

Andrew Exum: The Ethics of Drones and Civilian Contractors

Guiding Question: Civilian contractors and drones are both present in military activities by the United States today. What are the ethics of employing these two actors rather than using only a traditional military force?

Transcript:

ANDREW EXUM: With respect to drones, I have been very critical at various times of the drone program in [Pakistan](#) and wrote an [op-ed](#) that was not very appreciated in Washington in 2009 about that program.

But drones are like using direct-action special operations. It's a way to do discriminate killing, keeping in mind that there is no such thing really, ultimately. You very rarely get only the person you are going after.

When that type of discriminate killing takes place as part of a larger strategy, within a broader political/economic strategy, I think that there is a place for it. I worry that drones have been used more as a tactic in place of a strategy.

And they're easy. You can fly them from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. That makes them ultimately very seductive to especially civilian policymakers, who just don't want to put guys like I used to be on the ground.

JAMES TRAUB (*New York Times* journalist): It's also worth pointing out that there are many places where the people in those countries don't want to have somebody on the ground, and so one of the appeals of drones is that in a place like Pakistan or Yemen, where you can't have American boots on the ground, you can have a drone in the air.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, that's exactly right. And certainly I would say our Pakistani partners have been much more aware—let's put it that way—of a lot of our actions in Pakistan than perhaps they have let on in the public sphere.

JAMES TRAUB: Do you want to just briefly address the civilian contractor question?

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. I kind of feel the same way about civilian contractors. When you talk about contractors, the vast majority of those are not trigger pullers. The vast majority of those are the people who are running your dining halls and things like that. That's fine. If that saves the U.S. taxpayer money, that makes more sense economically, that's fine.

Private security corporations and private military corporations are another thing. It's remarkable—usually, occupied people often don't distinguish between people wearing uniforms and people in Blackwater. So in Iraq, when a Blackwater contractor kills a person at a

traffic intersection because their incentives are just to get that diplomat, or whoever, from point A to point B safely, and forget the broader construct, that then becomes an issue politically, strategically.

So my worry about private military corporations is that often the incentive structures aren't right. If you think about it as economists, they are not rewarded for how they fit into the broader strategy for what we are trying to do in an Iraq or an Afghanistan. They are only worried about their very limited mission, fulfilling the terms of their contract.

So we have seen quite a lot of incidents that have had strategic effect. That would be my concern. So I am much more concerned actually about private military corporations than I think I am about drones. But both of them have to be within a broader construct.

Additional Critical Thinking Questions:

What are the pros and cons of using drones during military missions?

What are the pros and cons of using military contractors during military missions?

What was the role of contractors during the Iraq War? (*Answer requires outside sources*)

What are some examples of contractors being used in present day conflicts as well as past wars?