

Baltimore police conducted privately-funded aerial surveillance of city for nine months

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The Baltimore Police Department (BPD) has been secretly conducting mass video aerial surveillance of the city since January. The program, funded entirely out of the pockets of a former hedge fund trader, was kept secret from the public and city officials until its existence was revealed by Bloomberg News late last month.

For up to 10 hours a day, a Cessna airplane equipped with a system of a dozen cameras captured video of an area spanning 32 square miles, which was transmitted in real time to a command center near BPD headquarters. To date, the program has amassed 300 hours of footage.

“[This] is a privacy nightmare come to life and precisely what we have warned against for years,” said David Rocah, senior staff attorney at American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Maryland. “It’s the equivalent of requiring each of us to wear a GPS tracker whenever we leave our homes...”

The technology, owned by the company Persistent Surveillance Systems (PSS), was originally developed by the Department of Defense for use in the Iraq War and was deployed in 2007. Then known as Angel Fire, the system was pitched as “Google Earth with [rewind] capability” and was used to identify and track not only individuals, but their whole social networks.

“This is a technology that promises to do for our physical movements what the NSA [National Security Agency] has aimed to do with our communications: collect it all,” said Jay Stanley, senior policy analyst and privacy expert at the American Civil Liberties Union.

The revelations come just two weeks after the Department of Justice (DoJ) found that the BPD engaged in systemic violations of the Constitution and federal law. Rocah noted that it was “astounding” that

the BPD could conduct a mass surveillance program while under investigation by the DoJ—an investigation which did not devote a single word to the program’s existence. On the contrary, the BPD and PSS operated with the unequivocal assent of the DoJ: the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which is under the DoJ’s jurisdiction, flew their own surveillance planes concurrently with PSS planes.

The \$120,000 behind the BPD’s contract was advanced by John Arnold, the billionaire founder of hedge fund Centaurus Advisors, and his wife, Laura Arnold. The noble causes that the self-styled “philanthropists” have pumped vast sums of money behind include the destruction of public worker pensions and the privatization of public education.

Ross McNutt, Angel Fire’s developer and CEO of PSS, explained that he and his sponsors chose the city of Baltimore “because it was ready, it was willing, and it was just post-Freddie Gray,” referring to the widespread protests and isolated rioting that erupted in the wake of the youth’s murder by police. The expression of mass anger in Baltimore was met by the paramilitary lockdown of the city with the deployment of thousands of National Guard troops.

McNutt retired from the Air Force and began marketing a commercial version of the Angel Fire system in 2007. In 2012, the system was demonstrated to the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, secretly surveilling the impoverished working-class city of Compton for nine days. PSS charges \$1,500 to \$2,000 per hour for services; one long-term contract with an American police department costs \$2 million a year.

Shortly following the program’s exposure, the BPD held a press conference absurdly claiming that the work with PSS was “not a secret spy program” and that, after

almost nine months of operating in shadowed silence, “there was no conspiracy not to disclose it.” Attempting to assuage public anger, the BPD and McNutt claimed that the surveillance was only a “trial” which had only “a few weeks” left before ending. The program would be resumed in October to cover large events—the same time that the 2016 presidential election comes to a head.

The BPD is no stranger to mass surveillance. The BPD has been in possession of cell-site simulators since 2007, which impersonate cell phone towers and are used to collect, disrupt, and falsify communication on cellular networks. According to publicly available information, the BPD uses cell-site simulator technology far more frequently than any other police department in the country.

City officials, despite having been ostensibly left in the dark about the program, did not hesitate to rally to its defence. “This technology is about public safety. This isn’t surveilling or tracking anyone,” said Democrat Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, perhaps also still unaware that the company conducting the operations calls itself *Persistent Surveillance Systems*. According to Rawlings-Blake, the city’s own working population poses a greater danger to “public safety”—in the aftermath of Gray’s murder she denounced Baltimore youth as “thugs” and “criminals” responsible for “destroying your city.”

Baltimore, as with other American centers of industry, has been scarred and left crumbling by a decades-long assault against the city’s jobs and living standards. The city has lost 300,000 of its residents to depopulation since 1950. Some 84 percent of the city’s public school students cannot afford a school lunch, and life expectancies in the poorest areas of the city are lower than those in North Korea and Syria.

The spying operations in Baltimore are only preliminary models for future repressive measures against the working class. Leashed to an outmoded economic system based on the accumulation of private wealth, the vast creative and connective potential of modern technology is channeled to defend the interests of private capital at the expense of social need. The defense of democratic rights is inextricably linked to the liberation of mankind’s productive forces—to the struggle for socialism.



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