
The Drone Campaign against Al Qaeda and ISIS

Interview with Lt. General David Deptula USAF (Ret.)

by Brian Glyn Williams

Introduction

The new era of covert drone war began on October 7, 2001—the opening night of Operation Enduring Freedom—America’s response to the Al Qaeda attacks that killed almost 3,000 Americans—with the firing of a Hellfire missile by an MQ-1 Predator in Afghanistan against the Taliban leadership. Since that historic event, Central Command, Air Force, and CIA Predator and Reaper drones have become one of the most effective killers of insurgents, terrorists and enemy combatants in a war that has gradually extended from the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan and the tribal zones of Pakistan to the deserts of Yemen and the battlefields of ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq.

Yet despite the fact that remotely controlled drone operations have become a signature component of America’s campaigns in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, this aspect of warfare remains widely misunderstood. The public hears about the occasional strike on a terrorist hideout or the use of drones in support of a combat operation in some exotic locale, but has only sketchy information. The recent unfortunate killing of an American hostage held by the Taliban in Pakistan by a drone, which was announced by the White House on 23 April 2015 brought rare and unprecedented scrutiny to Obama’s murky drone campaign.

All too often it is the issue of an airstrike’s “collateral damage” (i.e. accidentally slain civilian bystanders) that dominates the discussion of drones. Much of the conventional wisdom on drones is shaped by anti-drone activists, such as the Code Pink movement. In these circles, and among average Pakistanis who live in a country that has seen hundreds of drone strikes by the CIA’s separate drone fleet, it is not uncommon to hear comments like “99% of those who die in drone strikes are civilians.” According to these voices, the high tech drones, which can fly over their targets for over 24 hours monitoring movements on the ground with high-resolution cameras from two miles away before firing their precise, laser-guided mini-missiles, are engaged in the most uniquely indiscriminate “bombing” campaign since the fire bombing of Dresden or the carpet bombing of Hanoi. The recent furor caused by the accidental killing of the American hostage in Pakistan, Warren Weinstein, by a CIA drone intensified the debate on collateral damage killings.

Remarkably, there has been little or no push back from the CIA or Air Force to ill-informed and misleading claims. The CIA and the Air Force typically have a policy of not addressing accusations about covert drone operations. This means they have essentially ceded the field of debate to the anti-drone activists. Not surprisingly, average Americans cannot just sit down with those in charge of drone operations to get a better understanding of this opaque issue that has been all too often sensationalized or dominated by those who decry the drones’ alleged lack of discrimination.

At a recent conference in Boston, I got the extraordinary opportunity to talk with Lt. General David Deptula USAF (Ret.), the man who led the air campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the decisive opening months of Operation *Enduring Freedom* and subsequently served as the first Chief of the Air Force Headquarters’ Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance mission. Deptula has a unique insider’s perspective on the drone campaign as he was in charge of much of it since this new remote sensor-shooter technology made its debut above the battlefields under his command.

What evolved from my meeting with retired Lt. General Deptula was the following interview which, peels away some of the layers of secrecy, hype, disinformation and misunderstanding of the Air Force's secretive drone operations and finally addresses some of the charges of the anti-drone critics.

Interview

Brian Glyn Williams (BGW): *General, among the greatest concerns of the anti-drone voices is that drones lead to the roboticization of warfare and are taking us on a slippery slope towards creating a Terminator-style killing tool that will take humans out of the “kill chain.” What is your response to this accusation?*

Deptula: These issues are subject to much confusion and misunderstanding. Part of that confusion is due to the continued use of inaccurate terminology. Airpower today, and in the future, is not, and I predict, will not be “unmanned” in its application. It may involve the use of aircraft that are *uninhabited* by humans, but the application of those aircraft and the associated airpower, will not be [unmanned]. Aircraft will continue to be controlled by people – [however] what degree of autonomy aircraft will be allowed to possess is [an area] where significant policy implications lie.

