

America's Drone Command Centers: Remote Warriors Operate Computer Keyboards and Joysticks

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Predator drones sanitize killing on the cheap compared to manned aircraft and ground troops. Teams of remote warriors work far from, and at times, closer to battlefields.

Drone pilots operate computer keyboards and multiple monitors. Sensor staff work with them. They handle TV and infrared cameras, as well as other high-tech drone sensors. Faceless enemies nearby or half a world away are attacked. Virtual war kills like sport.

At day's end, home-based operators head there for dinner, relaxation, family time, then a good night sleep before another day guiding weapons with joysticks and monitors like computer games.

Dozens of drone command centers operate worldwide. Dozens more are planned. Pentagon and CIA personnel run them. Some are bare bones. Climate-controlled trailers work fine. They operate effectively anywhere. They maintain constant radio contact with command centers.

Others are sophisticated command and control centers. Two operate at CIA's Langley, VA headquarters. Nevada's Creech and Nellis Air Force Bases near Las Vegas have others. Plans last year called for Nellis operations to be moved to Florida's Hurlburt Field Special Operations Command.

Domestic bases also operate from command and control centers in California, Arizona, New Mexico, North and South Dakota, Missouri, Ohio, New York, and perhaps elsewhere. Eventually they could be anywhere.

Washington plans escalated surveillance and predator drone operations at dozens of global sites. Expanding them to hundreds is likely. The Pentagon and CIA are tightlipped.

Currently, around one in three US warplanes are drones. One day perhaps they'll all be unmanned. Sanitized killing is cheap and efficient. Rule of law principles and other disturbing issues aren't considered. Secrecy and accountability go unaddressed.

Last September, the [Washington Post](#) headlined, "US assembling secret drone bases in Africa, Arabian Peninsula, officials say."

Pentagon and CIA officials plan aggressive campaigns against "al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia and Yemen, U.S. officials said."

Ethiopia is home to one installation. Al-Shabab fighters are targeted. Another is based in the Seychelles. Since September 2009, Air Force and Navy MQ-9 Reaper drones operated there.

Called “hunter-killers,” they’re equipped with Hellfire missiles and satellite-guided bombs. Operational secrecy suppresses details of planned missions.

Besides elsewhere, drones are used in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen. Among other locations, they operate from Djibouti.

The CIA is building “a secret airstrip in the Arabian Peninsula so it can deploy armed drones over Yemen.”

More on Yemen below.

On July 1, 2011, [Aviation Week](#) headlined “Drone War,” saying:

“There is an unofficial but lethal drone war taking place over Pakistan, Yemen and Libya that has expanded the area of operation for U.S. forces beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, with no real acknowledgement from the government that anything extraordinary is happening.”

“The undeclared conflict on these three fronts might be the first Drone War, and warfare has never seen anything like it.”

The article asked if unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) increase the threshold for war in more places because logistics are simpler and US lives aren’t at stake.

Using them also provides intelligence. Aircraft can stay airborne 24 hours. Multiple crews operate them. Offsite calm away from battle zones aids concentration, decision-making, and overall efficiency.

The Air Force Academy’s class of 2011 was its first with graduates planning to specialize in drone operations. Army enlisted personnel do it along with trained pilots handling takeoffs and landings.

Unmanned platform killing is expanding. Targets include countries where technically America isn’t at war. Victims and families know otherwise.

Target Yemen

On June 14, 2011, the [Los Angeles Times](#) headlined, “CIA plans drone strike campaign in Yemen,” saying:

Obama authorized escalated counterterrorism strikes against alleged Al Qaeda threats to America. A secret CIA regional base will target them. An unnamed US official was quoted, saying:

“There’s no question that we’re trying to look at a lot of different ways to make something happen in Yemen.”

In March 2012, after returning from Yemen, [Nation magazine](#) contributor Jeremy Scahill headlined “Washington’s War in Yemen Backfires,” saying:

Washington is “doubling down on its use of air power and drones, which are swiftly becoming the primary focus of Washington’s counterterrorism operations.”

