

Discussion Guide

THE WAR OF THE FUTURE
IS UP IN THE AIR

DROONES





About DRONES

DRONES follows two Nevada desert-based drone operators as they pilot an unmanned craft over Afghanistan. Surveying a possible terrorist hideout, the pilots face a range of complicated moral dilemmas when they are ordered to kill a suspected terrorist and, consequently, many innocent bystanders — including children. DRONES explores the complex moral issues facing a US military that relies more and more heavily on the remote use of unmanned drones to execute its strategies.

A Note From Director Rick Rosenthal

Why a film about drones and why now?

Because combat drones are the Air Force of the future and the future is already here.

Because waging war in absentia on a video screen sets off a host of new and hitherto unresolved questions about complex moral issues.

Because DRONES is neither anti-drone nor pro-drone, but it's definitely anti-war – the way Stanley Kubrick's brilliant film PATHS OF GLORY was anti-war.

Because it's hard to look at all of the killing and destruction in the world and not wonder why we are engaged in such acts - particularly on foreign soil.



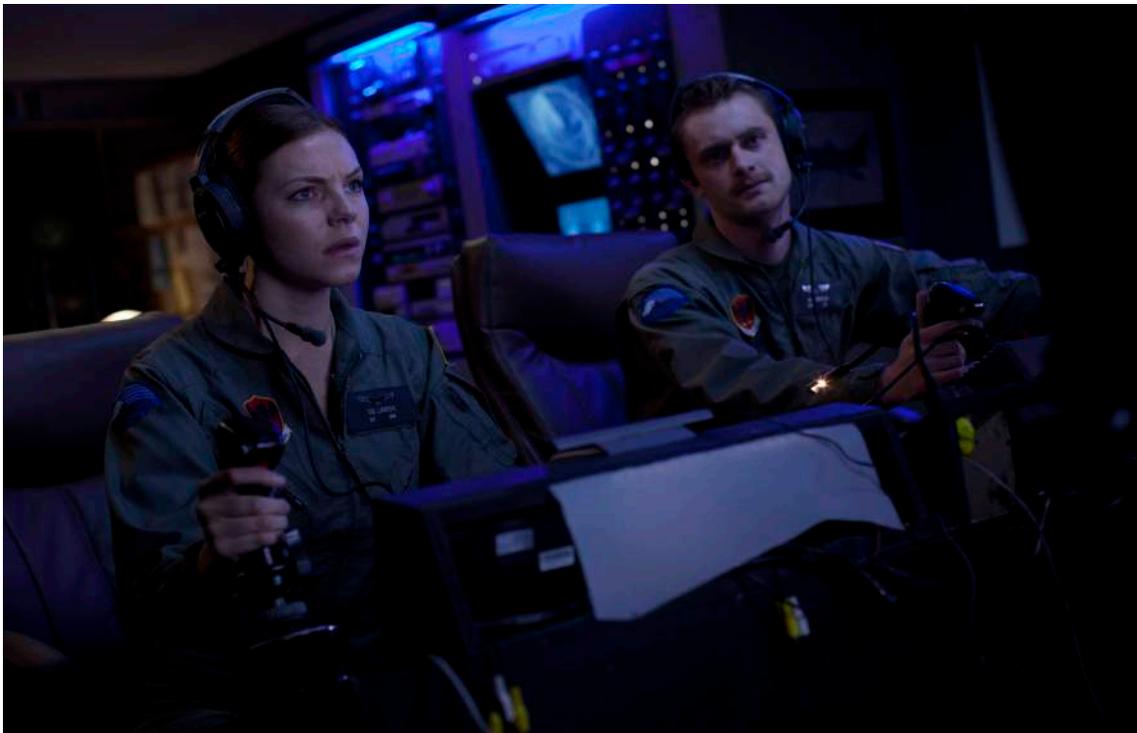
Because DRONES is a high stakes thriller with a ticking clock and time running out that's also meant to explore the complicated, razor-thin margin between truth, honor and duty and the decision whether or not to push the button.