The intent behind the term “unmanned aircraft vehicles” (UAV) – the term that is commonly used by the Department of Defense—was to indicate that there is much more to operating and exploiting the unmanned vehicle than simply the operation of the aircraft itself. In reality, today there is nothing unmanned about the system, except the aircraft itself which does not have a pilot on board. Words matter, that's why the US Air Force changed the way it refers to these aircraft to “remotely piloted aircraft,” as opposed to “unmanned [aircraft] systems.”

The media likes to use the term “drone.” They use this term because it is only one word and they don't have to explain what a “remotely piloted aircraft” is. In military parlance, a “drone” is a flying target for target practice—not a multi-role aircraft with a variety of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance sensors (as well as precisely accurate weapons controlled under the watchful eyes of operators informed by multiple intelligence sources). Furthermore, the word “drone” connotes a degree of autonomy that remotely piloted aircraft or UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) or “drones” simply do not possess. This term perpetuates many of the misperceptions regarding these aircraft. In actual fact, it takes about 200 people to operate and exploit one MQ-1 Predator or MQ-9 Reaper orbit using a remote-split concept of operations. There is *nothing* autonomous about weapons employment from these UAV aircraft—they are piloted, with a human in the loop. The pilot is simply remote from the aircraft, ergo the use of the term “remotely piloted aircraft.”

BGW: *Another claim of the anti-drone activists is that drones lead to a “play station” mentality towards killing. In your personal experience with the Air Force's drone program what sort of preparation goes into a drone strike and are these accusations valid?*

Deptula: The short answer to this set of questions is that an enormous amount of time and preparation goes into a drone strike. And no, the accusations you relate are not valid. Remotely piloted aircraft allow users significantly greater control, oversight, and review before a shot is fired than occurs using manned aircraft, or operations conducted by soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines. The persistence, situational awareness, and degree of control possible with remotely piloted aircraft (drones) allows for the immediate suspension of a lethal engagement if circumstances change, or questions emerge—even after a weapon has already been released or launched. Remotely piloted aircraft (drones) are networked aircraft and their data can reach any spot on earth in less than two seconds. Hence, in addition to the hundreds of operational, maintenance, and intelligence personnel, many lawyers and senior leadership are directly involved with remotely piloted aircraft

lethal engagements. This kind of oversight allows for exquisite preparation that is rarely, if ever, the case with the use of manned aircraft or with boots on the ground, or sailors at sea.

BGW: *You were Director of Combined Air Operations during much of the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. How did drones make their debut above the battlefields of Afghanistan and what role do they typically play in combat operations? Can you cite a few examples of their use in combat situations?*

Deptula: The bottom line is that the Predator was used the vast majority of the time to increase our situational awareness of what was going on with the enemy. Periodically, when we had good confirming intelligence, it was used in an attack role, but to give you an idea of the use between classic intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), and its use in a strike role, about 98 percent of the time it was used for ISR. Over a drone's mission's duration, the unblinking, unseen Predator would lurk in the sky, find enemy targets for manned fighters, bombers, and AC-130 gunships and allow them to "rain down lots of iron on bad guys"—and then keep loitering to help manned aircraft do the same thing again. As I stated, only rarely would we use the MQ-1 Predator in direct attacks on its own, and when we did, it was for a very specific target, with very specific intelligence, requiring extreme accuracy, and minimal collateral damage.

BGW: *Ethicists have decried the use of the remote controlled drone in killing [technologically] less advanced enemies in locales ranging from the remote tribal zones of Pakistan to deserts of 'Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula'-controlled Yemen. What do you say to the charges that this form of warfare, which does not put our pilots at risk, is cowardly and gives America an unfair advantage?*

Deptula: War is not about "equality;" it's about inflicting damage on your enemy without suffering damage yourself. Remotely piloted aircraft provide one of those asymmetries for peace-seeking allies today. The use of remotely piloted aircraft has substantially boosted effectiveness in accomplishing critical security objectives—with zero operator casualties, at significantly less cost, and with significantly less collateral damage than have surface-force operations in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade plus. The anti-drone movement keeps saying how much ill-will drones generate, but it never discusses how much ill-will the alternatives generate. If the people harboring terrorists around the world don't like drones, do you think they like military occupations with boots on the ground more? Relative to other options, remotely piloted aircraft are the most precise way of employing force at a distance in a manner that reduces collateral damage and minimizes casualties. The accuracy of weapons employed from a remotely piloted aircraft is nominally within less than 10 feet of the intended target. The accuracy of a 155mm howitzer is around 1,000 feet, and mortar accuracy ranges from 200 to 800 feet. None of the procedures governing the use of artillery, mortars, missiles fired from ships, or manned aircraft employ the tremendous oversight associated with the use of networked 'remotely piloted aircraft.'

