

Drones Come to the US

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A little-noted amendment to a \$63 billion Federal Aviation Authority appropriations bill has ominous implications for democratic rights in the United States.

President Barack Obama signed the bill, the “FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012”, into law on February 14. It clears the way for a vast expansion of the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, over US territory.

The legislation, passed earlier this month, underscores the link between the explosive growth of US militarism abroad and the steady advance of police state repression at home.

Drones have become infamous the world over as instruments of US military aggression and assassination in the “global war on terror”. Their use has expanded exponentially over the last decade. In 2001, the US military arsenal included barely 50 drones. Now, it has a fleet of some 7,500, ranging from small Raven drones, used for surveillance, to the better known Predators and Reapers, capable of hovering unseen over human targets for up to 28 hours and firing Hellfire missiles with devastating effect.

Just last month, Obama publicly praised what had ostensibly been a covert drone war against Pakistan, though the Pakistani people themselves were well aware who was responsible for the death raining down upon impoverished villages in the country’s tribal areas. The drone strikes have dramatically escalated during the Obama administration. They have claimed nearly 2,700 victims since 2004, the great majority of them unarmed men, women and children.

Drones have been employed in carrying out CIA killings in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere. Their targets have included US citizens, like the New Mexico-born Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was condemned to death at the direction of the US president, without ever being charged or a shred of evidence presented against him in a court of law.

These massacres and assassinations are carried out by remote-control, with CIA and military operatives targeting their victims on computer screens from cubicles in the Nevada desert and offices near Langley, Virginia.

Now this technology is coming home. The legislation signed last week by Obama requires the FAA, within 90 days, to expedite the process through which government agencies are able to secure permission to operate their own drones over US soil. Smaller drones must be cleared for operation by any “government public safety agency” almost immediately. Within six months, the FAA must establish a pilot program to integrate drones into the “national airspace system” in six test areas around the country.

By 2020 an estimated 30,000 drones could be operating in US skies—including military, police and corporate-owned UAVs. They are already in use by the Department of Homeland Security in monitoring US borders.

A key driving force behind the legislation was the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, whose members include such giants of the military-industrial complex as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman and Raytheon, and whose lobbyists reportedly wrote the language of the bill. The market for drones already approaches \$6 billion annually and is expected to double over the next ten years.

In the first instance, this proliferation of drones sets the stage for a vast expansion of state spying upon American citizens. Drones can carry sophisticated surveillance equipment capable of not only photographing and video-recording every step taken by individuals once they leave their homes, but also intercepting electronic communications and cellphone calls.

“Drones give the government and other (UAV) operators a powerful new surveillance tool to gather extensive and intrusive data on Americans’ movements and activities,” Jennifer Lynch, staff attorney for the Electronic Freedom Foundation warned last month as the EFF filed a lawsuit demanding data on authorizations already granted by the government for drone use in US airspace.

Moreover, there is no reason to believe that drones inside the United States will not be armed, putting to use within the United States the experience the US government has obtained from its killing spree in Pakistan and the assassination of Awlaki. In this regard, it is worth recalling the arguments used to justify the passage of the National Defense Authorization Act signed into law by Obama last December.

With this bill, the US Congress enshrined in law the president’s extra-constitutional power to condemn anyone, including US citizens grabbed on American soil, to indefinite military detention without judicial review.

The rationale offered by congressional backers is that the “global war on terror” has turned the entire planet into a battlefield, including the US itself. There is no reason why a government that accepts this reactionary claim would shrink from using drones to kill people within the United States, while it uses them regularly for assassination abroad.

With the backing of the Obama administration, both the Republican and Democratic Parties and with barely a word of opposition from within the media or the political establishment as a whole, the machinery is being put in place for a full-blown American military-police state.

Underlying this process is the unprecedented social polarization between the financial aristocracy that monopolizes wealth and power and working people, the overwhelming majority of the population.

Under conditions in which the global capitalist crisis has deepened this polarization and given rise to the first signs of renewed class struggle, the ruling elite is turning to the same bloody methods it has used to advance its interests abroad to defend its grip on power at home.

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