About this Discussion Guide

This guide is designed to help viewers of DRONES explore the issues presented in the film. Advocates, activists, educators, students and anyone else interested in participating in a deeper discussion about the use of combat drones in targeted killings should use this guide to:

- Deepen understanding of U.S. military drone strikes
- Consider the moral and psychological issues associated with drone strikes
- Shed light on the civilian deaths unreported by the U.S. government
- Spark discussion about the use of drone technology in warfare
- Connect with resources and advocacy groups working on these issues

This guide includes information about civilian deaths affiliated with drone strikes as well as discussion questions to explore the moral and psychological complexities of this modern day military approach. We encourage you to build upon this material to generate activities and discussions beyond the scope of this guide, as it is by no means comprehensive. For more information on drones, please visit the websites of the organizations listed in the “Resources” section at the end of this guide.



The Characters



Second Lieutenant Sue Lawson

Sue is a lieutenant in the Air Force who washed out of flight school because of a detached retina, an injury she sustained while winning the Air Force Academy woman's boxing title. As a result, she has been reassigned as a Drone Sensor Operator. The daughter of a general, Sue is graced with a general's stubbornly pugnacious, and willfully determined attitude, which will complicate her mission when she is ordered to assassinate a terrorist whose guilt she questions.



Airman Jack Bowles

A cocky, young private in the Air Force, Jack has worked as a drone pilot for two years and has racked up his share of kills. He remains haunted by one such episode in which civilians suffered collateral damage. More experienced than newbie Sue Lawson, he knows more about the job even though she technically outranks him. Jack has compartmentalized his own feelings of guilt, and soon comes to suspect that he has been lied to all along.

Drone Sorties, Strikes and Deaths

A drone or combat drone is also known as an unmanned combat air vehicle (UCAV) or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). They do not have human pilots on board and are usually controlled in real-time by a human pilot from a distance.



Photo by drsmith7383 on Flickr

They are deployed in targeted killings, which are premeditated killings of an individual by a state organization or institution outside a judicial procedure or a battlefield; the legality of targeted killings is disputed. Those who oppose targeted killings argue that they violate international law. To learn more about the legality of these killings, visit:

www.aclu.org/national-security/targeted-killings

Human rights groups report that drone strikes have killed hundreds of civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Below are graphs provided by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) that outline the number of drone strikes and the casualties associated with them – including civilian and children deaths – from U.S covert operations. The deaths reported below are all minimums – this means that there may be many more innocent victims of drone strikes than the conservative count included in this guide. For more detailed information on drone strikes, visit: www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/

Helpful definitions from TBIJ:

Drone Sorties: Armed drone flights by predator or reaper drones that may or may not result in a strike.

Drone Strike: A missile or set of missiles fired by a drone or drones at a single location. Where missiles hit more than an hour apart, we counted these as separate strikes. Where drones hit locations more than a couple of miles apart we also count these as separate strikes, even when they take place in quick succession.

Civilian: The Bureau classifies all individuals credibly reported as civilians as such. Where the dead are described as ‘tribesmen’, ‘locals’ or ‘people’, we believe this indicates possible civilian casualties and reflect this using the O-X range.

The Bureau has recorded a number of female casualties in the drone war. It almost always classes women as civilians: in the FATA region of Pakistan, where the strikes take place, reports of female militants are exceedingly rare.

Examine the graphs below and consider the accompanying discussion questions.

AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan, there is no comprehensive estimate for those killed in drone strikes – civilian or insurgent, in the full campaign. However the latest report from the UN mission in Afghanistan identified reports of at least 45 civilians killed in 2013.

Afghanistan	Total armed drone sorties	Total missiles fired by drones	Total drone strikes
2008	3,240	195	130
2009	6,126	257	196
2010	9,182	279	206
2011	10,321	294	238
2012	7,612*	333*	245*
Total	36,481	1,358	1,015

*Year to October 31, 2012 Source: TBIJ.com

Figure 1

Reflection:

DRONES features a drone strike in Afghanistan, a country only slightly smaller than the state of Texas. Consider the geographic size and the fact that there have been over one thousand strikes in Afghanistan since 2008. How would you feel if you were living under those conditions?



