



GETTY IMAGES

Two Predator drones rest in hangars at a base in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Even after the United States withdraws its last combat troops from Afghanistan next year, it will continue to operate drones in the country.

HEROES AND DRONES

Drones fly in the face of lessons taught to us by centuries of warfare.

BY F. S. NAIDEN

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A RECENT REPORT BY THE PAKISTANI government revealed an embarrassing detail about the U.S. drone campaign against Al Qaeda. Before Navy commandos caught up with Osama bin Laden in 2011, the terrorist leader had escaped detection during his years of hiding out in Abbottabad in part by wearing a cowboy hat. Thanks to the hat's broad brim, American surveillance satellites couldn't identify him by his face. To find him, the United States had to use human intelligence, and then it had to send soldiers to kill him in a face-to-face shootout.

Another attack on Al Qaeda the same year ended differently. The target, Anwar Al-Awlaki, an American citizen turned Al Qaeda preacher, was unwilling to give up Arab dress for Western attire, or perhaps did not realize how a cowboy hat might protect him. A small, unpiloted aircraft directed by remote control found and killed him outside a town in Yemen. The two killings hardly could have been more different. Conventional forces like those that tracked down bin Laden can take prisoners; they can also suffer casualties and often kill civilians by mistake (four died in the Abbottabad attack). The

drone that killed Awlaki, on the other hand, was virtually invulnerable. It was less likely to kill civilians than armed attackers would have been, but it was unable to take prisoners or interrogate or otherwise seek information directly from the enemy.

These are two ways of making war, one old, one new. In 2009, Leon Panetta, then the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said he preferred the new. Discussing the use of drones in fighting Al Qaeda, he stated, "It's the only game in town." Critics of drone warfare generally stick to the legal issues it raises: A court should authorize these killings, and the military, not a civilian agency such as the CIA (which controls drones used outside war zones), should carry out the operation, they contend. Using a civilian agency violates U.S. law and the Geneva Conventions.

**Leon Panetta called drones
"the only game in town."**

From the perspective of a military historian, the true issues are operational, not legal. If drones are used to the exclusion

of short-range weapons, American forces will be unable to take or interrogate prisoners, accept surrenders, and occupy positions. These practical advantages are not to be despised. Some terrorists surrender, even if bin Laden did not. Some provide intelligence. Yet a drone cannot communicate with the enemy.

In World War II, no weapon could have eliminated the entire top echelon of the government of any of the belligerents. Drones, though, offer this new possibility. Using them, the United States might try to eliminate the entire leadership of Al Qaeda. Although this new war aim may be attractive, once an enemy's leaders are dead, drones will not be able to capture, interrogate, or parley with survivors. And without any leaders to represent them, the remaining forces of the enemy may not be willing or able to surrender. The elimination of whole strata of leaders may not bring the conflict to a close.

Overreliance on drones is not only impractical; it is harmful to the combat ethos of the U.S. military. This ethos has always allowed for the use of long-range weapons, but it also gives an honored place to the use of short-range arms. A weapon such as the Hiroshima atomic bomb, dropped by airmen who never beheld their victims, is acceptable, but

the alternative, invading Japan with a large landing force, is acceptable, too.

Centuries of warfare combining short- and long-range weapons teach us that belligerents can fight and communicate with the enemy at the same time. Innovations such as the drone have their place, but it is a smaller place than technologically infatuated officials suppose.

THE FOLLOWING BRIEF (AND SELECTIVE) survey of the history of weapons begins with a truism: Weapons that kill from a safe remove are preferable to those that involve personal risk. Yet this truism has never been the whole story. Indeed, the activity of choosing between long- and short-range weapons is almost as old as warfare itself. In Book 11 of the *Iliad*, Paris, who uses the ancient Greek version of a long-range weapon, a bow, wounds Diomedes, who uses face-to-face weapons, a spear and a sword.

After hitting Diomedes, Paris says, "You're hit! . . . If only it had caught you down in the flank and killed you." Diomedes answers, belittling his opponent's weaponry, "You are boasting in vain about grazing the bottom of my foot. . . . It's like being hit by a woman or a silly boy." An arrow, he says, "is the flimsy weapon of a weak and worthless man."



ART RESOURCE

Thousands of years ago, Homer recognized the moral and practical dilemmas posed by long-range weaponry such as the Greek archer's bow, shown in a 15th-century depiction of the Trojan War.

