

# FBI spy planes used in police-military operation against Baltimore protests

Thomas Gaist  
7 May 2015

The Federal Bureau of Investigation arranged for at least two surveillance aircraft to patrol over Baltimore during recent mass demonstrations against the police killing of Freddie Gray, according to watchdog reports cited by the *Washington Post*.

Two small planes flew carefully planned routes over crowds assembled in West Baltimore during the mass demonstrations against the police murder, according to flight records from a third party called Flightradar 24, cited by the *Post*.

An unnamed source said the planes were equipped with infrared technology designed to track the movements of individual human beings on the ground. The Baltimore Police Department deferred all inquiries on the matter to the FBI, which has refused to comment.

Thus far, the US government has rejected demands by the ACLU and other civil liberties groups for an explanation of the domestic spying operation. The extended aerial surveillance operation only came to light as a result of personal investigations by citizens who noticed unusual airplane activity overhead.

It remains unclear precisely what other forms of technology outside of infrared surveillance were onboard the aircraft. One could assume, however, that the monitoring of crowd movements was used to help coordinate the military response against protesters, much like satellite, drone and other airborne technologies do for battlefield operations in Afghanistan or Iraq. Known technologies used by the government include mass cell phone data capture, high-resolution photography and facial recognition.

An unnamed US official who spoke with the *Post* confirmed the use of federal “surveillance assets” in support of the military-police mobilization in Baltimore. The FBI deployed the planes to bolster the

surveillance assets deployed by the city’s own police agencies, the *Post* source said.

Government aviation watchdogs had previously tracked one of the planes used in the operation while it was making unexplained patrols around Langley, Virginia, the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The revelations have highlighted the increasing deployment of militarized spying technologies and urban warfare techniques, honed by US military forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, against the American people.

Private spying firms with ties to the US government, such as Persistent Surveillance Systems, have developed airborne surveillance technologies on behalf of the government that are capable of recording huge areas, up to 25-square-miles of urban environment at a time. Persistent CEO Ross McNutt noted that standard scale aerial surveillance technology used by the government records high-resolution footage of urban environments simultaneously across five city blocks, at a minimum.

In response to the eruption of social outrage after the April 20 funeral of police murder victim Freddie Gray, the state’s Republican governor declared a “state of emergency” and deployed thousands of National Guard troops and militarized police units. The city’s Democratic mayor also imposed a 10 pm-5 a.m. curfew.

Humvees, armored vehicles, helicopters and fixed wing aircraft were put into operation by state and federal security forces as part of a coordinated plan to suppress the demonstrations. Gatherings of discontented, unarmed civilians were subjected to a barrage of “non-lethal” weaponry and hundreds were arrested.

The crackdown in Baltimore proceeded in line with doctrines drawn up by the US Defense Department in its “Graduated Defense Matrix,” which lays out tactics for the military suppression of large-scale demonstrations.

The operation in Baltimore was a further test of martial law-style operations. Previous exercises took place in connection with the lockdown in Boston in 2013 and last year’s suppression of protests against the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Ferguson is a small suburb of St. Louis, but Baltimore is a city of 622,000, located just 40 miles from Washington, DC.

During the Baltimore protests various career police officers boasted on CNN that federal and state law enforcement agencies had “intelligence assets” among the crowds in Baltimore. The police also said they were monitoring social media to track protests.

The military operation in Baltimore is the latest indication of the advanced preparations for military rule in America. Politically isolated, incapable of and opposed to any measures to ameliorate the conditions of grinding poverty and immense social inequality in America, the ruling class looks upon the masses of workers and youth with hatred and fear. It has recently been revealed that paramilitary forces referred to protesters in Ferguson last year as “enemy forces.”

The operation in Baltimore is part of an expanding program of “persistent surveillance.” According to the ACLU, new technologies, using sophisticated high-tech version of radar that is “akin to a camera” to track movements in detail across an immense territory, have been deployed or are in development,

Massive US army blimps were launched over Maryland last year as part of the JLENS (Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System) program. The blimps, priced at over \$1 billion, can gather high resolution imagery from all directions at a range of over 300 miles, and this data can then be synced with military’s targeting systems, giving the two specialized aircraft the capacity to identify targets and direct precision strikes across territories as large as Texas.

The blimps can identify and track hundreds of vehicles at the same time, and recent upgrades have enabled them to spot targets at night and “paint” targets with the laser designators used to guide “smart bombs”

onto their targets.

The Pentagon’s Persistent Ground Surveillance aircraft has hovered over Afghanistan’s capital of Kabul for years as the US neocolonial occupation force sought to “pacify” the country. “If you put a camera in a sky over an area where you expect a lot of unrest, the area will calm down,” a former US Air Force officer explained in comments to the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC).

Even though the tracking technology is being used against a huge portion of the most densely populated area in the United States, the Obama administration claims it poses no threat to privacy protections and democratic rights established in US and international law. “JLENS does not operate under privacy rules,” a representative from the company stated bluntly. The company and US government maintain that because the blimps do not intercept communications content, they do not pose any legal problems.

As the *Washington Post* acknowledged this week, such technologies frequently track “the movements of people under no suspicion of criminal activity.”

Facing an increasing restive and angry working class—as demonstrated in the protests sparked by police killings, poverty and inequality in Baltimore and around the country—the ruling elite is increasingly employing military methods to “pacify” workers and youth in the US.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**