

Roll Call



Border Surveillance Follies

By Patrick G. Eddington

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For more than a decade, the Department of Homeland Security has employed some of the same kinds of drones used by our military. The ostensible purpose of having unarmed Predator drones was to give U.S. Customs and Border Protection additional aerial surveillance capabilities along the Southern border. Homeland Security officials argued the drones were cost-effective and needed. As a cost-savings measure, the Obama administration proposed major cuts to the DHS drone program in 2010, but House Appropriations Committee leaders, who supported the program and felt the expansion should continue, shot that proposal down. They should've thought through that decision far more carefully.

On Christmas Eve 2014, the DHS's inspector general released a report on the department's drone surveillance program, and it is an indictment of the program.

The DHS IG found that “. . . after 8 years, CBP cannot prove that the program is effective.” Worse, the CBP low-balled the per-hour cost of operating its drones. Instead of the claimed \$2,468 per flight hour, the DHS IG found the cost was \$12,255 per hour — nearly five times as much as CBP officials have claimed. Almost no illegal border crossing apprehensions could be attributed to information from the drones, and the CBP could not show the drones actually reduced the cost of border surveillance. Despite these findings, the CBP has not abandoned plans to spend nearly half a billion dollars more to expand its drone program.

These are the kind of audit results that should spur Congress to terminate a wasteful, ineffective government program. Instead, this week Congress is poised to pass legislation that would direct the DHS to double-down on the use of drones for border surveillance.

The so-called Secure Our Borders First Act (HR 399), sponsored by the House Homeland Security Chairman Michael McCaul, R-Texas, directs on virtually a sector-by-sector basis the employment of drones for aerial surveillance — either the larger drones like Predator for “maritime surveillance” or man-portable drones for more overland aerial surveillance. It's worth noting that the kind of man-portable drones McCaul is instructing the DHS to use have vastly shorter aerial loiter times than the larger Predator drone, and cannot carry the full range of the most sophisticated, capable surveillance technologies available to the U.S. government — the very technologies that the DHS IG has found to be virtually useless for detecting or deterring illegal crossings even when employed by Predator drones.

Directing a federal agency that has already squandered hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars on failed surveillance technologies and policies to engage in more of the same reinforces the image of Congress being a dysfunctional institution.

Over the past decade, Congress has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars on other useless DHS projects, including worthless airport body scanners and explosive detection equipment that does not work. Program audits by federal watch dogs like the DHS IG are commissioned for a reason: to prevent waste, fraud and abuse. The Homeland Security and Appropriations committees should heed the findings of the DHS IG and stop wasting still more federal tax dollars on drones.

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