



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on September 12, 2016

## Civilians Being Hired by Pentagon to Pilot Drones

As President Obama expands the deployment of drones to summarily execute alleged enemies of the United States, the Air Force may not have enough of the specialized pilots to keep up with the pace of the program. A story in the *New York Times* claims that the lack of drone pilots and associated staff is driving the Air Force to hire “private contractors” to carry out the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The article reports:



As the Obama administration has accelerated its campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and Libya over the past 10 months, the Pentagon has added four drones flown by contractors to the roughly 60 that are typically flown every day by uniformed Air Force personnel.

Although the civilian contractors are reportedly “legally prohibited” from firing the deadly payload, they can perform pretty much any other function that contributes to the success of the deadly airborne assaults.

That said, a George Washington University law professor Laura A. Dickinson is quoted in the story saying that there is no way to be really sure where the boundaries on the contractors’ authority are drawn: “With drones, this is a new area where we already do not have a lot of transparency, and with contractors operating drones there’s no clearly defined regime of oversight and accountability.”

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Besides the draw of being a part of the controversial mission, there is something stronger attracting potential pilots to the Pentagon’s program. A statement from the Defense Department published in the *Times* article reveals that “at least several hundred contractors, many of them former drone or fighter pilots ... are making double or triple their military salaries.”

So money talks and, apparently, mental illness walks: The *New York Times* article reports that drone pilots have suffered psychological trauma far beyond the rate of their military comrades.

To combat the mental corrosion, a program called MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper Culture and Process Improvement Program (CPIP) was introduced last August to help treat the mental health harm being done by the drone war to the airmen pulling the triggers.

In a statement released by the Air Force, Colonel Troy Jackson explained the program’s purpose. “A lot of assumptions were made over the years, and people don’t realize how stressful and overworked the MQ-1/9 field is,” said Jackson, the command and control intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations division chief and CPIP officer in charge. “We’re asking Airmen to do a lot when they’re either not trained properly or not ready for what’s being asked of them, which leaves the Airmen burned out.”

One would imagine that those unfortunate enough to have been caught within a “signature strike” kill zone, or who have had a loved one blown to bits while attending a wedding would know a little bit about how “stressful” the drone war can be, as well.



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Of course, the drone pilots wouldn't be so stressed and overworked if the president would stop ordering them to kill so many people in so many countries. As of today, those deadly missions are being flown in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, and anywhere else ISIS can be claimed to be operating.

Jackson believes that the drone pilots are getting "burned out" and the Pentagon should take a "holistic" approach to treating this malady. One of the methods used by the Air Force to help relieve the stress is the creation of a Facebook page and a blog.

According to various media reports on the CPIP online tools, the blog originally included memes using humor to advertise and promote the CPIP mission. These memes have since been removed.

What persists, however, is the problem of mental trauma suffered by those tasked with killing suspected enemies thousands of miles away.

Again, would the members of the United States Armed Forces not be better served by eliminating the source of the trauma rather than treating its effects?

For many years the media have reported on drone operators' psychological fallout from firing missiles at targets thousands of miles away in a manner more like a video game than a combat mission.

In a lengthy story about one former drone pilot's increasing mental instability, *GQ* included some data on the Pentagon's push to diagnose the pilots with PTSD:

In 2011, Air Force psychologists completed a mental-health survey of 600 combat drone operators. Forty-two percent of drone crews reported moderate to high stress, and 20 percent reported emotional exhaustion or burnout. The study's authors attributed their dire results, in part, to "existential conflict." A later study found that drone operators suffered from the same levels of depression, anxiety, PTSD, alcohol abuse, and suicidal ideation as traditional combat aircrews.

The latest story on the pilot shortage reveals that a possible reason for the damage done to the psyche of drone pilots is that they "typically work long hours in windowless rooms staring at computer monitors and do not get many days off."

So, while drone pilots pull triggers and kill people with no more due process than a CIA green light or presidential permission, the Air Force decides that the best way to stem the rising tide of trauma among the operators is to create a blog where they'll post "funny" pictures, hoping that laughter will be the best medicine.

And, if the memes don't ameliorate the mental distress, a fresh crop of former pilots can be put in the driver's seat and be paid well above the salary they earned when they served as the deliverers of death from above.

If the *Times* story is reliable, the drone pilots are now being targeted by the targets:

The pilots have also become targets for terrorists who say drones have been used to indiscriminately kill civilians. This past spring, the Islamic State released a detailed list of several dozen senior Air Force officers who the group said were connected to the drone program. The list included photographs of the officers, their home addresses and other personal information.

Of course, the American people could put a stop to this silliness by holding elected officials accountable, forcing them to remain faithful to their oaths of offices to be bound by the chains of the Constitution.

This would accomplish the twin goals of healing those whose sanity is being sacrificed on the altar of



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empire and buttressing the barriers to autocracy built by the Founding Fathers in the Constitution.

For now, the men and women being drawn to the drone program are being treated as little more than drones themselves by the Pentagon and the CIA. They will be tasked with helping carry out President Obama's fatal commands without concern for the fact that they likely will come to see, and maybe even do, things that their inherent sense of right and wrong will flag as unacceptable.

Finally, with the CIA conducting so many of these deadly airstrikes, and so many of the drones being piloted by civilians, the line between what is military and what is not seems to be blurring to the point where there will be no significant distinction between the two, a situation that could make the imposition of martial law imperceptible to all but the most aware.

*Image: photo of MQ-9 Reaper from Wikipedia*



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