



Executive Summary

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THE ETHICS OF DRONE STRIKES: DOES REDUCING THE COST OF CONFLICT ENCOURAGE WAR?

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Drones have had a revolutionary influence on U.S. military operations over the past 2 decades. This technology is on track to becoming an increasingly important part of the country's arsenal as the dozens of unmanned systems currently in development enter service in the future. Drones have also raised profound questions about the nature of warfare and the morality of fighting in ways that create asymmetrical risks between opposing belligerents. Concerned citizens, academics, journalists, nongovernmental organizations, and policymakers have spoken out against drones and called for them to be strictly regulated or even prohibited.¹ This level of public concern is evidence that the future of drone warfare not only hinges on technical innovations, but also on careful analysis of the moral and political dimensions of war. Regardless of whether drones are effective weapons, it would be difficult to sanction their use if they undermine the legitimacy of U.S. military forces or compromise the foundations of democratic government.

One key challenge raised by many critics of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) specifically and unmanned systems more generally is that removing American Soldiers from the battlefield could disrupt civilians' attitudes toward the use of military force in ways that promote war and undermine democratic accountability. Casualty aversion, which we understand to be the civilian public's discomfort with sustaining military casualties and resistance against costly military operations, is a powerful constraint on when and how wars are waged in democratic societies. Policymakers, and even some

high-ranking commanders within the military, may feel pressured by public opinion to wage wars in ways that minimize the risk to soldiers or to avoid fighting when casualties are likely. One of the most popular and plausible arguments against the use of drones is that these weapons subvert the constraints created by casualty aversion in dangerous ways. Drones may allow wars to be waged without risk to human soldiers and therefore without the risk of provoking public backlash.

Although the argument that drones will subvert casualty aversion is one of the most common objections raised against these weapons, it has not been subjected to systematic empirical investigation. It is generally substantiated with inferences drawn from past wars and with purely theoretical accounts of how drones may promote civic disengagement. We tested this argument with survey experiments involving over 3,000 participants in the United States recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk online labor market. Participants were randomly assigned to read information about fictional conflict scenarios. These scenarios varied the type of attack by U.S. forces, describing it as drone strikes, strikes from manned aircraft, or the use of ground troops. They also systematically altered the strategic goals of the military mission, which included counterterrorism, humanitarian intervention, the restraint of an aggressive foreign power, foreign policy restraint, and support for an ally facing an internal military threat to its hold on power.

Our results show that participants are more willing to support the use of force when it involves drone

strikes. Support for attacks increases noticeably when it is described as a drone strike. However, this technology's influence on support for military interventions may not be as profound as critics of drone warfare often argue. Indeed, one important shortcoming of philosophical and ethical reflections on the effects of drones is that they do not produce very precise estimates about how sizable a change in opinion the introduction of this technology will create. One important contribution of our results, then, is to compare how drones alter opinions compared to other factors that we know from existing research alter support for the use of force. Casualty aversion is one of several considerations that affect support for war, such as mission type and existing attitudes about war. Demographic characteristics like gender, race, income, and age were also included in our analysis, with gender having an influence on support for war that was comparable to using drones. Thus, participants were more likely to support wars that posed lower levels of risk to American Soldiers, but they were also more likely to support wars in pursuit of important objectives (especially for counterterrorism) when they thought that war was generally an effective foreign policy tool, or when they were male. This suggests that critics of drones are correct in calling attention to the risk of drones lowering inhibitions against war, but that this shift in attitudes is unlikely to have a strong effect on the incidence of wars.

Our analysis proceeds in five stages. First, we provide an overview of the research on casualty aversion and explore the reasons why low casualty tolerance may limit wars in both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* senses. Second, we discuss arguments that drones may circumvent casualty aversion in ways that lead to an increased incidence of war and undermine democratic accountability. We also raise the possibility that lowering inhibitions against war could have beneficial consequences by making it easier to engage in humanitarian interventions. Third, we explain our research design and show how it improves on aggregate polling data when assessing

support for military interventions involving drones. Fourth, we present our results and discuss their implications for the debate over the morality of drone warfare. Finally, we conclude by considering some of the policy implications of our research and call attention to the importance of conducting further research on dimensions of this topic that we were not able to test.

ENDNOTE

1 . Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*, New York: OR Books, 2012; Sarah Kreps and John Kaag, "The Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Asymmetric Conflict: Legal and Moral Implications," *Polity*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2012, pp. 260-285; John Kaag and Sarah Kreps, *Drone Warfare*, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014.

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