“For years, the elite Joint Special Operations Command and the CIA had teams deployed inside Yemen that supported Yemeni forces and conducted unilateral operations, consisting mostly of cruise missile and drone attacks.”

Lots of civilians are killed. At anti-regime rallies, “prominent conservative imams deliver stinging sermons denouncing the United States and Israel.”

US policy enrages tribal leaders. Resistance grows stronger against it. Washington’s belligerence “backfire(d) by killing civilians” and for violating Yemeni sovereignty. Angry people strike back. In a heavily armed country, America’s alleged threat is stronger.

Yemen’s a gun culture. On average, people own three, including automatic weapons like AK-47s and heavier arms. Moreover, they’re prone to direct action. Threaten them and they strike back. They’re mostly ordinary Yemenis against imperial America’s intervention. In self-defense, they react belligerently.

Perhaps Obama officials want it that way in more combat theaters than Yemen to justify waging permanent wars. America needs enemies. Peace and calm defeats its imperial agenda. Killing civilians may work as planned.

On April 25, 2012, the [Washington Post](#) headlined “White House approves broader Yemen drone campaign,” saying:

Al Qaeda suspects are targeted. Obama’s authorization lets Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and CIA personnel “fire even when the identity of those who could be killed is not known, US officials said.”

In June 2011, counterinsurgency advisor David Kilcullen told Congress that drone strikes kill militants 2% of the time. Others are noncombatant civilians. He explained that these

operations “lose the population (and) the war.” He also raised issues of legality.

UAVs were first used in Vietnam as reconnaissance platforms. In the 1980s, Harpy air defense suppression system radar killer drones were employed. In the Gulf War, unmanned combat air systems (UCAS) and X-45 air vehicles were used.

Others were deployed in Bosnia in 1995 and against Serbia in 1999. America’s new weapon of choice is now commonplace in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, elsewhere abroad, and domestically for law enforcement and surveillance. Escalated domestic and foreign use is planned.

Along with satellites and other technologies, Big Brother plans a global presence to spy and kill. International law isn’t considered. Neither are constitutional and US statute laws. Rogue states do what they please. They answer to no one and don’t say they’re sorry.

CIA Director General David Petraeus urged easing the rules of engagement. Anything goes is policy. It always was, but now it’s more official. Princeton University Yemen specialist Gregory Johnsen worries about “a dangerous drift.” He said policymakers “don’t appear to realize they are heading into rough waters without a map.”

The greater the number of drone kills, he explained, the more recruits Al Qaeda gains. What does Washington plan in response, he asked? Is another war coming, he wonders?

On April 20, Yale Law Professor [Bruce Ackerman](#) headlined his Washington Post op-ed “President Obama: Don’t go there.”

Before Obama’s authorization, he said permitting expanded UAV strikes “break(s) the legal barrier that Congress erected to prevent the White House from waging an endless war on terrorism.”

Ackerman, of course, knows legal barriers haven’t deterred presidents from waging lawless wars since Korea in 1950. WW II was the last legal one.

Since 2009, Obama waged drone war on Yemen and other countries besides officially designated war theaters. He also authorized special forces death squads in dozens of countries worldwide.

Post-9/11, Congress gave Bush a blank check to wage war. It approved the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) for “the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the recent attacks launched against the United States.”

It was used to wage war on Iraq. It’s still in force today. Obama’s 2010 National Security Strategy “reserve(s) the right to act unilaterally if necessary to defend our nation and our interests.”

In other words, to wage preemptive or proxy war, including with nuclear weapons. Making the world safe for capital may destroy it. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) was reinvented in new form. Who knows what’s next.

A constitutional lawyer, Obama knows right from wrong. Nonetheless, he's waging lawless permanent wars, plans more, and not just against Yemen.

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