Fighting fair means spear to spear, face to face. Homer agrees with Diomedes, praising “those fighting in the front rank.” Yet Paris survives unscathed, while Diomedes limps to his chariot and leaves the field. This scene strikes a balance between the two kinds of weapons, giving Paris the tactical advantage and Diomedes the moral advantage.

Neither side tries to exterminate the enemy without a word. Homeric leaders and soldiers alike prefer to parley and stage duels rather than fight to the finish. If wounded men do not fling insults and board their chariots, they are captured

and beg for mercy. The victor negotiates with the captive, and often spares him in order to collect ransom. Sparing those who beg for mercy is the acme of heroism. Killing without warning is out of the question.

During the Classical period, which began after the Persian Wars of 490–79 BC, more long-range weaponry was available, but the idea of heroism in close-range combat persisted. When a visitor asked why the Spartans fought with short swords, a Spartan magistrate replied, “We come up close to our enemies.” Yet even the Homerically inclined

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Greeks had to admit that long-range weapons sometimes worked better. In his account of the Peloponnesian Wars, Thucydides reported that archers could defeat the fearsome Spartans, while taking care to note that the advantage conferred by their long-range weapons was unfair:

When one of the Athenian allies maliciously asked one of the prisoners whether the Spartans who had died were good, brave men, the prisoner said that spindles [arrows] would be worthwhile if they could pick out brave men. He implied that men killed by arrows and stones died by chance.

A little later, in the fourth century BC, Greek warfare became higher tech. Crossbows increased the reach of long-range weapons from 100 yards to 250. Next came catapults loaded with five-pound stones. About the same time, engineers learned to use torsion, which increased throw-weight as well as range.

Homer and Thucydides never conceived so powerful a weapon as a catapult. Yet despite the advance in military technology, the hoplite or legionary with his spear and sword remained the bulwark of ancient armies; artillery did not change the fundamentals of warfare. Killing and talking continued to complement each other.

One of the first uses of artillery, by Alexander the Great’s father, Philip of Macedon, at the Greek city of Olynthus in 349 BC, illustrates how old attitudes persisted amid new weapons. Macedonian artillerymen firing lead pellets and balls into the city first scratched messages on them (perhaps the first time artillerymen wrote on shells), extending the practice of Homeric jeering. Some of the balls have survived. Among the inscriptions are “Here’s one, swallow it” and “It rained.” One reads, simply, “Ouch.” Some warned of rape: “Conceive.”

Olynthus soon fell, but thanks to traitors who opened the gates to the Macedonians, not artillery fire. The victors looted the city, ransomed some of the inhabitants, no doubt raped others, and sold many into slavery. Long-range killing was only a moment in this process. To a Macedonian, as to a Homeric hero, it was unthinkable that the victor would not come face to face with enemies.

Ancient siege warfare did mark a departure from Homer in one respect: It affected civilians more deeply. In sieges, civilians could no longer see or hear missiles before impact. Even in peacetime, city dwellers experienced a new remoteness from the world beyond the city gates, one measured by towers built to interdict artillery fire, ramparts to cushion its impact, and outer works to ward off the enemy. Something of a siege mentality became permanent. This was the Greeks' high-tech military horror, their foretaste of drones. Yet even in these circumstances, the enemy was less than a mile away, and words still flew between foes, along with arrows and stones.

THERE IS NOTHING PECULIARLY GREEK about combining face-to-face and long-range weapons. There is also nothing peculiarly Greek about fighting and talking at the same time. Colonial America provides an example: Indians armed with tomahawks and bows, and later with muskets.

When Europeans started fighting Indians in eastern North America in the 16th century, the natives would begin engagements by firing arrows at a Homeric range of 50 yards or so. Then they would rush the opponent, usually with a

tomahawk or club, in order to capture or scalp him, or just touch him. If they did not touch him, they earned no honor—as Jesuit missionaries put it, they would not count *coups*. Long-range killing was permissible, and sometimes unavoidable, but not preferable. The Indians had no practical notion of exterminating the whites.

Indian methods of warfare should not be thought anything less than cruel and brutal. Sneak attacks with flaming arrows often caused high numbers of casualties. The French explorer Jacques Cartier recorded an example that occurred in 1539 in what would become the province of Quebec. In his book *A Memoir of Jacques Cartier*, he told of a force of Toudaman Indians who attacked a village of 200 sleeping Iroquois, burning them to death and killing those who tried to escape the flames. But in other instances, pitched battles resulted in fewer casualties. The two sides would face off and then dart behind trees to avoid arrows. Often the fighters on each side sang and danced in the face of the enemy, as some ancient Greek warriors did. In 1643, Roger Williams, the Protestant dissenter who founded Providence Plantations, witnessed a nearly bloodless battle in Rhode Island. Arrow attacks caused some wounds, but few

deaths. The two sides ridiculed each other, then quit the field.