PAKISTAN

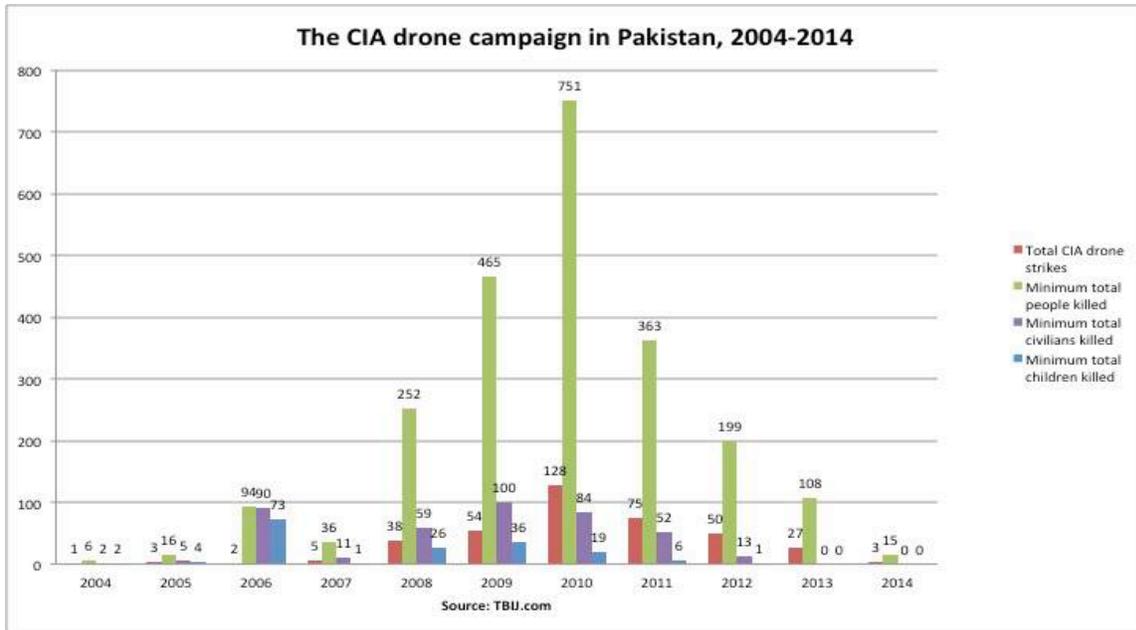


Figure 2

Reflection:

Note that the drone strikes in Pakistan as presented in Figure 2 were carried out by the CIA and peaked in 2010. In May of that same year, Faisal Shahzad, a U.S. citizen of Pakistani descent who was trained by the Pakistani Taliban, planted a car bomb that failed to detonate in New York City's Times Square. Shahzad later claimed that the CIA drone strikes in Pakistan incited his anger toward the United States.¹ Do you think the drone strikes are combating terrorism, breeding terrorism or both? Why?



