

# Look up in the sky and see a drone

BY **MALOU INNOCENT AND MEDEA BENJAMIN** / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Ready or not, drones are coming to a law enforcement agency near you.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or drones, have been primarily used for surveillance and targeted killings in wars in faraway lands. Now, with apparently minimal debate, local police departments have begun using them for surveillance directed at American citizens.

To us, this is a grim illustration of the post-9/11 militarization of America.

While drones can serve valid purposes, like monitoring forest fires, surveying land and search-and-rescue missions, they pose a threat to our freedoms.

Their domestic use should be strictly controlled, and current legal standards updated to reflect this powerful new technology.

Instead, it has been authorized largely outside the public eye.

The Federal Aviation Administration began issuing permits for the domestic experimental use of drones in 2006. A lawsuit by the Electronic Frontier Foundation forced the FAA to start releasing the names of government agencies, companies and universities that have been granted permits. The FAA has issued about 750 permits, some 300 of which are still active.

The FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection applied for these permits, as did local police departments from small towns like Gadsden, Ala., to big cities

like Houston. Many police departments received Homeland Security grants to buy drones and train their police forces to use them.

Facing slowing business as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, drone manufacturers solicited the help of the 58-member Congressional Unmanned Systems Caucus to speed up the pace of the FAA permit process.

In February, Congress passed sweeping legislation that forces the FAA to fully integrate drones into our national airspace by 2015, and sooner for government agencies. By May, the FAA waived the application process for police use of drones weighing up to 25 pounds, and is now streamlining the approval process for larger drones.

As the Electronic Privacy Information Center explains, enhanced drone technology is capable of “peering inside high-level windows, and through solid barriers, such as fences, trees, and even walls.”

Worse, drones could move from surveillance to offensive action. The Montgomery County sheriff’s office in Texas used a \$300,000 Homeland Security grant to buy a helicopter drone. The CEO of Vanguard Defense, the company that sold the drone, said it is designed to be weaponized and could easily be outfitted with tasers and stun batons.

This is a slippery slope. If confronted with a stand-off similar to the one at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco in 1993, will authorities resort to drones?

When FBI Director Robert Mueller was asked at a congressional hearing in March if Americans could be targeted for assassination by drones here at home, he simply said that he did not know. That’s not very reassuring.

All Americans should be asking their elected officials about the limits of the use of drones — before it’s too late.

One option is to eliminate federal grants that subsidize drones for police departments. Another is to mandate that police obtain a warrant in circumstances where drones can surveil a private residence or anywhere else citizens have a reasonable expectation of privacy.

Militarization at home, as the Founding Fathers argued centuries ago, is inconsistent with the values of a free society.

Since 9/11, some in Washington seem to have forgotten that a free society depends on a citizenry whose natural rights are protected by a limited and accountable government — not by a government that uses high-tech, stealth video cameras to constantly surveil the public wherever and whenever it wants.

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