

Letter to the Bundestag

When I was in Afghanistan under the 73rd EACS in 2009 I was one of many individuals working on an Unmanned Aircraft System people refer to as the U.S. Drone Program. I worked in Satellite and Radio communications and I was a technician. If it were not for what I and others like me did at Kandahar AF, bombs would not be dropped in Afghanistan. I will never forget the day when our system went online and I could hear radio chatter of pilots in the background as our Master Sergeant smiled to all of us and said we were “killing bad guys now”. On the monitors, there were dozens of tiny dots over a map of Afghanistan, each one representing an aircraft that was being directed to where they should drop bombs. I saw monitors showing camera footage, and on some days I witnessed the last moments of someone’s life. I found myself on a daily basis loading cryptographic keys into our equipment so that these missions could take place. I traveled on this base between squadrons and I helped connect them to the CAOC in Al Udeid as well as Ramstein AB through our satellites. When the drones would take off and land I knew this was only possible because of cryptographically synced equipment that deciphered codified information carried over radio waves: equipment that needed careful calibration. When they dropped bombs, it was done so through our communications equipment. I was just one man doing his job in a compartmentalized system of hundreds of individuals doing their jobs with the end result of bombs being dropped on human beings with families and dreams of their own.

In my time there, I had experienced dozens of rocket attacks. I saluted over 50 flag draped coffins returning home too. I would have dreams about collateral damage and finding dead kids in the villages around our base. I was only beginning to comprehend that the information contained within radio waves are as much a matter of physics as the bullets that shoot from a rifle and the triggers we press to make that happen. “No comms, no bombs” as we’d say. By building this site and loading the crypto-keys, from a God’s eye view my actions were connected to every order to drop a bomb in Afghanistan. Like everyone else, I had to put the trust in the legitimacy of my actions on hundreds of people’s decisions, training, experimental technology and biases that guided their thinking. At the end of my tour I received documents stating that I had assisted in 100,000 flights, 2,400 Close Air Support Missions, 1000+ unmanned aerial support missions and over 200+ enemy kills. When I inquired about civilian casualties, I was told I didn’t have a “need to know”. When I saw the UNAMA report documenting civilians killed in airstrikes, I broke down. It has been nearly 12 years and there isn’t a single day that passes that this thought does not give me a feeling of panic.

Unlike a soldier holding a rifle, this way of killing requires many individual inputs and responsibilities behind the scenes and across a globe. It is a network dependent weapons system, and despite popular notions that responsibility solely falls on the pilot, I am still unsure who is ultimately responsible in a modern day drone strike. A pilot acts in the same capacity as everyone else, they have to trust the work of analysts who provide them with the justification for dropping a bomb on someone and that the equipment they are using to do it is performing without error. When I think about how people in the military colloquially used to speak of these people we considered targets, many names would fill the place of “person”... “Haji”...“sand nigger”... It was anything but “person” or “human-being”. As I see this technology proliferate, I worry about the precedent my country has set. I worry for the people who live under these “Swords of Damocles” who have said in numerous accounts that they now fear the sky and the many more who hate us for the hell we brought to their homes.

For many years since I began speaking in opposition to putting weapons on this platform for sensors we call drones, I have hoped for a nation to stand for the humans who live under these threats. I had hoped that my nation would see the futility in fighting wars on terror with the persistent terror of death loitering over peoples heads. When I had heard that Germany of all countries believed it necessary to follow the rest of the world into this delusion that arming their drones was necessary to stay militarily relevant, I felt compelled to offer up my experiences and information to ensure that you do not unwittingly follow the same road as the US. The truth is that in order to protect your troops, any laser guided weapon would suffice on a base or in a convoy with a drone pointing that laser. There is more deterrence in a helicopter than a Heron TP flying at 10,000 feet. No technology in the world replaces good strategy and contingency plans. The only reason to arm a drone is to go where there aren't soldiers for the purpose of targeting individuals. It is not my belief that the German Bundestag has been provided the information necessary to make an informed decision on this matter. It is my hope that Germany can be a political force for reigning in targeted killing by other nations by standing firm in their convictions and upholding its commitments to international law.

With Respect,

Cian M. Westmoreland