



# Conference of Major Superiors of Men

## Armed Drones: Do They Make us Better People?

On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, President Obama laid out an [updated drone policy](#) to the Administration's earlier [legal argument](#) in February for the use of armed drones. The [ACLU responded](#) to the February document with legal critiques. This past week the US Conference of Catholic Bishops rightly raised "[serious moral concerns](#)" about the drone policy and called us to "consider the longer-term social and political impacts." Academics have been offering analysis as well, such as Michael [Walzer](#) and Maryann Cusimano Love. For the most part these analyses consider laws of war, "just war" theory, and civil rights. However, [Cusimano Love's analysis](#) notably mentions a key limit in that "just" war theory does not tell us how to build peace.

Focusing on the "just war" theory as the key frame of moral analysis for armed drones also fails to adequately engage our imagination for practices of nonviolent peacemaking. This focus also lowers our capacity to sustain peacemaking practices, and offers little insight into envisioning the justpeace which "just war" theory purports to intend. "Just war" theory also depends on, but doesn't develop the "just people" needed to interpret, apply, and revise the criteria.

But even more significant, "just war" theory doesn't prioritize or illuminate a more important moral question about human habits. Therefore, by taking a longer-term view of building a justpeace, we recommend we shift the primary analysis of armed drones from law, "just war" theory, and rights to the question, "*what kind of people are we becoming* by using armed drones?" The following discussion provides an example of where this ethical approach, i.e. virtue ethics, might draw us.

### **Increasing fear in communities**

With drones killing people, we become the kind of people who cultivate fear in communities as they wonder when a drone is hovering and if they may be attacked just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Drones [provoke high anxiety](#) in communities and children become especially afraid. Parents often fear sending their children to school or going to the market. This anxiety and fear is incredibly destructive to trust in communities, and as many have pointed out, drone killing also [leads increasing numbers of people](#) to turn to other fear-based strategies, which includes acts we often describe as "terrorism."

### **Increasing impersonal ways of engaging conflict**

Armed drones are an impersonal means of engaging conflicts. By increasingly relying on the latest destructive machine to settle conflict and destroy the other, we become increasingly less capable and willing to engage various conflicts in humanizing ways that are in accord with our human dignity. For instance, we become less likely to create conditions to defuse the hostility, such as using development programs, restorative justice practices, nonviolent civilian

resistance training, or unarmed civilian peacekeeping. Further, we also become less likely to speak face-to-face with our opponents, less empathetic for the other, less prone to healing and more apt to ignoring, excluding, de-faming, and even destroying in our various relationships. The capacity for empathy is a core virtue of human flourishing as President [Obama has even promoted](#) in the past. But armed drones significantly damage this capacity in ourselves as well as lowering the empathy that others may have for us.

This impersonal way of engaging conflict is also manifested in the video-game mentality of the drone controllers and thus exacerbates the objectification of others. Such objectification contributes to the habits in our culture of relating to others primarily as instruments for economic gain, political power, sexual gratification, etc. One of the more direct manifestations of this habit is the development of [higher rates of post-traumatic stress syndrome in military drone operators](#) compared to soldiers in combat zones.

### **Avoiding the roots of conflicts**

Using armed drones also lowers our engagement and effectiveness in addressing the roots of conflicts. Hence, although they may appear to be immediate or short-term resolutions, i.e. “x” leader is killed, we soon end up facing the same conflict re-surfacing in new ways. Then we wonder why we seem to lurch from hostility to hostility. We must develop practices and habits that get closer to the roots of conflict to transform them into opportunities for growth and human flourishing. President Obama is wise to raise the issue of addressing “underlying grievances,” but when coupled with ongoing armed drone attacks, we will largely obstruct any social gains and create more "grievances." In our culture, this habit of avoiding root causes shows up too often in our criminal justice system with its high recidivism rates; school disciplinary systems that too often focuses on exclusion; immigration debate that overemphasizes border security without attention to the drivers of migration; and even friends who too often are unwilling to offer constructive critique to each other. Using armed drones will likely exacerbate this habit and some cultural problems that arise from it.

### **Diminishing key virtues**

Using armed drones diminishes other key virtues besides empathy. For instance, the virtue of *hope* in others, particularly regarding the capacity to change will falter. We see this showing up in the ways we too often disconnect, avoid, or give up on people who think differently than us in our families, in the criminal justice system, and in our political wrangling.

The virtue of *solidarity* with all people, especially the poor and marginalized will become less active. We damage solidarity not only by increasing fear and cultivating fear-based strategies of violence in poor and marginalized communities, but also by instigating an arms race in drones, which diverts funds away from those in urgent need.

The virtue of *courage* that risks one's life to lift up the dignity of all people will also be diminished. This is incredibly damaging to our capacity to imagine, enact, and sustain the practices of nonviolent civilian resistance, which has driven our greatest social movements and overthrown dictators across the globe in much [more sustainable ways](#) than any violent approach.

The virtue of *justice* also suffers in our culture as we ramp up armed drones. A preoccupation with technical legal issues regarding the use of lethal force, risks diverting attention from the deeper and more significant form of justice that focuses on the harms done to relationships and how to heal them in ways that address human needs, i.e., restorative justice. Using armed drones damages our capacity to see the harm done to relationships and to imagine how to heal that harm in a sustainable way. Perpetuating this destructive habit will likely increase patterns in our culture such as our high recidivism, divorce and suicide rates, etc.

The [virtue of nonviolent peacemaking](#) which realizes the good of conciliatory love that draws enemies toward friendship, and the good of our ultimate unity and equal dignity of all people is also diminished by continued reliance on armed drones. To recognize this virtue is not to deny that violence is presently part of our experience, but to acknowledge that the habit of nonviolent peacemaking is an expression or basic component of human flourishing. For those professing Christianity, which many of our leaders do, Jesus' example clarifies that nonviolent peacemaking is a central virtue.

The strategies and tactics we engage become practices, which cultivate the character habits of human persons and societies. Although President Obama asserts that his "high threshold" for the "lethal action" of drones respects the "inherent dignity of every human life," and [John Brennan claims](#) that armed drones satisfy the "principle of humanity," the analysis above indicates some deeper concerns and a fuller vision of "humanity" we should attend to.

The Catholic Compendium of the Social Doctrine quotes Pope John Paul II who said clearly, "that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy of [hu]man[s]. Violence is a lie for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. *Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings.*"<sup>1</sup> More recently, Pope Francis exclaimed, "I also think we are like the people who, on the one hand want to listen to Jesus, but, on the other hand, at times, like to be cruel to others, isn't that right? To condemn others, right? This is Jesus' message: mercy. On my part, I say it with humility; this is the Lord's strongest message: mercy."<sup>2</sup> War and violence are evil, as Pope Francis reasserts: "Let us look around: how many wounds are inflicted upon humanity by evil! Wars, violence, economic conflicts that hit the weakest..."<sup>3</sup>

Whether the reader resonates with all or even some of the above analysis, it should be more clear that the use of armed drones is *inconsistent with human dignity* and, thus, with the fullness of human rights, and even more important, human flourishing.<sup>4</sup>

May 30, 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, (2004), par. 496.  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, morning mass at Vatican City, 17 March 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Palm Sunday 2013 - XXVIII World Youth Day - Homily of Pope Francis.

<sup>4</sup> An earlier version of this statement was produced on Apr. 2, 2013 in *America: The National Catholic Review*, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/what-are-drones-doing-us>