



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on May 23, 2012

Despite Change to Drone Policy, Drones Still Controversial

The use of drones by the United States is so controversial that even mainstream media outlets cannot ignore it. Earlier this week, CBS News [asked](#) who would be targeted by U.S. drones, and who would decide whom the drones target. According to that report, the decision would be “concentrated” in the hands of a very small group of people at the White House.



CBS News reports, “White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan wants to scrap the more inclusive yet cumbersome process run by the military.” Some officials who wished to stay anonymous because they are not permitted to discuss the program publicly, have said that Brennan’s move would improve the Pentagon’s role in the decision making process rather than detract from it. Under the plan, Brennan’s staff would be responsible for consulting the Pentagon, State Department, and other agencies regarding who may appear on the list of people targeted by the drones. Officials argue that this is preferable because more people would be involved in the decisions.

The Associated Press [writes](#), “Brennan believed there was a ... need to draw together different agencies’ viewpoints, showing the American public that al-Qaida targets are chosen only after painstaking and exhaustive debate.”

Still, not all officials involved in the decision are satisfied. One official still bemoaned “how easy it has become to kill someone.” He notes that some of the very things that compel a drone attack by the United States overseas would provoke FBI and Secret Service investigations here in the United States.

But Defense Department spokesman George Little said the department was “entirely comfortable with the process by which American counterterrorism operations are managed. The Defense Department says its list of drone targets is approximately two dozen names long.

The Defense Department is not the only one with a list, however. The Associated Press reports, “Drone attacks were split between JSOC and the CIA, which keeps a separate list of targets, though it overlaps with the Pentagon list. By law, the CIA can target only al-Qaida operatives or affiliates who directly threaten the U.S. JSOC has a little more leeway, allowed by statute to target members of the larger al-Qaida network.”

Drone attacks came under particular scrutiny by the American people last year when American-born



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senior Al Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki was killed by a CIA-led drone strike.

Texas Congressman Ron Paul warned attendees at a town hall meeting in Manchester, New Hampshire at the time that permitting targeted killings of American citizens without proper due process could set a dangerous precedent.

“Al-Awaki was born here. He is an American citizen. He has never been tried or charged for any crimes. If the American people accept this blindly and casually that we now have an accepted practice of the president assassinating who he thinks are bad guys I think it’s sad,” Dr. Paul said. “What would the people have said about Timothy McVeigh? We didn’t assassinate him. We were pretty certain that he had done it. And they put him through the courts and they executed him.”

Similarly, [blogontherun.com](#) wrote, “When the president of the United States can singlehandedly order the assassination of a U.S. citizen without charge or trial, we’re not just on the slippery slope toward dictatorship, we’re in free fall.”

Congress has already approved approximately 30,000 drones in U.S. skies by the year 2020, prompting privacy advocates to question how the FAA will safeguard the American people from the drones.

Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer in an appearance on Fox News last week actually took a hard stance [against](#) the use of drones in the United States.

“A drone is a high-tech version of an old army and a musket. It ought to be used in Somalia to hunt bad guys but not in America. I don’t want to see it hovering over anybody’s home. Yes, you can say we have satellites, we’ve got Google Street View and London has a camera on every street corner but that’s not an excuse to cave in on everything else and accept a society where you’re always under — being watched by the government. This is not what we want,” Krauthammer said on the panel portion of FOX News’ “Special Report.”

Concerns that the drones would add to privacy violations were vindicated when a newly discovered Air Force intelligence brief revealed that surveillance data of American people captured by drones “accidentally” can be stored and analyzed by the Pentagon.

“Collected imagery may incidentally include US persons or private property without consent,” the instruction states.

Last week, a military drone reportedly nearly caused a mid-air crash with a commercial jet over Denver. Meanwhile, the drone industry in the United States is doing its best to promote a positive image of itself to the public.

Michael Toscano, president of the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, is optimistic that some public relations will help the industry.

“You have to keep repeating the good words,” he said, adding that the word “drones” should also be dispensed with because of its negative connotations and replaced with the term “remotely piloted vehicles.”

“Toscano made it sound like something straight out of a crisis-management textbook — or Orwell. The AUVSI wants to bombard the American public with positive images and messages about drones in an effort to reverse the growing perception of the aircraft as a threat to privacy and safety,” [reports Salon](#).

The Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International already spent nearly \$300,000 last year to lobby Congress.



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President Obama has not only advocated the use of the drones, but is a proponent of [selling](#) them to allies such as Turkey and NATO, contending that it would help redistribute the weight of American global operations.

Congress is not entirely sold on this notion, however. Democrat Dianne Feinstein said last year, "There are some military technologies that I believe should not be shared with other countries, regardless of how close our partnership. The United States should be trying to control the proliferation of certain weapons, and I would put armed UAVs in that category."

Others have voiced concerns over how the drones would be used by other nations once purchased. For example, Tim Brown of [Globalsecurity.org](#) explains, "The concern is that Turkey will use US-builtUCAVs to go after the PKK [the Kurdish Workers' Party], and might not place a high enough priority on quality control in their targeting process. The number of innocent civilians killed might increase."

Brown contends that if the allies were careless in their use of the drones, "the US will share in the blame."



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