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Drone debate extends to Iowa

War critics, military experts raise questions about aircraft that Guard wing is expected to operate

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Vietnam-era vet involved in civilian death: 'quite...': Vietnam-era veteran Gilbert Landolt, president of Des Moines' Veterans for Peace, talks about his involvement in a civilian casualty, and how it has affected him since. Landolt is protesting a drone operation center coming to Iowa.

Written by Sharyn Jackson

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Gilbert Landolt has an intimate relationship with the phrase "collateral damage." He volunteered to join the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, and, while stationed in South Korea, his squad hit a civilian with a tank round.

The then-19-year-old Iowan had to pick up the pieces of the body, put them in a tarp and haul them away.

"It's quite a traumatic thing, you know, to take someone else's life," Landolt said. "But it was all due to the military. It's just death either way you look at it."

Decades later, still haunted by the incident, Landolt is a pacifist

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speaking out against an impending drone operation that the Air



A Predator B unmanned aircraft taxis at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas. / Associated Press file photo



Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates stands by an unmanned aerial vehicle in Afghanistan in December 2008. Gates is backing lawmakers' proposal to form a special court to review President Barack Obama's deadly drone strikes against Americans linked to al-Qaida. / Associated press file photo

Force plans to establish in Des Moines by

2014.

Pilots with the 132nd Fighter Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard will operate the unmanned aircraft from a cockpit on the ground and out of harm's way at Des Moines International Airport. The remotely piloted aircraft will fly over places like Afghanistan and Pakistan to gather information, monitor safety for troops, and, about 1 percent of the time, drop bombs.

The drone program will nourish "this insatiable appetite out there for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering" while bringing "stability" to the wing after the F-16 fighter jets based there are removed due to military budget cuts, said Col. Drew DeHaes, the 132nd's commander. Drones will not be flown over Iowa, he said.

From Landolt's perspective, the new operation will turn Iowa "from 'Field of Dreams' into 'The Killing Fields.'"

The controversy over drones has escalated since a U.S. Justice Department memo, leaked earlier this month, provided legal basis for the Obama administration to use drones secretly to strike against American citizens suspected of being terrorists.

Almost 400 strikes have taken place since 2004 when the lethal use of drones was first authorized by President George W. Bush.

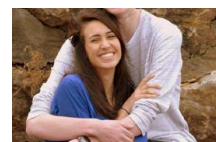
The number of civilian casualties from those strikes is unclear. John O. Brennan, President Obama's chief counterterrorism adviser and the president's nominee as head of the CIA, said last year that civilian casualties are "exceedingly rare," while the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London reports at least 473 civilian casualties in



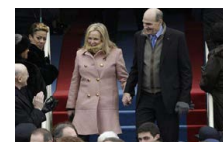
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Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, including 176 children.

Members of the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee last week delayed voting on Brennan's confirmation until more information about the White House's targeted killing policy is released. As scrutiny increases, lawmakers, military experts and critics are raising questions about the legal, ethical and psychological issues surrounding the use of drones, particularly against American citizens without due process.

There are no clear answers, as the growing debate over a legal yet highly controversial practice moves onto Iowa soil.

The problem is that drones are a nice way of turning war into a contest between robots, in which there is little risk to the American presence," said Mark Kende, director of Drake University's Constitutional Law Center. "I don't see that as illegal by any means, but if we don't have adequate due process, there's always the risk of error. The approach is problematic and shortsighted."

Dr. Nancy Sherman, an expert in military ethics based at Georgetown University, questions the lack of information coming from the government about civilian casualties. "It's hard to know who is and isn't a combatant and if the same people that have the kill list are the people counting the collateral injuries and killings, it's highly suspect," Sherman said.

But as knowledge of civilian casualties begins to surface, Dr. Charles Dobbs, a professor of military history at Iowa State University, asks how the "collateral damage" issue affects the world's opinion of the United States.

"I really wonder ethically where we stand in a world with drones," he said. "There are children growing up in parts of the world where the only way they know the United States is the thing flying over their heads. If we win this fight, are we losing a bigger fight?"

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Another question prompted by the use of drones is what the psychological toll is for a pilot in, say, Des Moines who pulls the trigger on a strike thousands of miles away.

About 30 jobs at the 132nd Fighter Wing will be lost when the F-16 program ends, but the new drone operation will increase fivefold the number of personnel who will have a visual link to war, as each mission will require a three-person team of a pilot, a surveillance operator and an intelligence coordinator.

They sit at their desk, go out for a coffee break, go out for lunch, pick up the kids, take them to soccer practice and go home at night," Dobbs said. "Throughout history, war is terrible, it's violent, it's painful. Real warriors don't talk about what they saw. I wonder what will happen to the people who are sitting with a joystick, who don't have time to flush it out and deal with the memories."

DeHaes, the 132nd Fighter Wing commander, said helping his personnel deal with seeing warfare on a screen and returning each night to the civilian world will be a priority. The wing currently has a psychological health director, and DeHaes has received authorization to bring on a full-time chaplain.

For F-16 pilots, it takes three years of getting mission-ready, getting used to the notion of what you do for a living," DeHaes said. But training for the drone operation can take as little as 3 1/2 months. "They can be thrust into it, and it might take a while to get used to it. We're making sure we stay on top of these issues."

Members of Iowa's congressional delegation did not take a stance on the use of drones in general, but expressed disappointment over the plan to retire the F-16s, and relief that the drone mission would replace it without too many jobs lost.

Rep. Tom Latham, R-Clive, whose district includes the 132nd, said remotely piloted

aircraft give the fighter wing “an opportunity to avoid a complete drawdown and closure of Air Guard operations in Des Moines. While not the outcome I had hoped for,” he said, the drone mission “could offer a positive repurposing” for the base.

The U.S. Air Force budget cuts announced last year would have resulted in the loss of 378 jobs among the 1,000 personnel in Des Moines. An amendment to the defense authorization bill for fiscal year 2013 by Rep. Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa City, “forced the Air Force to go back to the table and bring new missions to the 132nd,” said Loebsack aide Joe Hand, including the drones, an intelligence mission and a cyber security mission. Only about 30 jobs were ultimately cut and many Iowa airmen will be trained for new specialties.

Landolt, who heads the Des Moines-area chapter of Veterans for Peace, would have preferred the 132nd retire completely. “It wouldn’t be the first time we lost 1,000 jobs in Iowa,” he said. Instead, by welcoming the drone operation, he said, lowans are being tested, as he was decades ago.

“I think the moral fiber of the people in Iowa, and the type of people that we are, I don’t think that we really want to be part of that killing, because even though we may just be sitting there pushing buttons at the Des Moines airport, someone’s on the receiving end of that death and destruction,” Landolt said.

But DeHaes sees the drone mission as a way for the 132nd to evolve, as a new, albeit controversial, form of combat emerges. “As warfare changes, we’re willing to change with it.” he said.

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Protesters gather outside the Iowa Air National Guard base in Des Moines on Jan. 23 to oppose plans to create a military drone control center. / Catherine Lucey/Associated Press

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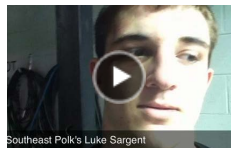
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