II buff, I mourn the fact that the *Magazine* wasn't around in 1943. Imagine the over-the-top insensitivity: "The killing of Jews, usually caused by inadvertent German and Axis deportations, has become the most sensitive issue between the French and their Teutonic guests."

"Inadvertent" airstrikes?

"Guests"?

Many of the botched airstrikes have been carried out by Predator drone planes remote-controlled by CIA and USAF personnel watching computer screens thousands of miles away. One click of a mouse and a Hellfire missile bearing a 20-pound blast fragmentation warhead

zooms towards its target. Despite numerous killings of civilians, drones are popular with the military because they keep soldiers out of harm's way.

Like a lot of ideas, it only seems like a good one before you think about it. America's obsession with protecting its own people is at the heart of Afghans' contempt for the U.S. occupation. And Afghan resentment is the biggest reason the war effort has been doomed from the start

To Afghans on the ground, drones symbolize American callousness and project a smug sense of superiority. Because they protect us at the Afghans' expense. *New York Times* reporter David Rhode, the journalist kidnapped by neo-Taliban militants and held in Afghanistan and Pakistan for nine months, describes their "terrifying presence":

"Remotely piloted, propeller-driven airplanes, they could easily be heard as they circled overhead for hours. To the naked eye, they were small dots in the sky. But their missiles had a range of several miles. We knew we could be immolated without warning."

To the dead, death is death--how you die doesn't matter in the end. To the living, it's all that matters.

Would you rather lose the love of your life to a drunk driver? Or because she rushed into a burning building to save a child? Afghanistan is a martial society. As an Afghan, how would you rather lose your son--in the heat of battle or to some alien contraption buzzing around in response to the movement of a joystick in Virginia?

Unlike his predecessors McChrystal knows that every "inadvertent airstrike" prompts a certain number of Afghans to join or support Afghan resistance forces. "Gentlemen," he tells a morning briefing of NATO generals, "we need to understand the implications of what we are doing. Airpower contains the seeds of our own destruction. A guy with a long-barrel rifle runs into a compound, and we drop a 500-pound bomb on it? If we use airpower irresponsibly, we can lose this fight." Later that day, the *Times* reporter who recorded that statement wrote, McChrystal said he planned on "banning bombs and missiles in populated areas unless his men were in danger of being overrun."

An improvement, no doubt. But in Afghanistan and everywhere else, *all use of airpower is irresponsible*. Whether piloting a B-52 at 35,000 feet or wiggling a joystick 8,000 miles away, fighting a war at a distance means chucking ordnance willy-nilly into people and situations you can't see or know anything about.

And those people will hate you for it.

In the short term, remote drone warfare offers the tantalizing prospect of killing your enemies without risking your own forces. "In Pakistan, a CIA-led program using Predator drones to hunt down and kill leaders of Al Qaeda and the Taliban has proven remarkably successful, even if controversial within Pakistan itself," reports the *Times*. "To date, American officials

say, they have killed 11 of the top 20 Al Qaeda leaders, without having to launch large-scale military operations across the border."

In the long term, however, the geopolitical risks eclipse any short-term gains. Note the "even if." Drone plane attacks brought Pakistani anti-Americanism to a boil and led to the collapse of the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf, a U.S. ally. Meanwhile, like most cell-based guerilla organizations, Al Qaeda's structure ensures that no man is indispensable. It simply appointed new members to the positions vacated by the Hellfire victims.

If the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is destined to fail, it would be nice to see it end with more dignity. In an ideal world, President Obama would sign legislation outlawing the manufacture, deployment or use of Predator and similar drone bomber technology, and urge other nations to do the same. In a somewhat decent world, he would withdraw rather than send more troops to Afghanistan. And in the crappy world we call home, the least we can do is kill Afghans with flesh-and-blood soldiers rather than drone planes.

(Ted Rall is the author of "To Afghanistan and Back," the first book about the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Among its chapters is one titled "How We Lost the Afghan War.")