

Google providing US Department of Homeland Security with tech platform for virtual border wall

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According to documents published recently by the Intercept, Google is now working with the Trump administration on a high-tech surveillance project being developed at the US-Mexico border.

The documents—related to a federal contract with the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) division of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—show that Google is providing cloud services as part of the artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure for a virtual southern border wall. The Intercept report describes the virtual wall as a combination of “surveillance towers and drones, blanketing an area with sensors to detect unauthorized entry into the country.”

CBP is developing its Autonomous Surveillance Towers program with automated surveillance operations “24 hours per day, 365 days per year” that can “identify items of interest, such as people or vehicles.” The system is based on a series of high resolution and infrared cameras that the US government claims are a “true force multiplier for CBP, enabling Border Patrol agents to remain focused on their interdiction mission rather than operating surveillance systems.”

The Intercept reports that Google is quietly providing the cloud AI services through a third-party contracting firm called Thundercat Technology. This relationship is confirmed from a redacted contracting document that had been obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request by a research firm called Tech Inquiry that was founded by former Google research scientist Jack Paulson.

The Virginia-based Thundercat Technology is a shell company that specializes in reselling the information technology services of other companies in US government contracts. According to the website of Thundercat Technologies, the firm “is unique in that we work with

many different agencies across the DoD, Civilian, and Intelligence communities.” Among its many US government customers are the FBI, the Department of Defense, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Defense Information Systems Agency.

The DHS services contract—signed on Aug. 27—shows that Thundercat Technologies is providing “Cloud support services for INVNT team” of CBP. Very little public information is available about INVNT, which stands for “Innovation Team,” a special department within CBP devoted to the implementation of “disruptive” and “cutting edge” commercial high-tech solutions.

Although the specifics of Google services on the virtual wall project are not known, the Intercept has also published a 10-page statement of work document entitled “Google Cloud for INVNT” from a previous agreement that goes back to April 2016. This document shows that Google’s AI platform and Internet of Things (IoT) cloud technology has been integrated with advanced camera imaging hardware.

The document says, “Google Cloud Platform (GCP) will be utilized for doing innovation projects for CI’s INVNT team like next generation IoT, NLP (Natural Language Processing), Language Translation and Andril [sic] image camera and any other future looking project for CBP. The GCP has unique product features which will help to execute on the mission needs.”

As pointed out by the Intercept, the reference to Anduril (misspelled as Andril in the Google Cloud document) is highly significant. The report says that Anduril Industries “operates sentry towers along the U.S.-Mexico border that are used by CBP for surveillance and apprehension of people entering the country, streamlining the process of putting migrants in DHS custody.”

Additionally, Anduril is a startup defense technology contractor founded by 28-year-old Palmer Luckey, an extreme right-wing supporter of President Trump and open advocate of collaboration between big tech and the US military. The Intercept says the company's virtual wall system "works by rapidly identifying anyone approaching or attempting to cross the border (or any other perimeter), relaying their exact location to border authorities on the ground, offering a relatively cheap, technocratic, and less politically fraught means of thwarting would-be migrants."

Anduril also sells to the US government "intelligent air support" with its Ghost 4 autonomous small unmanned aircraft system (sUAS). The Anduril website says Ghost 4 is "modular, man-portable, waterproof, and combines long endurance, high payload capacity and a near-silent acoustic signature for a wide variety of mission capabilities." It also "is designed and manufactured in the US to meet the needs of our military users," and "provides real-time surveillance, intelligence, and reconnaissance capabilities, creating a clearer common operating picture which enables service men and women make more informed decisions."

The Ghost 4's UAS drones operate in conjunction with the Anduril "Sentry Towers" which, according to the Intercept, "bundle cameras, radar antennae, lasers, and other sophisticated sensors atop an 80-foot pole. Surveillance imagery from both the camera-toting drones and sensor towers is ingested into 'Lattice,' Anduril's artificial intelligence software platform, where the system automatically flags suspicious objects in the vicinity, like cars or people."

It is clear that the Thundercat Technology contract enables Anduril to plug its surveillance image data gathering systems into the AI and deep learning systems of Google Cloud services. Among the capabilities of Google's Natural Language tool, for example, is "to reveal the structure and meaning of text ... [and] extract information about people, places, and events." According to company marketing materials, this technology can be paired with Google's speech-to-text transcription software "to extract insights from audio conversations."

Through its contract with DHS, Google is working directly with those in the tech industry who, like Anduril, are open advocates for the use of advanced systems for war and the anti-immigrant agenda of the Trump administration. The Intercept report says CEO Palmer Luckey has personally donated "at least \$1.7 million to Republican candidates this cycle. On Sunday, he hosted

President Donald Trump at his home in Orange County, Calif., for a high-dollar fundraiser."

Anduril also counts among its investors Peter Thiel, a right-wing venture capitalist who functions as a tech advisor to Donald Trump and who is also an investor in the IT firm Palantir, a top provider of IT and big data mining solutions for US intelligence agencies.

Palmer Luckey has been vocally hostile to the opposition among Google employees to the collaboration between the tech giant and the US military. When Google employees forced company management to abort a contract with the US Defense Department's Project Maven in 2018, Luckey accused the company of "abandoning the Pentagon." He went on to say that Google permitted "a fringe inside of their own company" to allow foreign adversaries to adopt superior AI military capabilities to the US.

Exposing the extreme nationalist views prevalent among this layer of American tech executives, in 2019 Luckey said the following about the employees who signed the petition objecting to the Project Maven contract: "You have Chinese nationals working in the Google London office signing this letter, of course they don't mind if the United States has good military technology. Of course, they don't mind if China has better technology. They're Chinese. They're not going to have any loyalty."

The revelation that Google is developing AI for a CBP border surveillance system—and working with companies like Anduril—makes clear that the fight to stop advanced technologies from being deployed for repressive and military warfare purposes requires a political struggle against the entire capitalist system and for socialism.



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