PAKISTAN, YEMEN AND SOMALIA

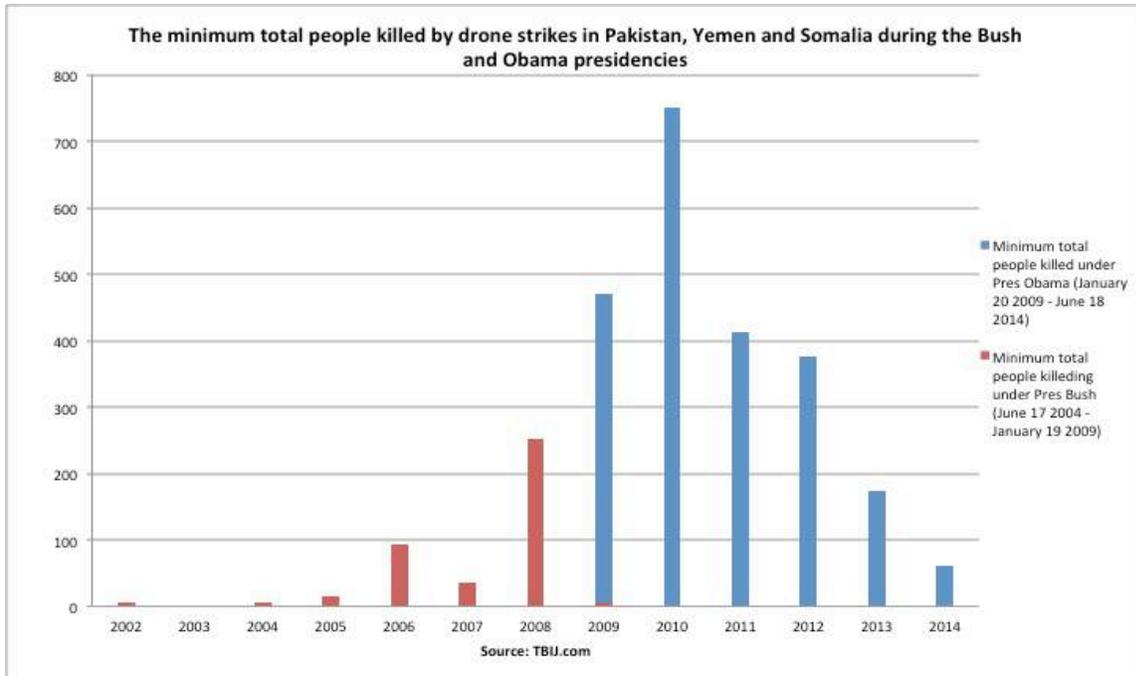


Figure 3

Reflection:

Figure 3 reveals the increase of people killed by drone strikes in recent years under the Obama administration. Considering the death toll and the strikes began escalating in 2008, do you remember being aware of drone strikes in the news? When do you feel like you became most aware of U.S. military drone strikes and why?

Drone Strikes: The Victims

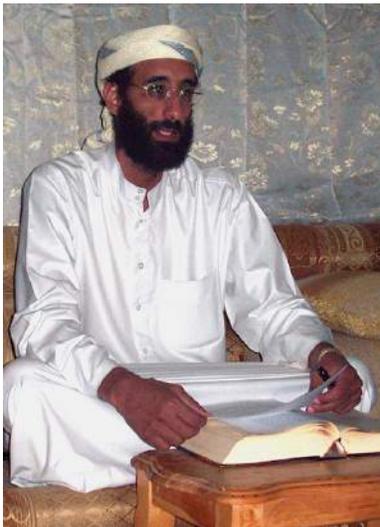


Photo of Anwar Al-Aulaqi in 2008
by Muhammad un-Deen
[CC BY-SA 3.0]

Anwar and Abdulrahman Al-Aulaqi and Samir Khan: U.S. Citizens in Yemen (From the Center for Constitutional Rights and the ACLU)

In 2010, Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought the first legal challenge to the United States' "targeted killing" program. In *Al-Aulaqi v. Obama*, CCR and the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the Obama administration's authorization for the killing of a U.S. citizen in Yemen, Anwar Al-Aulaqi. They argued that the Constitution prohibited Al-Aulaqi's killing without charge and trial outside of an armed conflict context, except as a last resort in the face of a specific and imminent threat. The standing order to kill him flew in the face of these requirements.

On September 30, 2011, U.S. drone strikes killed Anwar Al-Aulaqi and another U.S. citizen, Samir Khan, along with two others. Two weeks later, on October 14, 2011, U.S. drones fired missiles at an outdoor restaurant in Yemen where 16 year-old Abdulrahman Al-Aulaqi, Anwar Al-Aulaqi's U.S. citizen son, was eating dinner with his teenage cousin, killing the two boys and five others.

In 2012, CCR and the ACLU filed a second case, *Al-Aulaqi v. Panetta*, alleging that the killings of Anwar Al-Aulaqi, Samir Khan, and Abdulrahman Al-Aulaqi were unconstitutional. Government officials moved to dismiss the case, arguing that there should be no judicial review. This position is consistent with the government's position in virtually every national security civil suit since 9/11, on behalf of U.S. and foreign citizens alike, whether for arbitrary detention, torture, or killing. In April 2014 the district court dismissed the case, finding that while Anwar Al-Aulaqi's due process rights may have been violated, the court could not inquire into the claims because they relate to national security.