European invaders brought with them longer-range weapons, too—matchlock guns effective at 50 to 100 yards, but heavy and cumbersome. The burning cord gave away the soldier's position, and often fizzled out in wet weather. Then came the flintlock musket, introduced to North America around 1700. It was lighter than the matchlock and operable in a rainstorm. Appreciating the difference, the Indians abandoned their bows in favor of the new weapons. Indian warfare now took the form described in the 19th century by the novelist James Fenimore Cooper: Indians firing from the depths of the forest ambushed columns of white soldiers.

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BRIDGEMAN

American Indians adopted the European settlers' long-range weaponry with considerable success. The Seminole leader Osceola, shown here with a musket in an 1842 lithograph, was captured during the Second Seminole War (1835–42) only when he was lured to sham peace talks and arrested.

Even more deadly than the flintlock was the rifled musket developed around 1750 by German gunsmiths in Pennsylvania, but known as the Kentucky rifle because of its popularity in the first white settlements west of the Appalachians. With this weapon, a marksman could

fell man or beast from up to several hundred yards away. Long-range killing now became easier, and Indians had no scruples about adopting it. Once the warriors hit their targets, they could still close in and count *coups*. They did not immediately grasp the strategic setback represented by an increased reliance on long-range killing. Their archery skills became obsolete, their superiority in hand-to-hand fighting became less important, and their dependence on European goods increased. By the end of the 19th century, Indians faced repeating rifles and machine guns: ever more projectiles, fired more accurately from farther and farther away.

Now, amid weapons that would have been as surprising to Roger Williams as catapults would have been to Homer, the U.S. Army could exterminate its Indian opponents at little risk to itself. It was a somewhat new kind of warfare, but not entirely: The Army had to find the Indians, and some, like Geronimo, were very elusive. To do better against future enemies, the Army would need even better long-range weapons. First came improved field artillery, then bomber planes and rockets, but none were flawless. Artillery was more effective when targeting was done with the assistance of airborne spotters, but the spotters were very vulnerable.

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Bombers were vulnerable to enemy aircraft and ground-based anti-aircraft fire, and bombs often missed their targets. Any infantryman adjusting his aim was a more flexible killer than a bomb or rocket. Through both world wars, the infantry remained the largest segment of any army's frontline troops, the same as in antiquity and colonial America.

In World War II, when their enemies were finally defeated, the Allies did not deal with them at a distance and without communication. When the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, enemy leaders were not targeted. The bombs were not dropped in order to preempt negotiations but to hasten them. Allied military leaders received the German and Japanese surrenders face to face in formal ceremonies, then implemented an occupation of both countries that lasted for years.

In Vietnam, the foe was cleverly retrograde. He attacked with short-range

weapons such as knives and bamboo stakes. His notion of a long-range weapon was a tank gun with an effective range of a mile. The Americans could fire from much longer range, in safety, but they would have to fire incessantly, since they would almost always miss once the target slipped into the jungle or ducked into a cave. U.S. forces introduced precision-guided munitions that anticipated today's drones, but in small numbers that made little impact on a numerous enemy. Another new weapon, the guided missile, was too expensive for most targets in a guerrilla war. Carpet-bombing by B-52s hearkened back to the massive raids against Japanese and German cities at the end of World War II. But the United States had no notion of killing Ho Chi Minh and the other members of the elite that ran North Vietnam any more than the Communists had of killing off the Nixon administration. Innovations and all, the Vietnam War effectively ended at a negotiating table, different in form but not in substance from the powwows of America's colonial era and the parleys reported by Thucydides.

Then came drones. Although experiments with unmanned planes dated back to the beginning of aviation, the 1950s witnessed the first military use of these machines, which served as radio-guided

decoys in the Korean War. Similar planes directed naval gunfire in the 1990s. In the Gulf War (1991), one of these planes took pictures of Iraqi soldiers waving their shirts in the air, attempting to surrender to the drone. In the late 1990s, in time for the invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq War, drones began to carry missiles. Soon all the services had drones. Army personnel and Marines directed the craft from trailers near the frontlines. The CIA joined in, and the Air Force built a command center for drones at Nellis Air Force Base, in Nevada. Aerial surveillance improved, making it possible to pick out individual targets, such as bin Laden.

