



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 5, 2012

Report Says United States Is Planning Nuclear-powered Drones

"American scientists have drawn up plans for a new generation of nuclear-powered drones capable of flying over remote regions of the world for months on end without refueling," the U.K. daily reported. The project is a joint effort of Sandia National Laboratories, the principal U.S. nuclear research and development agency, and Northrop Grumman, one of the nation's leading defense contractors. The goal is to increase "from days to months" the flying time of the unmanned vehicles without refueling stops. The nuclear powered propulsion will also make more power available for operating equipment on board, according to a project summary published by Sandia. The research into "ultra-persistence technologies" is aimed at solving three limitations of drone flights: inadequate "hang time" over targets, a shortage of power for running the sophisticated surveillance and weapons systems on board, and inadequate communications capacity.



The summary "does not spell out the fact that it is referring to a nuclear-powered drone," the *Guardian* reported, referring instead to "propulsion and power technologies that went well beyond existing hydrocarbon technologies." But the London daily identifies the project's lead investigator as Dr Steven Dron, a specialist in nuclear propulsion. The reluctance to spell out the nuclear power involved may have to do with controversies over nuclear fuels in general, as well as the already existing opposition to drones in some quarters.

"It's [a] pretty terrifying prospect," Chris Coles of Drone Wars UK, told the British paper. The organization campaigns against the increasing use of drones for both military and civilian purposes. "Drones are much less safe than other aircraft and tend to crash a lot," Coles said.

Ironically, the alleged development of drones by the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq was cited in 2002 by the Bush administration and other supporters of the Iraq War as further evidence, in addition to the regime's alleged possession of "weapons of mass destruction," of the need to invade Iraq and overthrow the government in Baghdad. Since then, the United States has employed drones in military attacks against insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere in the "war on terror." The planes, guided by remote control, have often missed their targets or hit wrongly identified targets, killing innocent civilians. They have also been used to intentionally target persons away from any field of combat, as in the controversial killing in Yemen of Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born Muslim cleric



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believed to have been part of the al-Qaeda terrorist network. A separate drone attack killed the cleric's 16-year-old son in what the Pentagon termed "collateral damage."

Additional "hang time" will enhance the utility of the unmanned planes in domestic law enforcement as well as in military attacks. Drones, with their electronic "eyes in the skies" have already been used to assist police in the United States and that trend is likely to increase. As Bob Adelman [reported](#) on *The New American* website earlier this year, the New York City Police Department has been looking at the possibility of obtaining drones to help with law enforcement in the Big Apple. An e-mail obtained by CBS Channel 2 in New York showed that a detective in the NYPD counterterrorism unit had asked the Federal Aviation Administration about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles as a law-enforcement tool. Police Commissioner Joe Kelly described the department's interest in the vehicles in terms suggesting the city might want its own air force. "In an extreme situation, you would have some means to take down a plane," he said about the advantage of having a drone over Manhattan or elsewhere in or around New York. Asked about the unmanned planes, a spokesman for the department said, "We've looked at them, but we haven't tested or deployed any."

Other departments have used either their own drones or had one deployed from a nearby military facility. When a county sheriff encountered armed resistance while trying to execute a search warrant on a family farm in Lakota, North Dakota, last summer, surveillance provided by a drone from Grand Forks Air Force Base alerted county law-enforcement officials, aided by a SWAT team, that the residents were spotted unarmed, and it was safe to move in for the arrest. A possible shootout and consequent bloodshed had been averted, but critics of drones as a law-enforcement tool see them as a potential threat to the privacy interests of law-abiding people who may not even be criminal suspects.

"It's bizarre to me they would be using military drones for that purpose," [said Bruce Quick](#), the Fargo attorney representing the family in Lakota. "I don't think those things are intended to be used for that." The American Civil Liberties Union and other advocacy groups have expressed concern over what the ACLU warns may be "a routine aerial surveillance of American life," a fear some in law enforcement believe is either overblown or simply groundless. The Montgomery County Sheriff's Department in Conroe Texas bought a drone for use in law-enforcement operations the *New York Times* [reported](#) in February, but chief deputy Randy McDaniel dismissed concern that the overhead cameras are a cause for worry over invasions of privacy. "We don't spy on people," he told the *Times*. "We worry about criminal elements."

But how law-enforcement agencies use the drones to determine who might be the "criminal elements" continues to be a cause for concern. Can sensors from a plane overhead, for example, pick up evidence of a heat lamp used to grow marijuana in the privacy of one's own home? If so, should that evidence of illegal activity be obtained without a warrant, backed up by probable cause, as required by the Fourth Amendment? Should a drone be recording images of sunbathers or people at a backyard barbecue while cruising overhead in a search for suspicious activity? Glenn Greenwald, civil liberties lawyer and columnist for Salon.com has warned that "the escalating addition of drones — weaponized or even just surveillance — to the vast arsenal of domestic weapons that already exist is a serious, consequential development. The fact that it has happened with almost no debate and no real legal authorization is itself highly significant.

"One thing is for certain: this is a development that is going to continue and increase rapidly," Greenwald predicted. "It needs far more attention than it has thus far received."



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