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## Waging peace at the drone convention

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

The future of war was on display last week at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas. There, the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International showed and sold the latest weapons of death -- drones, those unmanned fighter bombers currently used by the Obama administration to bomb children in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen. It was like a big, happy, drunken party for death. Fortunately, peacemakers took notice and held vigil and did what they could to call for the abolition of drones and war itself.

The 2012 convention featured 8,000 attendees, 500 exhibitors and representatives from 40 countries, according to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. But that didn't stop my friends Franciscan Frs. Louis Vitale and Jerry Zawada and CODEPINK co-founder Medea Benjamin from trying to enter the convention and staging a die-in right at the entrance.

"The convention was a celebration of killing technology," Medea told me on the phone afterward, "and they are so anxious to wrap all this in the veneer of humanitarian good, how drones can find lost children, for example. They say the drones can help, but it's a humanitarian cover. Inside the convention, it's all about military."

Medea knows what she is talking about. She has just published a powerful new book, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*.

"My book is about how we have to counter the image, offered by one government official, that these drones are 'surgically precise, just, ethical and wise,' " she said. "It looks into the legal and moral issues: What happens to the pilots who direct them; who produces the drones; how they kill people; how it has become a growth market and how counter-productive these drones actually are. They pose a real threat to

the rest of the world. We can go anywhere now to kill anyone on the basis of secret information. Why shouldn't other nations do the same thing, even to us?

"What was so clear at the convention," she told me, "was how much this industry is relying now on police departments. In the booklet for the convention, they had six booths about health care, 20 for the military and 25 for U.S. police departments. Much of the focus now is about how they are going to open up the U.S. air space to sell drones to the 18,000 U.S. police departments. The war is winding down, they say, and though the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will not really end, we need new markets. 'We need a domestic market for drones,' they say.

"We tried to rent a room in the convention center so that I could give a talk about my book, but they wouldn't let us rent a room, even though there were many empty rooms," Medea said. "So I decided to register as a journalist, and paid the \$200 registration fee, to learn what's happening. But they wouldn't let me register. I was standing on line when security guards came up and told me to come with them. Five minutes later, the security came up to Fr. Louie. They knew our names. In a hallway, Louie and I were surrounded by security guards and Las Vegas police, who thought we were a threat. They told us that if we ever entered the convention center again, they would arrest us.

"The drone convention was clearly all about making money," she continued. "We saw how the entire industry is being fed by U.S. tax dollars. It would be impossible without that. Several billion dollars of homeland security money may go to help sell drones to local police departments. They make it sound like free enterprise at its best, but the whole thing is heavily subsidized by government money, taxpayers' money. That reinforces the idea that the convention should be open to the public since the public is paying for it. And yet they are so afraid of people who advocate for peace. Peace is bad for their business."

The next day, Medea, the two Franciscans and a dozen or so friends staged a "die-in" in front of the convention center. They laid down on the sidewalk and covered themselves with white sheets that had red paint poured on them so the sheets looked blood-stained. Large signs were placed around them that read, "The victims of drone attacks in Afghanistan" or "Pakistan" or "Yemen" or "Iraq." A model of a drone was placed in the center that read, "Killer Drone." It, too, had red paint on it, making it look like blood was dripping all over it.

"They didn't know what to do with us," Medea told me. "People walked by and took pictures. We were very quiet, with bloody sheets lying over us. We spoke, too, saying that we represented the innocent victims of these weapons, and that we shouldn't glorify weapons used to kill innocent people. After a while, we stood up, gathered in a circle, and Fr. Louie led us in prayer. By then, the hotel security guards and local police had arrived. They threatened to arrest us, so we left."

What can we do? I asked Medea.

"People need to engage their communities in an open discussion about the ethics and morality of drone warfare, particularly in the faith based community," she said. "At the moment, we are asking faith-based leaders to join our sign-on letter campaign. We're also asking people to contact their congresspeople and express their concerns about drones, especially since they are managed by the CIA, a secretive organization. We are calling for 'no-drone' resolutions at city councils across the country and asking people to contact their local police department to inquire about their intentions for acquiring drones and to express their concerns about privacy. We also want people to start organizing protests at every local drone headquarters, at Air Force bases, universities that work with the military, businesses that work with drones, and think tanks that support drones. These demonstrations need to be stepped up. Every state in the U.S. now has a strong relationship with a drone program. We need to organize significant protests against these drones.

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"According to recent legislation, the FAA has to open U.S. airspace to drones by 2015, so within the next decade, we will be seeing 20,000 drones in our own airspace. It's up to us to set some standards to protect our privacy as well as our safety."

As a co-founder and director of CODEPINK, one of the largest, most active peace organizations in the U.S., Medea Benjamin has given her life to the abolition of war. Currently, CODEPINK has about 160,000 members, and its members are very involved with the Occupy movement across the country.

"Polls show the majority of Americans support the use of drones against terrorist suspects who have never been convicted of anything. In 10 years of killing thousands of people, mostly by drones, most Americans have never seen a drone victim. They've never seen anyone killed by these lethal machines. It makes it hard for Americans to develop a sense of compassion for the victims if you never see the victims, and if you are told by the government that they are all militants. It's our job to humanize the victims, to get these pictures out to people, and their stories out to people."

Over the last few years, she has been in close touch with people in Pakistan. Some of them said to her, "When women and children are being killed in northern Pakistan, the local people think this is what the American people want. If this is not true," they said, "we have to show them." How can we do that? Medea asked. They suggested a joint peace march with Americans and thousands of Pakistanis into northern Pakistan, the area most targeted by U.S. drones.

So next month, Medea is flying to Pakistan with other CODEPINK women, and on Sept. 21, International Peace Day, they will journey into the remote rural northern area and march for peace with thousands of local Pakistanis.

"If the government prevents us from traveling up there, then the drone victims and their families will travel to Islamabad to meet with us," she said.

"We need to reinvigorate the peace movement," Medea said. "It's absolutely critical. There are many reasons why the peace movement is a shell of its former self, but one reason is partisan politics. Peace people are more likely to criticize a Republican administration than a Democratic administration. If we're going to be effective, we have to be independent from partisan politics, and criticize the Obama drone policy as much as Bush's indefinite detention policy at Guantanamo. If we can help people with their local needs, and connect their needs for jobs, housing, health care and affordable education with the huge amount of money that continues to go to the Pentagon, we can build the movement again."

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John Dear will speak Aug. 22 at the spirituality festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Aug. 26-28 near London at the annual Greenbelt Festival before embarking on a national speaking tour of England. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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