

New course challenges ethics of war weapon technology

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Imagine a United States whose soldiers are biologically enhanced for efficiency and whose wars are fought with drones and lethal autonomous robots.

College students today have never lived in a country not in conflict.

Psychology professor Charles Pence recognized the significance of warfare education and is offering a new course for the spring, “Ethics of Emerging Weapons Technologies” that evaluates and challenges the morals surrounding the forthcoming realm of warfare technologies.

Offering this course at the University this spring makes it the second class on ethics of emerging weapons technology in the U.S. as of yet. Pence created the course with retired Air Force Major General Robert Latiff while teaching at the University of Notre Dame.

Key topics in this course include types of emerging weapons such as drones, robotic systems, non-lethal weapons, cyberwarfare, bioenhancement, and data mining, positions on ethics of peace and war, the Law of Armed Conflict and normative ethical theories.

Pence said students should take this course regardless of their fields of study because of the societal implications.

“These are topics that I think are relevant to anyone who’s a member of contemporary society,” Pence said. “As Michael Walzer once wrote, parodying Trotsky, ‘You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.’”

The intent for the class, Pence said, is to expose the students and challenge the current mindset.

“There’s no settled philosophical dogma about these questions — they’re too recent and too complicated,” Pence said. “Rather, what we learn are the tools that you need to be able to decide for yourself how to approach these issues.”

Though ethical guidelines for warfare have remained useful through various wars in the past, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wars of the present already look dramatically different. The class will encourage a focus on which ethical frameworks may need to change and how.

“We’re dropping more bombs on Pakistan — who we’re not at war with — than we did in the initial phases of the Kosovo conflict,” Pence said. “Why doesn’t Pakistan count as a war? What does that shift in perspective say about our perceptions of war?”

Pence said the questions and challenges evaluated in the class are not only central to the direction and future of the military, but to American society.