Mamana Bibi: A Grandmother in Pakistan (From Amnesty International)

In October 2012, 8-year-old Nabeela ventured out with her 68-year-old grandmother Mamana Bibi to do daily chores in their family's large, open field. Moments later, Mamana was killed by a U.S drone strike, apparently aimed directly at her. Her grandchildren recounted in painful detail to Amnesty International the moment when Mamana Bibi, who was gathering vegetables in Ghundi Kala village, northwest Pakistan, was blasted into pieces before their eyes. Amnesty International did not find any evidence she was endangering anyone, nor that she was posing an imminent threat to the U.S. Years later, Mamana Bibi's family has yet to receive any acknowledgment that it was the U.S. that killed her, let alone justice or compensation for her death.

The Psychology of Killing

(From the Center on Conscience and War)

A number of indicators seem to suggest that killing one another is not natural for humanity. This is seen clearly in the way the military trains its members for combat. Military training has evolved over the decades to a scientifically-developed system that teaches troops to kill reflexively, by rote, without thinking. By conditioning troops to react, and not think, the military was able to achieve shoot-to-kill rates of 90% by the Vietnam War, compared with WWI at 5% and WWII at 15%.²



Other tactics are also used by the military in training troops to kill. Seeing the enemy as less than human, "dehumanization of the enemy," helps overcome a person's innate resistance to taking another human life. Imposing different levels of distance between "us" and "them" is a classic way to desensitize troops and make it easier for them to engage in warfare. Distance can be imposed on moral, psychological and physical levels. We impose moral distance by creating the impression that "we" are morally superior to "them." Phrases like "God is on our side" and "good guys" and "bad guys" are very effective in achieving moral distance. Imposing psychological distance means using psychological manipulation to express that the "enemy" is less than human. Racial slurs are good examples of ways to create psychological distance. Physical distance means creating actual physical distance between "sides" in war, so that troops do not need to come face to face with someone they are meant to kill. Many tactics of modern warfare achieve physical distance: bombing from airplanes, the use of land mines and, most recently the use of drones. Drone pilots kill "targets" on a screen from thousands of miles away, while engaging in normal everyday activities, like eating takeout pizza or drinking Starbucks coffee and possibly even returning home to their families after work.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think that Mahmoud is a terrorist?
- Airman Bowles tells Lieutenant Lawson that drones save the lives of American pilots. Why does he feel that American lives are worth more than the lives of the twelve Afghan civilians?
- How did you feel about the drone pilots' experience in the film? Were you surprised by how and from where they carry out their duties? Why or why not?
- How do people respond to violence when it becomes personal?
- How do drone attacks affect the communities in targeted areas? How would Americans feel if another country targeted us with drones?
- How are drone attacks different from the "terrorism" the U.S government is ostensibly fighting?
- How do you think drone strikes impact drone pilots psychologically?
- If you were in Lieutenant Sue Lawson's position, would you push the button?

Endnotes

1. Bergen, Peter. (2012, July 3). *Drones decimating Taliban in Pakistan*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com>

2. For a complete discussion of the evolution of military training and its effects, see: Grossman, Lt. Col. Dave. (2009). *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Resources

American Civil Liberties Union
www.aclu.org

Amnesty International USA*
www.amnestyusa.org

Bill of Rights Defense Committee
www.bordc.org

Brookings Institution
www.brookings.edu

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*
www.thebureauinvestigates.com

Center for Civilians in Conflict
www.civiliansinconflict.org

Center on Conscience and War*
www.centeronconscience.org

Center for Constitutional Rights*
www.ccrjustice.org

CODEPINK
www.codepink4peace.org

Human Rights First
www.humanrightsfirst.org

Living Under Drones
www.livingunderdrones.org

The New America Foundation
www.newamerica.net

Veterans for Peace*
www.veteransforpeace.org

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