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U.S. Customs and Border Protection Flew a Predator Surveillance Drone Over Minneapolis Protests

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May 30, 2020

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has flown a Predator drone above ongoing protests against police brutality in Minneapolis, [according to flight logs](#).

An aircraft using [the call sign CBP104](#) took off from Grand Forks Air Force Base in North Dakota — where CBP [has drones stationed](#) — at around 12:10 am AEST Sunday, reaching Minneapolis and entering a hexagon-shaped holding pattern at 6,096.00 m over the city at 1:47 am AEST. At around 3:15 am AEST, it began heading back to Grand Forks.

Minneapolis technically falls within the 185.2 air kilometre border zone where CBP has jurisdiction, an area that encompasses [just shy of two-thirds](#) of the nation's population. The city is currently being rocked by massive protests against [brutality and racism](#) by the Minneapolis Police Department that have gone on to inspire other demonstrations around the country. Donald Trump referred to demonstrators in the city as looters and “thugs” while issuing a [disgusting threat](#) of lethal force by “the Military” on Friday.

The White House taunted Twitter on Friday by reposting Donald Trump's tweet calling for the outright extrajudicial slaughter of Americans protesting police brutality in Minneapolis, which the social media site on Friday hid behind a label for “glorifying violence.” Twitter has now responded by doing exactly the same thing to...

CBP-104 was first spotted by flight-watching community ADB-S Exchange, [according to Vice](#), and was flagged on Twitter by [investigative reporter Jason Paladino](#). Predator drones are equipped with powerful cameras designed to capture clear video from as far up as 7,620 metres in the air and are capable of remaining airborne for dozens of hours.

The call sign CBP 104 is identified by numerous sources as a Predator drone operated by the agency, including a [2006 press release](#) by manufacturer General Atomics, a [2007 Popular Science article](#), and [CBP presentations](#) and [drone flight logs](#). The exact model in question is a Predator B, which is more typically identified by the model name MQ-9 Reaper.

CBP surveillance drones are cleared to operate [within 100 air miles](#) of the border, which is under more or less [continual aerial surveillance](#). An analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute in 2018 found that Predator B drones operated by the agency [contribute little](#) to actions like drug seizures and apprehending people attempting to enter the U.S., but they do give CBP warrantless surveillance powers that it has lent to other agencies on hundreds of occasions.

“No government agency should be facilitating the over-policing of the Black community, period,” ACLU Senior Legislative Counsel Neema Singh Guliani wrote to Gizmodo in a

statement. “And CBP has no role in what’s happening in Minneapolis at all. This rogue agency’s use of military technology to surveil protesters inside U.S. borders is deeply disturbing, especially given CBP’s lack of clear and strong policies to protect privacy and constitutional rights. This agency’s use of drones over the city should be halted immediately.”

While it is obvious that CBP-104 is monitoring the protests in Minneapolis, it is less clear whether CBP is flying the drone of its own volition or the fly-over was requested by local law enforcement or another federal agency. It is also not clear what type of information the drone is collecting and for what purpose. CBP told MPR News in 2015 that drones flying out of the Grand Forks base are not capable licence plate identification and face recognition, and as recently as February 2020 told Recode it is not using face recognition at the border.