Bravery and "Drone Pilots": Medals to the Operators of America's Death-delivering Video Games

By Glenn Greenwald
Global Research, July 11, 2012
Salon 11 July 2012

Theme: Militarization and WMD, US NATO War Agenda

The Pentagon considers awarding war medals to those who operate America's death-delivering video games

The effort to depict drone warfare as some sort of courageous and noble act is intensifying:

> **The Pentagon is considering awarding a Distinguished Warfare Medal to drone pilots who work on military bases often far removed from the battlefield**. . . .
>
> [Army Institute of Heraldry chief Charles] Mugno said most combat decorations require "boots on the ground" in a combat zone, but he noted that "emerging technologies" such as drones and cyber combat missions are now handled by troops far removed from combat.
>
> The Pentagon has not formally endorsed the medal, but Mugno's institute has completed six alternate designs for commission approval. . . .
>
> The proposed medal would rank between the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Soldier's Medal for exceptional conduct outside a combat zone.

So medals would be awarded for sitting safely ensconced in a bunker on U.S. soil and launching bombs with a video joystick at human beings thousands of miles away. Justifying drone warfare requires pretending that the act entails some sort of bravery, so the U.S. military is increasingly taking steps to create the facade of warrior courage for drone pilots:

> The Air Force has been working to bridge the divide between these two groups of fliers. First off, drone operators are called pilots, and they **wear the same green flight suits as fighter pilots**, even though they never get in a plane. Their operating stations look like dashboards in a cockpit.

And drone pilots themselves are propagating boasts of their own bravery more and more:

> Luther (Trey) Turner III, a retired colonel who flew combat missions during the gulf war before he switched to flying Predators in 2003, said that he doesn't view his combat experience flying drones as "valorous." "My understanding of the term is that you are faced with danger. And, when I am sitting in a ground-control station thousands of miles away from the battlefield, that's just not the

case." But, he said, **"I firmly believe it takes bravery to fly a U.A.V."** — unmanned aerial vehicle — **"particularly when you're called upon to take someone's life.** In some cases, you are watching it play out live and in color." As more than one pilot at Holloman told me, a bit defensively, "We're not just playing video games here."

Whatever one thinks of the justifiability of drone attacks, it's one of the least "brave" or courageous modes of warfare ever invented. It's one thing to call it just, but to pretend it's "brave" is Orwellian in the extreme. Indeed, the whole point of it is to allow large numbers of human beings to be killed without the slightest physical risk to those doing the killing. Killing while sheltering yourself from all risk is the definitional opposite of bravery.

This is why the rapid proliferation of drones, beyond their own ethical and legal quandaries, makes violence and aggression so much easier (and cheaper) to perpetrate and therefore so much more likely. In the *New York Times* today, Thomas Ricks, echoing Gen. Stanely McChrystal, calls for the re-instatement of real conscription because subjecting all of the nation to the risks of combat is the only way to finally restrain America's posture of Endless War ("having a draft might, as General McChrystal said, make Americans think more carefully before going to war"); conversely, cost-free, risk-free drone warfare does the opposite. If the mere act of taking steps that will result in the death of others makes one "brave," consider all the killers who now merit that term: dictators who order protesters executed, tyrants who send others off to war, prison guards who activate electric chairs.

As for the claim that drone "pilots" are not engaged in the extinguishing of human life via video games, the military's own term for its drone kills — "bug splat," which happens to be the name of a children's video game — and other evidence negates that. From Michael Hastings in *Rolling Stone*:

> At first, many pilots resisted the advance of drones, viewing them as nothing but a robotic replacement for highly trained fighter jocks. . . . Now, given the high profile and future prospects of drones, **pilots are lining up to operate them, volunteering for an intensive, one-year training course that includes simulated missions.** "There is more enthusiasm for the job," says Lt. Gen. David Deptula, a fighter pilot who ran the Air Force's surveillance drone program until 2010. "Many pilots are excited about operating these things."
>
> For a new generation of young guns, **the experience of piloting a drone is not unlike the video games they grew up on.** Unlike traditional pilots, who physically fly their payloads to a target, drone operators kill at the touch of a button, without ever leaving their base – a remove that only serves to further desensitize the taking of human life. (**The military slang for a man killed by a drone strike is "bug splat," since viewing the body through a grainy-green video image gives the sense of an insect being crushed.**)
>
> As drone pilot Lt. Col. Matt Martin recounts in his book Predator, **operating a drone is "almost like playing the computer game Civilization"** – something straight out of "a sci-fi novel." After one mission, in which he navigated a drone to target a technical college being occupied by insurgents in Iraq, Martin felt "electrified" and "adrenalized," exulting that "we had shot the technical college full of holes, destroying large portions of it and **killing only God knew how many people.**" Only later did the reality of what he had done sink in. "I had yet to realize the horror," Martin recalls.

Human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson [recently recounted](#) numerous cases of horrifying civilian deaths involving Pakistani teenagers whose lives were ended by drones, and she observed that "this PlayStation warfare is **only risk-free for operators of these remote-controlled killers**." She added that the use of the term "bug splat" for drone victims "is deliberately employed as a psychological tactic to dehumanise targets so operatives overcome their inhibition to kill; and so the public remains apathetic and unmoved to act," and that "the phrase has far more sinister origins and historical use: In dehumanising their Pakistani targets, the US resorts to Nazi semantics. Their targets are not just computer game-like targets, but **pesky or harmful bugs that must be killed**."

I don't doubt that some drone attackers experience some psychological stress from knowing that they are eradicating human beings with their joysticks and red buttons (though if it's only "bugs" who are being splattered, why would the stress be particularly burdensome?). But that stress is nothing compared to the terror routinely imposed on the populations in numerous Muslim countries who are being targeted with these attacks. And whatever else is true, drone warfare is already so exceedingly cheap and easy that the temptation to use it regularly is virtually irresistible. Collectively venerating it as an act of "bravery" (of all things), deserving of war medals, is only likely to shield it even further from critical scrutiny and challenge.

The original source of this article is [Salon](#)
Copyright © [Glenn Greenwald](#), [Salon](#), 2012

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: **[Glenn Greenwald](#)**