

Drone squadron planned for Niagara Falls Air Force base

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The US Air Force is proposing the installation of a drone squadron at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station (NFARS) in Niagara Falls, New York. The base, which houses the 107th Airlift Wing of the Air National Guard and the 914th Airlift Wing of the Air Force Reserve, has been under repeated threat of closure since 2005. This new “mission” is being touted as a long-term lifeline to the base and the nearly 3,000 military and civilian workers employed there.

The base is the sole military installation in the region, generating \$131 million worth of economic activity annually in the local economy. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security announced earlier this year plans for the eventual construction of a new border patrol station at the base.

The drone proposal is part of a revised Air National Guard structure change proposed by the US Air Force. It comes after an earlier proposal by the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, which would have shuttered the 107th and other units nationwide, was rejected by Congress.

On November 9, Air Force officials briefed Capitol Hill staffers on the possibility of locating a “Remote Split Operations Squadron,” a euphemism for the highly unpopular drone program, at NFARS. There is still no official word as to whether the plan will move forward, but Air Force officials did say that they wanted some proposal for the base included in the annual defense authorization bill that will go before Congress next year.

New York’s Democratic senator Charles Schumer characterized the possibility of the installation of a drone base at NFARS as “a very big step forward.” He added, “drones are the future.”

Former congresswoman Kathy Hochul of western New York invited Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to

tour the base last August. Hochul, a Democrat, gushed over the potential of the base to serve as a center of military intelligence and research. “We have 80,000 miles of fiber optics in this region,” she said. “So when they talk about the military of the future, cyber security, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, we’re there and we’re ready.”

Also on hand during Panetta’s visit were Schumer, Democratic representative Brian Higgins of Buffalo, and Robert Duffy, the Democratic lieutenant governor.

Speaking before an audience of approximately 200 Air Force reservists, Air National Guard members and civilian air base employees, Panetta said that they would be considered for future missions, including those involving intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and other new technologies. “I know that many of you and many members of this community obviously are concerned about the future and are concerned about yourselves and your families for the future,” he stated, “but I want you to know that I am committed to do everything I can to fight for your interest.”

While the reservists, guard members, and other employees are indeed concerned about their economic well-being, the installation of a drone base in the region is being carried out in an atmosphere of fiscal bribery and with a media blitz meant to silence and intimidate opposition to the proposal.

NFARS is located in Niagara County, with a population of just over 200,000 people. Its urban center is the city of Niagara Falls. The county as a whole has a poverty rate of approximately 8 percent, while the city’s rate is nearly 20 percent. The official unemployment rate is around 10 percent for the county, and 11.5 percent for the city. The median income for families in Niagara Falls is \$26,800.

Niagara Falls is also facing a fiscal crisis due to an impasse between the Seneca Nation of Indians and New York State over casino gambling operations. The Senecas, who operate a major casino in the city, are withholding tens of millions of dollars in payments to Niagara Falls because the state is operating gambling facilities in contravention to a pact that guarantees exclusive rights to casino operations to New York tribes. The state has authorized an emergency loan to the city from the New York Power Authority, which pays the city an annual fee to operate there.

Buffalo, the largest city in the western New York region, is located 20 miles south of Niagara Falls in Erie County. It has an official unemployment rate of nearly 11 percent, more than 26 percent of the population lives under the poverty line, and the median household income is just over \$24,500.

NFARS, therefore, is important to the economy of the region. Repeated threats to close the base have led to fears of further economic distress and population decline, both of which have been on the rise in the region since the deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s. Buffalo and Niagara Falls were both major manufacturing centers, especially of steel and related industries. The loss of these jobs led to economic decline and large numbers of people leaving the region in search of better employment opportunities.

Much is being made in the media of the more than 500 jobs that would be created by the new mission. However, the program, which will further entrench the use of drones abroad and domestically, actually creates a net loss of jobs at the air base. There are approximately 845 people currently working in the unit that will be assigned to the new mission, including 580 part-time Guard members; therefore, 345 people will lose their jobs.

In June, Senator Schumer proposed a research partnership between the University at Buffalo (UB) and the Air Force, citing three areas of “Western New York Expertise”: improving military medical evacuation technology, developing “cutting-edge” intelligence and surveillance, and bolstering border management. UB’s Center for Unified Biometrics is currently working on border security projects, including technologies involving biometrics, vehicle classification, and non-intrusive vehicular occupant recognition.

Such a partnership will further ensnare the economy

of the region into the growing militarization of the country as a whole. UB is another of the region’s major employers and is integral to the area’s economy.

Schumer commented that “the most promising work is related to the use of unmanned drones for intelligence and surveillance.” He cited the enormous volume of raw data collected from unmanned aerial drones, including high-definition video streams, thermal imagery, and audio data. For this information to be useful, and to produce “complete pictures for decision making,” the scientific resources of research universities such as UB must be enlisted.

His is the position of politicians in both of the big business political parties, Democrats and Republicans alike. The vast majority of the American population, on the other hand, view drones with a combination of suspicion and horror, recognizing their use in the murders of innocent civilians abroad, and the extrajudicial killings of American citizens. People also recognize their likely use in spying on Americans domestically, as well as in putting down popular uprisings that will inevitably occur in the not too distant future.



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