

US acquires ninth Predator drone to patrol borders

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Last week, the US Customs and Border Patrol acquired its ninth Predator unmanned surveillance drone aircraft. This is the fourth drone that will be based and flown out of Sierra Vista, Arizona. Two others are already based in Corpus Christi, Texas. Together, these drones continuously patrol a several-thousand-mile area from California to Louisiana.

Three more drones are based in the northern part of the country and patrol the skies from Washington to Minnesota. All of these aircraft are identical to the ones used by the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Equipped with sophisticated night vision and infrared surveillance equipment, these drones are capable of cruising continuously for 30 hours and can identify vehicles and people from an altitude of 50,000 feet while their operators control them from a base thousands of miles away. They can also be outfitted with a weapons payload of up to 3,000 pounds, though none of the domestic Predators have been armed—so far.

The domestic unmanned aircraft program began in 2005 under the Bush administration but has expanded rapidly under President Obama. In 2010, Obama's appointee to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Randy Babbitt, worked to expedite his agency's approval for drone flights over the state of Texas. Most of the recent drones were purchased as specific earmarked requests included in Obama's \$600 million supplemental border security package passed last year.

While the administration proclaims that there is no money for education, health care, or social programs, the price tag of each aircraft is more than \$20 million. With maintenance costs included, the Government Accounting Office estimates that a quarter of a billion dollars has been spent on the program, which does not include the drones' estimated operating costs of \$3,234

per hour.

The border patrol claims to have detained 238 drug smugglers and 4,865 undocumented immigrants as a result of the program. If those numbers are correct, it would mean that more than \$7,000 was spent for each person arrested.

Although it is claimed that the drones are only used for border security, there is no existing mechanism to guarantee that must be the case. The Customs and Border Patrol agency itself has broad authority to investigate and make arrests in the interior of the country. Moreover, they are an agency subordinate to the Department of Homeland Security, which claims an unlimited jurisdiction. Given that these aircraft have an operational radius of thousands of miles, there is virtually no portion of the country that is not subject to potential aerial surveillance.

The official justification for this unprecedented use of technology is that it is necessary to fight against the alleged escalation of threats by drug smugglers operating south of the border. This claim is as dishonest as it is false. Between the US government, the Mexican government, and the drug cartels, there exists a relationship that is less adversarial than commonly presented.

Even though these groups sometimes step on each other's toes, the fact is that agencies within the American intelligence apparatus have longstanding ties with the cartels (whose profits from the drug trade are often laundered through legitimate banks and financial institutions in the US, especially in Southern California and Miami) and are willing to work together for information gathering, arms trafficking, assassinations, and off-the-books financial transactions.

More important, however, is the fact that the use of military-style spy aircraft at home is only the most

recent example of the militarization of domestic law enforcement agencies. This process is a trend that runs concurrent with the policy of social reaction increasingly turned to by the ruling elite since the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The period of relative class compromise having coming to an end, the forces of the state more and more were coming into conflict with a population increasingly hostile to the attacks being leveled against it. Under these conditions, the political establishment has turned to a policy of police repression and widespread imprisonment.

While incarceration rates in the United States held relatively steady from the 1930s through the 1970s, increasing only slightly during this time frame, the 1980s and 1990s saw these rates skyrocket to record levels, quadrupling during this period and still rising today. Today, 3.1 percent of all U.S. adults are currently under correctional supervision, with minorities and the most impoverished layers of the population disproportionately represented.

Under these conditions, maintaining even the pretense of a purely civilian police force, whose ostensible function is to serve and protect the constitutional rights of the citizenry, became impossible.

In the early 1980s, the Regan administration signed into law the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act, which dramatically expanded the armed forces' participation in and collaboration with what were previously entirely civilian law enforcement matters. This was an historic erosion of the 1878 Posse Comitatus act, which had hitherto restricted the military in these affairs. With the precedent therefore set, by the end of the decade the Department of Defense would be spending more than \$1 billion annually on providing information and operational support to federal police.

In the 1990s, the cumulative effect of more than a decade of social reaction provoked new conflicts between the working class and the police. Events such as the Los Angeles riots, the Waco siege, and the Seattle WTO protests demonstrated that the maintenance of bourgeois rule would require new tools of repression.

Thus, beginning in 1994, a series of laws were passed authorizing the Pentagon to donate surplus military

equipment to local police departments, including grenade launchers, armored personnel carriers, bayonets, tanks, helicopters and other aircraft. The influx of surplus army equipment has facilitated the rise of the police as a paramilitary unit and the expansion of SWAT deployments.

Still more significant than the change in equipment is the destruction of even the most basic constitutional protections against police intrusion. Constant subjection to arbitrary searches and seizures has become an expected part of the daily life of the country. The "sanctity" of a person's home is now but a quaint notion as police routinely break down doors on the flimsiest of justifications.

Indeed, the very psychology of law enforcement has undergone a profound transformation perhaps best exemplified by the current terminology: the 2009 stimulus bill refers to police stations near the border as "forward operating bases," and officers in the field are given "rules of engagement."

The distinction between the military and the police is now blurred from both ends. The recent passage of the National Defense Authorization Act allows the military to arrest and indefinitely detain American citizens on American soil, while police agencies operate military-style tanks and spy planes also against American citizens on American soil.

Both of these organizations exist primarily to protect a financial aristocracy that has enormously enriched itself over the last few decades and now views domestic opposition as a threat to its wealth and privileges to be dealt with in a similar fashion to insurgents in occupied countries abroad.



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