THE DRONE "DEBATE" AND FRIENDLY FIRE

Last week, Spencer reported on an Air Force contract for software to move towards self-piloted drones.

> The Air Force recently gave Stottler Henke Associates $100,000 to deliver a software package that can keep drones from colliding into human-piloted planes as they take off and land. Stottler's proposal, called the Intelligent Pilot Intent Analysis System, models pilots' behavior in manifested and predicted scenarios: how they take off, how they land, how they maneuver in between. It also incorporates information from Air Traffic Control and guidance for specific runways. All that will tell the drone how to react when a plane veers close or the trajectory of the two planes might portend a crash.
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> Put simply, it's analogous to getting a drone to think like a pilot, getting into his head. And it's a big step for drone autonomy. "We're encoding that knowledge that human pilots have, what they're going to do," Stottler says.

Then on Friday, Walter Pincus had an article describing discussions in the UK and here about whether using drones desensitizes their users to the death they cause.

> The British study noted that drones are becoming increasingly automated. With minor technical advances, it said, a drone could soon be able to "fire a weapon based solely on its own sensors, or shared information, and without recourse to higher, human authority." It cautioned that the Defense Ministry "currently has no intention to develop" such systems.

> Nonetheless, the aircraft, piloted by people far from the battlefield, represents an approaching technological tipping point "that may well deliver a genuine revolution in military affairs," according to the Joint Doctrine Note, which was conducted under the direction of the British Chiefs of Staff. Titled "The United Kingdom Approach to Unmanned Aircraft Systems," it was first disclosed last week by the Guardian newspaper.
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> [snip]
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> Retired Lt. Gen. David Deptula, former Air Force deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, acknowledged that the use of drones comes with potential problems with public perceptions. "Our adversaries have interjected this as a question in [people's] minds, as an attempt to limit the use of what is very, very effective," he said.

Though, as FAIR notes, while the lede of Pincus' article referred to "debates," what he described in his article was really a chorus of drone supporters.

> Readers of the **Washington Post** can see this headline in today's edition (4/25/11) about the U.S. drone airstrikes:
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> > **Debates Underway on Combat Drones**
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> But there is no actual debate in the article. Reporter Walter Pincus cites a British military study that calls the use of missile-firing drones "a genuine revolution in military affairs," adding that the "use of unmanned aircraft prevents the potential loss of aircrew

> lives and is thus in itself morally justified."
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> Pincus goes on to explain:
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>> At a Washington conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) last week, the issue of drones was also widely discussed.
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> That "wide discussion" would seem to have involved drone proponents from the CIA and the military.

Aside from any real debate, though, this discussion about all the lives that drones save seem to be missing one more detail: the recent news that two Americans were killed in a friendly fire drone strike.

> Which is why I find it particularly tragic that our abstract certainty about who is and who is not a terrorist has led to this: the friendly fire death of two Americans last week—including Navy medic Benjamin Rast from Niles, MI—in a Predator drone strike in Afghanistan.
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>> The investigation is looking into the deaths of a Marine and a Navy medic killed by a Hellfire missile fired from a Predator after they apparently were mistaken for insurgents in southern Afghanistan last week, two senior U.S. defense officials said Tuesday.
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>> [snip]
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>> Marine Staff Sgt. Jeremy Smith of Arlington, Tex., and Seaman Benjamin D. Rast of Niles, Mich., were hit while moving toward other Marines who were under fire in Helmand province.

> Perhaps appropriately, the LAT just laid out in chilling detail the ways in which our drone targeting is prone to human error (the LAT article appeared after Smith and Rast were killed but before DOD admitted they were killed by a drone strike). In an effort to bypass unreliable Afghan partners, we have moved increasingly to targeting people who *act* or *look* like insurgents. But from 15,000 feet above the ground, with analysis conducted 7,000 miles away, it seems Americans own troops can look like insurgents, too.

It is clear that we've reached a point in our use of drones where the experts who use them are considering what relation they have on our own humanity. But if we have that discussion without, at the same time, talking about not just the "lives saved" but those tragically lost, haven't we also lost our humanity?