

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 10
Issue 5 April Roundtable: Genocide and US
National Interests

Article 2

4-1-2010

Do Drones Have a Silver Lining?

David Akerson
University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>

 Part of the American Politics Commons, Defense and Security Studies Commons, Human Rights Law Commons, International Humanitarian Law Commons, International Law Commons, International Relations Commons, Military, War, and Peace Commons, National Security Law Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Akerson, David (2010) "Do Drones Have a Silver Lining?," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 5, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss5/2>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, digitalcommons@du.edu.

Do Drones Have a Silver Lining?

Abstract

Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woocher's article, "How Genocide Became a National Security Threat," flags an important milestone in American foreign policy, namely that mass atrocities might now be appropriately viewed as the national security threats that they are. The problem with translating this policy development into action is the next and not insignificant challenge. Aerial drones may be key to overcoming it.

Keywords

Human rights, United States national security, United States foreign policy, Genocide, Conflict prevention, Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Do Drones Have a Silver Lining?

by **David Akerson**

Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Wocher's article, "How Genocide Became a National Security Threat," flags an important milestone in American foreign policy, namely that mass atrocities might now be appropriately viewed as the national security threats that they are. The problem with translating this policy development into action is the next and not insignificant challenge. Aerial drones may be key to overcoming it.

Rwanda and Yugoslavia provided us with unequivocal examples as to why the United States will still be reluctant to go forward with humanitarian interventions despite this new policy. After the bodies of dead American soldiers were dragged through the streets in Mogadishu in the "Black Hawk Down" debacle in Somalia, President Clinton could not afford the political capital necessary to put soldiers in harm's way in Rwanda, a country with less strategic value to the United States. Meanwhile, in Yugoslavia, US-backed NATO forces did bomb Serbia in order to stop the mass atrocities in Kosovo. But the NATO sorties were directed to bomb Serb targets at an altitude of 15,000 feet, above the reach of anti-aircraft fire, in order to eliminate the risk of incurring NATO casualties. The United States would not agree to intervene to stop the mass killings unless the NATO missions were basically risk-free. The problem is that high-altitude bombing, while removing pilots and crew from harm's way, is very inaccurate and leads to a disproportionate number of civilian casualties. And so the simple reason that America still will choose not to intervene is that Congress cannot tolerate war casualties in conflicts that the American people simply do not care about.

So, while it is a positive development that President Obama has placed mass atrocity on the US national security threat list, he remains saddled with a legislative branch that would obstruct any efforts to use military force in a pure humanitarian intervention.

Drones might be the answer. The United States loves drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). We began the current Iraq war with fewer than ten, and now we have in excess of 10,000 in the field. The US military and CIA use weaponized UAVs to strike targets in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Yemen. The typical scenario is that "pilots" in the United States, sitting in front of panels of computer monitors, control the drones over network connections. Some missions are merely surveillance, but others identify and destroy targets. While remote computer-controlled weapons raise many issues, the silver lining may be that we are subtly developing the capability of humanitarian intervention without risk. If President Clinton could have intervened in Rwanda with drones, without putting actual soldiers at risk, he might well have done so.

UAVs provide several intriguing opportunities for the United Nations and regional organizations like NATO as well. Imagine if, when a humanitarian crisis broke out, the United Nations could immediately deploy surveillance drones to monitor and record events on the ground at the massacre sites. This would serve to chill the bravado of the average dictator, and it would gather evidence of the atrocity if and when accountability became an issue. One hopes that, in the case of imminent or active mass killings in which military force was the only remaining option that

could save thousands of lives, the United States might not be so hesitant to provide drones and expertise as it has been to put its own soldiers at risk.

In short, there are many reasons to engage in a dialogue about robotic warfare. But the opportunity that drones give countries like the United States to intervene to stop a genocide with minimal political risk—now that’s intriguing.

Visiting Professor, University of Denver Sturm College of Law, Prosecutor at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, South African Lawyers for Human Rights, President Commission for the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident.