The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, to attack members of ISIS and AL-Qaeda has been the subject of considerable debate, which has only intensified since release of a new documentary on the subject. Supporters argue that the weapons allow the U.S. to kill its enemies without risking the lives of American soldiers, that they are far more precise than other weapons systems, and that they, therefore, do far less collateral damage. Critics insist that they make it too easy to kill from a distance, that they cause far more civilian casualties than the government admits and that anger over them fuels terrorism. Whatever side one side takes, it is important to realize that this is a very old debate.

New weapons, especially those that have allowed military personnel to kill from a safe distance, have always been controversial. In the fourteenth century, French knights railed against the immorality of the English long bow, which allowed a commoner to knock a knight off his horse at over 100 yards. When cannon appeared on the battlefields of Europe, the Vatican imposed a ban of excommunication on artillerymen as punishment for employing their infernal machines, which killed civilians during sieges. In the early days of the First World War, the allies railed against the immorality of submarines, which could sink ships without warning. Anger over the sinking of the luxury liner Lusitania helped propel the U.S. toward war with Germany. Few at the time realized that the ship had been carrying military supplies and was thus arguably a legitimate target. Outrage lasted until the allies developed their own submarines. Manned bombers capable of leveling cities also provoked moral outrage, which did nothing to stop both sides using them with devastating effect during World War II.

Drones are thus but the latest in a long line of weapons deemed “immoral” by some and “necessary by others.” The debate over the new technology is, however, complicated by several factors. The U.S. is fighting a complex network of terrorist groups rather than a foreign state. Precise data on the death and destruction unmanned aerial vehicles cause is hard to get. Washington has been able to confirm the deaths of numerous terrorist leaders, but is less clear on civilian loss of life. The argument that drone strikes fuel terrorism rests on the dubious assumption that terrorist attacks would diminish if the drone program ceased. The terrorists do not just hate us for our weapons. It also must be noted that both AL-Qaeda in 2001 and ISIS today have intended to draw the U.S. into a costly ground war, so of course they hate weapons that allow the Pentagon to fight them without suffering casualties.

The debate on drones may never be resolved, primarily because it is the wrong debate. Rather than focus on the morality of a weapons system, discussion should consider how and why it is being employed. As one analyst observed, the problem is not the drones themselves but the faulty intelligence upon which some strikes have been based. There is also the undeniable fact that drones kill far fewer people than cruise missiles or manned bombers. This does not mean that they should be used indiscriminately, but it does commend them as a weapon of choice in some circumstances. History
suggests that new weapons do not go away because people do not like them. That lesson suggests that our efforts would be better spent trying to prevent conflicts whenever possible and bring them to a swift conclusion when that fails rather than debating whether one killing machine is more ethical than another.