

A 51st State for Armed Robotic Drones

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Weaponized UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), also known as drones, have their own caucus in Congress, and the Pentagon's plan is to give them their own state as well.

Under this plan, 7 million acres (or 11,000 square miles) of land in the southeast corner of Colorado, and 60 million acres of air space (or 94,000 square miles) over Colorado and New Mexico would be given over to special forces testing and training in the use of remote-controlled flying murder machines. The full state of Colorado is itself 104,000 square miles. Rhode Island is 1,000 square miles. Virginia, where I live, is 43,000 square miles.

The U.S. military (including Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines) is proceeding with this plan in violation of the public will, new state legislation on private property rights, an exceptionally strong federal court order, and a funding ban passed by the United States Congress, and in the absence of any approved Environmental Impact Statement. Public pressure has successfully put the law on the right side of this issue, and the military is disregarding the law.

I spoke with Jean Aguerre, whose organization "Not 1 More Acre" (<http://not1moreacre.net>) is leading the pushback against this madness. Jean told me she grew up, during the 1960s, on the vast grasslands of southeast Colorado, where the Comanche National Grasslands makes up part of a system of grasslands put in place to help the prairie recover from the dust bowl. The dust bowl, Aguerre says, was the worst environmental disaster in the United States until BP filled the Gulf of Mexico with oil. The dust bowl had been brought on by the government's policy of requiring homesteaders to plow the prairie. The recovery programs created large tracts of land, of 100,000 acres and more, owned by "generational ranchers," that is families that would hand the ranches off to their children.

Aguerre said she grew up on a ranch of incredible beauty and natural wealth, with a 165-million-year-old dinosaur track way and petroglyphs from 12,000 years back. Grasslands are the most threatened ecosystems in the world because they are so accessible, Aguerre says, and the only intact short grassland left in this country is the one being targeted for the "51st state."

Round One began in the 1980s. Fort Carson, an Army base in Colorado Springs, had been kept open after World War II and now began looking for more land. The people of the area were opposed. The U.S. Congressman representing the area agreed to oppose any landgrab. But Senator Gary Hart took the opposite position. As a result, during the early 1980s, the Army Corps of Engineers started telling ranchers to sell out or risk seeing their land condemned and taken from them.

The ranch next to Aguerre's is called Wine Glass Rourke. It was sold to a shill, as Aguerre

describes the buyer. He ran the place into the ground with too many cattle, she says, and then sold it to the military, "And they were off and running!" With condemnations the military put together 250 thousand acres. Ranchers, along with their cattle, were moved off their own land by federal marshals. "We didn't know when we'd be next," Aguerre says of her own family.

Luckily for the people of Colorado and New Mexico, and all of us, Aguerre got involved in politics. She became a political director for Congressman Tim Werth who later became a U.S. senator. Aguerre took him to see the Wine Glass Rourke ranch and told him "Let's take it back." Werth dedicated his staff to the effort for three years, resulting in the transfer to the Forest Service of 17,000 key acres.

The Army used its new land less than twice a year for maneuvers, but caused horrible environmental damage whenever it did. That was the case for about 30 years, until the activity of recent years made everything that came before look sensitive and sustainable.

In the meantime, people like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld were theorizing the transformation of the U.S. military into a force for robotic warfare. Aguerre believes it was in 1996 that a decision was made that the military would need a robotic warfare center. Around 1999 the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement was created. This precedes the more specific Site Environmental Impact Statements. The U.S. public, just like the public of any foreign nation where new U.S. bases are being planned, was told nothing.

In 2006, Aguerre was working in Oregon when friends started asking her to come home and help because something big was happening. An Army land expansion map had been leaked that showed plans for taking over 6.9 million acres, the whole southeast corner of the state. Aguerre thought she would come home for two weeks but has never left. An Environmental Impact Statement for the site was about to be released, and Aguerre knew that meant the project was pretty far along. She formed organizations and found a lawyer in Colorado Springs named Steve Harris to help. The two of them, she says, were absolutely dedicated to NEPA and FOIA. NEPA is the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. FOIA is the Freedom of Information Act of 1966. "NEPA is intended to prevent our government taking our world apart piece by piece without our knowing it," explains Aguerre.

Aguerre and others persuaded the area's county commissioners to vote against the military's plans in 2006, and the state legislature to pass a private property rights bill in January 2007 — a bill that required approval of such plans by the state legislature.

Ken Salazar was the military's hired servant. He had been Attorney General of Colorado from 1999 to 2005. He was a U.S. Senator from 2005 to 2009. President Barack Obama has made him Secretary of the Interior. Around 2007, Jean Aguerre recounts, Salazar held a public meeting in Pueblo, Col., with about 300 ranchers packing the room. He turned his palms up to the ceiling and announced: "I will lift the golden curtain that falls at the end of El Paso county so that prosperity can flow onto the eastern plains." This meant that military spending was economically beneficial. Military expansion, people were being told, was good for them — even if it stole their families' land, and regardless of what momentum it created for the launching and continuing of wars.