BGW: *Another fear of ethicists is that drones are the exact opposite of nuclear weapons. While nukes are too horrible to use, remotely controlled drones are seductively easy to use and may make warfare and killing too easy. What is your response to this claim?*

Deptula: It is nonsense, and a false assertion unproven by any fact. The truth is, remotely piloted aircraft are the most precise means of employing force in a way that reduces collateral damage and minimizes civilian casualties. The critics don't understand the reality of what they call "drone" operations, nor do they comprehend that our adversaries are most certainly conducting an aggressive perception management campaign on this issue—an effective campaign if the recent attention over remotely piloted aircraft use is a measure of effectiveness. Because remotely piloted aircraft are so effective, enemies try to manipulate our use of those aircraft to do what they cannot—limit their use—by spreading falsehoods which posit that, what they call "drones," cause reckless collateral damage, or are somehow not accurate. The fact of the matter is that remotely piloted aircraft are one

of, if not *the* most, accurate means of employing force at a distance in the military arsenal. Airpower, in the form of remotely piloted aircraft, is the one capability that terrorists around the globe cannot defeat directly. The terrorists, by creating international focus on civilian casualties, and attributing those casualties to drones, versus the biggest cause of those civilian casualties (themselves) create political and societal pressure to limit the use of drones. Adversary falsehoods regarding inaccuracy and collateral damage by drones divert attention from the fact that the massive intentional damage, intentional killing of civilians, and intentional violations of international law are being conducted by Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Taliban—not “drones.” Remotely piloted aircraft allow users significantly greater control, oversight, and review before a shot is fired than occurs using manned aircraft, or any other lethal operations conducted by soldiers, sailors, airmen or Marines.

BGW: *No weapons system is perfect and, for all their state-of-the-art technology, even drones are only as good as the humint (human intelligence) and technint (technological intelligence) that goes into a strike. What does the Air Force do to prevent drone strike errors and how has it learned from past mistakes?*

Deptula: Every second of a remotely piloted aircraft's high-fidelity video footage, communication, and aircraft parameters is recorded and stored for very precise review and evaluation. This, ironically, is one of the reasons there is so much attention paid to what the media labels “drones.” Imagine if one could see the results of every missile, artillery, mortar, and rifle round fired, as is the case with drones. A principal value of remotely piloted aircraft is that they provide a perspective only available from operating in the air, and surveillance persistence to a degree much greater than an aircraft flown by a pilot. Remotely piloted aircrafts' ability to fly over one spot for a very long time allows those flying them to observe, evaluate, and act very quickly, or to take all the time necessary to be sure they can do what they really want to do. That precise engagement is simply not available to other types of weapons.

Unfortunately, military combat operations do result in civilian casualties—from all sources in all mediums—air, ground, and sea. However, the fewest number of civilian casualties result from air operations, and fewest number by aircraft system type are from UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles). According to the ‘UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan,’ for the first six months of 2013, air strikes caused two percent of all civilian casualties in the country. Among air strikes, the fewest number of civilian casualties were attributable to UAVs (just one third of that two percent). This is not just due to their accuracy, but also as a result of surveillance persistence; low collateral damage weapons such as mini-missiles; and continual aerial oversight that results in unmatched situational awareness. In 2012, the ‘UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan’ report was more specific and counted just 5 collateral damage incidents out of 1,336 total “weapons releases from remote piloted aircraft.” That is just 0.37 percent—or less than one-half of one percent—of RPA (Remotely Piloted Aircraft) air strikes caused civilian casualties. Regardless, after every mishap involving unintended collateral damage, the Air Force does a complete investigation to determine the cause of the error(s), and establishes corrective procedures to minimize the chances that that particular reason occurs again.