The United States and its allies lacked the troops, ships, and planes to assault Al Qaeda in all of its sanctuaries throughout the greater Middle East, and the George W. Bush administration turned to drones as a substitute. After the election of Barack Obama in 2008, it became clear that the United States lacked the will to keep large forces in the field indefinitely. In the first few years of Obama's presidency, drone attacks on enemy leaders increased, with the avowed purpose of breaking up the Al Qaeda system of command and control.

The Obama administration found several justifications for the reliance on drones. There was the old rationale of not nego-

tiating with terrorists, and the new one of treating Al Qaeda as a criminal enterprise. There was humanitarian horror at civilian casualties caused by conventional warfare. Yet drone warfare is not immaculate. Civilians are killed and wounded, and in Pakistan and Afghanistan that has led to protests against “the only game in town.”

SOME SOLDIERS AND CIA PERSONNEL dislike the game. “There’s something about pilotless drones that doesn’t strike me as an honorable way of warfare,” a former Army Ranger told journalist Jane Mayer for a 2009 article in *The New Yorker*. The Ranger did not quote Homer, but he was thinking like Diomedes, or like the Spartan who scorned arrows. He was thinking of the personal risk taken in combat, but also of the responsibility felt for taking life. An ancient soldier might accept this responsibility without qualm. A contemporary soldier is more likely to ponder this duty, and ask whether a goal worth killing for is also a goal worth dying for. The operator of a drone need not ask this question.

Drone operators are not without conscience. Many have found the job intensely stressful, and some, Mayer reported, are said to wear flight suits at work. That reminds the operator that he is, after all, making a bombing run.

Even if he cannot see the enemy face to face, he is entering hostile airspace. If he were a pilot, he could be shot down or captured after parachuting to the ground. He could end up in a place like the Hanoi Hilton, and get to know his enemy all too well. He could taunt or be taunted, be brainwashed or forgiven, or be exchanged, if not ransomed. He could, in a word, be a warrior.

This sort of thinking is not too romantic for the public. The public reacted to the death of bin Laden much more than to Awlaki’s not just because bin Laden was more important, but because his almost cinematic demise seemed mythical. The attackers ran great risks in order to kill him point-blank. He had a chance to arm himself, to no avail.

When Panetta described drones as a game, he could not have been thinking about heroes or heroism. He supposed that the United States could prevail over Al Qaeda. Attacking Al Qaeda’s leadership may not lead to this result. In 2002, former CIA general counsel Jeffrey Smith told *The New Yorker’s* Seymour M. Hersh, “If they’re dead, they’re not talking to you, and you create more martyrs.”

Unlike the war with the Taliban, which may end after U.S. troops leave Afghanistan, the war with Al Qaeda is sure to continue. The United States will keep

deploying drones, and Al Qaeda will keep using its own arsenal. While not averse to using the poor man's long-range weapon, the improvised explosive device, or IED (often detonated by cell phone), Al Qaeda also uses the poor man's face-to-face weapon, the suicide bomb. Suicide bombers are counted as martyrs, the heroes of their religious lexicon. The asymmetrical conflict may go on for some time. Then will come a change of fortune that Thucydides might have predicted. Just as the Indians acquired muskets, Al Qaeda will acquire drones. That is another one of warfare's truisms: A weapon used by one side will sooner or later be acquired by the other. The game will have two players, not one. The outcome of the game will be exponentially harder to predict.

Drones are tempting. Compared to spears or even guns, they save attackers' lives. Compared to artillery or bombs, they save civilians' lives. Used to the exclusion of conventional forces, however, they will do harm as well as good. They will liquidate a target like bin Laden the same way they liquidate a target like Awlaki. Used as an

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instrument of assassination, they will turn war against an enemy into war against his leaders, a psychological and cultural shift that may backfire. Drones give our own combat soldiers no responsibility, and they give our technicians too much.

Drones should serve the familiar purpose of inflicting casualties in tandem with inducing surrender. They should not serve the novel purpose of replacing troops, casualties, negotiations, and heroism—the whole business of war—with gadgetry.

Americans like gadgets, of course, especially the military kind, and they admire the strong, silent type. D. H. Lawrence spotted this predilection in the character of Natty Bumppo, novelist Cooper's frontier hero. Bumppo is a dead shot with his Kentucky rifle. Lawrence thought Bumppo exemplified "the essential American soul . . . hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Drones are the post-modern equivalent: silent, deadly gadgets that do the frontiersman's solitary work. But gadgets do not win or lose wars. Soldiers and nations do. ■

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