"Instead of putting together frameworks for nonproliferation," says Aguerre, "Ken Salazar worked to destroy the last intact short grass prairie because the money was too good."

Senators Wayne Allard, who would join the military lobbyist company the Livingston Group within weeks of leaving the Senate, and Ken Salazar passed an authorization for taking land as part of the 2007 John Warner Defense Authorization Act. “None of the ranchers knew they were in line to be condemned for the second damn time,” says Aguerre.

John Salazar, Ken’s brother, at this time represented Colorado’s third congressional district, while Republican Marilyn Musgrave represented the fourth. Musgrave was persuaded by ranchers that there was no need for the government to take their land. Aguerre worked with Musgrave’s staff to draft a one-sentence funding ban. Aguerre and her allies then organized massive public pressure to recruit John Salazar as a Democratic co-sponsor. Ken Salazar failed in his effort to block this measure in the Senate. The ban passed both houses and became law, but it must be renewed every year.

In 2009, Aguerre and her allies won a federal court ruling throwing out the military’s Environmental Impact Statement with harsh and unequivocal language — “one of the strongest court orders under NEPA,” says Aguerre. By 2008, the military had begun using its land a lot more, and the court ruling did not stop them.

The funding ban, too, is not stopping increased activity. This past year, the funding ban was missing from a committee chairman’s markup in which it had appeared in previous years. Not 1 More Acre and its allies pressured Third-District Congressman Scott Tipton. People from all over the country phoned his office. They were told that as non-constituents their views did not matter. Aguerre advised people to reply: “When you pick my pocket you don’t ask what district I’m from.” Tipton was won over, and the funding ban, for what it’s worth, remains for now.

Nonetheless, says Aguerre, the military is proceeding with and increasing trainings and environmental destruction daily .

Senators Mark Udall and Michael Bennet of Colorado and Tom Udall of New Mexico don’t receive high marks from Jean Aguerre. “Mark Udall on Armed Services and Michael Bennet on Agriculture sit with their thumbs in their pie. Udall has never once come to southeastern Colorado and looked young ranchers in the eye and said ‘this is why we need this military takeover of your lands.’”

Aguerre continues: “And Tom Udall puts out this pap the other day, mumbo jumbo about the Air Force. It’s not Air Force; it’s Special Operations. Aguerre said that her group and others are preparing a comment letter seeking legal standing to challenge the Air Force, and potentially to pry loose more information from the iron grip of our “transparent” government. Aguerre points out that the Air Force Special Operations Command Environmental Assessment was written by SAIC, a global military contractor that also makes voting machines.

“We found out that the state national guard is completely involved in UAV warfare,” says Aguerre. “So when your house floods and you don’t have the national guard there, they may be remotely piloting something somewhere else.”

Aguerre says that in 2006 she knew of four countries that were manufacturing armed UAVs, and that now she knows of 56. So, the argument that drones keep “people” out of harm’s way (with people redefined to mean U.S. citizens) doesn’t hold up very solidly. We have also already had a suicide bomb attack on a drone piloting location and had drone pilots commit

suicide, not to mention the risks of long-term blowback, the damage being done to the rule of law, and all the human beings killed and injured from among the non-U.S. 95% of humanity.

Aguerre asks scientists who love unarmed UAVs to consider the full effect of supporting such technology. I would ask environmentalists to consider the full effect of not resisting the destruction of what Not 1 More Acre describes as:

- unique bioregions of canyonlands, forested mesas, grasslands and riparian systems providing habitat for diverse flora and fauna found nowhere else on Earth and the largest block of native prairie remaining on the High Plains;
- restored Dust Bowl lands - Comanche, Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands — offering robust safe haven to threatened and endangered species of plants and animals, including rare insects and reptiles yet to be named;
- wild rivers and complex wetlands vital to native fish, migrating birds, unique wildlife and environmental health.

I would ask opponents of drone warfare to consider the likely impact of setting aside 60 million acres of air space for testing drones.

“We cannot allow the sacrifice of our democracy to politicians who are bought by military contractors,” says Aguerre. “If they are able to get this 51st state for robotic warfare, I think the economy will be irretrievably lost. These are unbelievably beautiful and pristine lands. Our rural areas are where the genetically modified seeds are being planted, where the lands and mountains are being mined, and where the military is going to destroy an area the size of a state, because the rural people are so few. Gary Hart was able to attack the last short grass prairie without political cost.”

Why is there no political cost? Because “we can’t get the word out.”

Let’s help get the word out by sharing this link: <http://not1moreacre.org>

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