BGW: *Without giving away classified details, can you shed some light on the ongoing use of drones in Operation Inherent Resolve (the campaign against the terrorist group ISIS) in Syria and Iraq?*

Deptula: Drones in Operation *Inherent Resolve* are being used in ways similar to other operations, ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), strike, and directing other aircraft operations. For example, let's say that there is a particular known ISIS target of interest near Ar-Raqqah—the “capital” of ISIS. Drones are being used to assist, satisfying the ever-increasing demand to avoid unintended damage and casualties and thus political backlash. Let me quote from an article on the subject in which Rick Whittle discussed how that is being accomplished with a civilian expert. [Deptula reads:] “If it [a target] is going to be struck, they can't take their eyes off of it,” the civilian expert said. “So they help other people come in. They have all kinds of rigor,

confirming that we're all looking at the same thing. How you say that is not something we want to go into detail on, but the 'fast-mover' [slang for a jet – BGW]] comes in and does his thing. He's lucky to see what's going on for less than a minute – thirty seconds in and thirty seconds out. He just gets coordinates. He doesn't get to see a higher resolution of what's really going on. Having a Reaper [drone] that's there on chat with him, kind of giving him a playbook rundown before they come in and do this quick strike, is paramount. It eliminates a lot of the errors in which we're going after the wrong thing." In military operations, the Reaper's weapons are most often used at the end of such strikes, this expert said. "Typically they're last, because they don't carry all that much [weaponry]."

BGW: *The Air Force is today pouring money into the drone program and training more drone pilots than manned aircraft pilots. This, at a time of cutbacks for the military and general austerity in the Air Force. What do you foresee as the future of drones in the US arsenal of weapons and do you think this killing technology will spread to other countries, or even to terrorist groups?*

Deptula: Given all that I have said, while introducing enormous capability and employment advantages, remotely piloted aircraft are not a panacea for warfare, nor will they replace manned aircraft. They are but one tool among many in the set of modern weapon systems. They have advantages, and they have disadvantages. For example, the most popular remotely piloted aircraft today that possess weapons delivery capability are very vulnerable in contested or denied airspace. Remotely piloted aircraft present challenges in terms of integration with manned aircraft in congested airspace, and the deconfliction of challenges from an air defense perspective are not trivial. However, remotely piloted aircraft and their effects will continue to have an important role as the U.S. rebalances its forces. Some of the central issues at play are determining the appropriate mix of drones, given available funding that we should design and build to operate in permissive versus non-permissive airspace. Remotely piloted aircraft can enable global vigilance, reach, and power effectively and efficiently so the next generation [of drones] need to be multi-role aircraft that combine all elements of ISR and strike on a single platform. The information age allows new aircraft to become much more than just "bombers" or "fighters," but actually sensor-shooter aircraft. When integrated with other system "nodes" in every domain -air, space – land–sea, [drones] will have the capability to create a "combat cloud." A "combat cloud" is a manifestation of a self-forming, self-healing intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR)-strike-maneuver-sustainment complex and has the potential to usher in an entire new era in defense and play a crucial role in what people are now seeking in a "third offset strategy." This kind of future requires acquisition of drones that are open, modular and rapidly adaptable to the broad range of military operations. They will work with manned aircraft to a degree unforeseen today...where dozens [of drones] may be controlled by F-22s and F-35s and the next generation long-range sensor shooter aircraft formerly know as bombers. With respect to their potential in the future, we are today with drones where we were with manned aircraft just after WW 1 with bi-planes...so we have an exciting period of development ahead.

BGW: *Many thanks for taking the time to speak to me on these important and controversial issues.*

Deptula: Thanks for giving me this opportunity.

About the Interviewer: **Brian Glyn Williams** is Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth and author of 'Predators. The CIA's Drone War on Al Qaeda' (Washington DC: Potomac, 2013).

About the Interviewee: Lieutenant General David A. Deptula (Ret.) spent more than 30 years with the US Air Force (AF) and finished his military career in 2010 as first Deputy Chief of Staff for ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) at AF Headquarters.