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Congress Funds Killer Drones the Air Force Says It Can't Handle

By [Spencer Ackerman](#)

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4:52 pm |

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An avionics specialist checks out an MQ-9 Reaper before it prepares to fly from Creech Air Force Base, 2008. Photo: U.S. Air Force.

The Air Force says it needs to [scale back](#) buying its flying deadly robots while it gets enough human beings in place to operate them and interpret the surveillance data they collect.

Congress decided that the flyboys might need more cash, just in case.

The Pentagon asked Congress for only around \$4 million for the MQ-1 Predator drone and about \$1.7 billion for the next-generation MQ-9 Reaper over the next year. The House Armed Services Committee, which on Tuesday finished [its version of next year's defense bill](#) (.pdf), decided that wasn't enough for either program. If the committee's version of the bill makes it through the legislative process, the Air Force will get about \$23 million more for the Predators, and an extra \$180 million for the Reapers.

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To be clear, that cash isn't necessarily for extra flying robots, and there are lots of legislative hurdles to overcome before this bill becomes law. The Air Force [stopped buying new Predators in 2010](#) and upgraded to Reapers. Chances are the new Predator cash is for replacement sensors or spare parts. And about \$26 million worth of cash for the Reapers, similarly, is for spare parts. But the committee also wants to give the Air Force nearly \$159 million for 12 new Reaper planes.

That's not all. The committee also boosted funding for the Hellfire missiles the drones carry — to \$61 million, some \$13 million more than the Pentagon asked.

The additional drone cash comes at a strange time for the Air Force's operation of the machines. Over the next five years, the "combat air patrols" that the drones fly — teams of up to four Predators or Reapers — will [rise from 61 to 65](#), with what Defense Secretary Leon Panetta called a "surge capacity" of up to 85. But the Air Force actually asked to cut its drone cash, in order to make sure it's got [enough human beings trained to operate the drones](#) — and, more urgently, get a better handle on the onslaught of video and other surveillance data they collect.

The word from Air Force Secretary Michael Donley is that the Air Force plans on holding the number of Predator and Reaper "combat air patrols," or CAPs — flights of up to four drones at a time — static for about five years once they hit 65 CAPs, in order to give the humans a breather. It's not clear whether an infusion of extra drone cash will affect that decision.

The drones aren't the only program the House Armed Services Committee is beefing up. It's adding \$115 million for "advanced procurement" of Navy destroyers and \$778 million for the Virginia-class submarine — consistent with the Republican-controlled House's complaint that [the Navy isn't building enough ships](#) for its ambitious strategy in the Pacific. GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney wants to go even further, [vastly expand shipbuilding](#) by as much as \$7 billion per year. If Romney has a notion to supersize America's unmanned air force, so far he's kept those plans to himself.



Danger Room senior reporter Spencer Ackerman recently won the [2012 National Magazine Award for Reporting in Digital Media](#).

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Tags: [House Armed Services Committee](#), [Predator](#), [Reaper](#)

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Soylent_Green_is_people

Okay, I don't have any urge to actually fire missiles at people, but, seriously, if they're short on people to fly drones then, yes, I would like a well-paid job in an air-controlled building far away from any actual threats to my own person where the task is basically little different than playing a video game. Sign me up.

1 week ago 13 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Parazo

The problem with the Air Force is that it requires pilots with experience to fly the drones, unlike the Army which allows "fresh out of CoD" teens. If the Air Force realizes that it'll be cheaper to emulate the Army, I think you still need to enlist. I doubt if they'll use civilian operators.

1 week ago in reply to [Soylent_Green_is_people](#) 7 Likes

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Joey

The US Airforce concerned with costs? Those of the bomber worth its weight in gold and quarter of a billion dollar fighter that is too valuable to actually USE in combat situations?

They will not adopt the army's position on drones because they have pilot's jobs to protect, a manned bomber program to waste a few trillion upon, and hellfire armed predators fit well into the war they have but not the war they want...therefore it is not needed.

1 week ago in reply to Parazo 2 Likes

Like Reply



Parazo

Lulz...makes you want to bomb the generals, no?

1 week ago in reply to Joey 1 Like

Like Reply



Joey

ME!?! an advocate of sedition. Not in this political climate.

1 week ago in reply to Parazo 2 Likes

Like Reply



Parazo

Well, does it count if you're only "sedicing" the generals?;)

1 week ago in reply to Joey

Like



General Hap Hapablap, There's only one thing I need to know; ca...

I don't think I like your tone, young man.

1 week ago in reply to Parazo

Like Reply

Parazo

Besides, what are you going to do, skullfap me to death?;)

6 days ago in reply to General Hap Hapablap Like



Parazo

Yeah, well, generals who put money and prestige above the welfare of their troops deserve to be sacked.

It's hard enough soldiers have to fight the enemy without worrying about their equipment killing them.

1 week ago in reply to General Hap Hapablap Like



Robert Hurtig

Why not just cross train the F-22 pilots, it's not like the drones need uncontaminated oxygen while in the air. There, personnel problem solved.

1 week ago 8 Likes

Like Reply



Casey Limon

Cross train? Unheard of in a bureaucracy where everything is sub-divided and highly specialized.

1 week ago in reply to Robert Hurtig

Like Reply



Inigo

Congress doesn't fund projects in order to see them *do* anything - they fund them in order to put taxpayer money in the hands of politically-connected contractors. The needs of national security, and even the practical capacity of the armed forces to manage a program, are irrelevant as long as the money gets delivered. It's a lot worse when Republicans are in control, because they have an ideological belief that it's good to transfer wealth from taxpayers to corporate shareholders.

1 week ago 5 Likes

Like Reply



montemanm1

*DING*DING*DING*DING*DING*DING*DING!!

We have a winner!

Except for that last part. Do you really think dummycraps are less pork-addicted than repuglic*nts? If so, you haven't been paying attention.

1 week ago in reply to Inigo 4 Likes

Like Reply



Parazo

Man, a Lt. Col pilots a Predator (see picture)? That's how high ranking do you need to operate these?

1 week ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



Dark_Laser

So this is what the Tea Party means when they say "smaller government" and "cut spending". ./

1 week ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



James Schmidt

Because 38 members out of 535 can make a HUGE difference. I think you don't understand as much as you think you do.

1 week ago in reply to Dark_Laser 2 Likes

Like Reply



Dark_Laser

The Tea Party has influence over the whole Republican party, which supposedly stands for those things anyways. You could replace "Tea Party" with "Republican Party" in that sentence, and it would still make sense. I don't think you understand as much as you think you do.

1 week ago in reply to James Schmidt

Like Reply



James Schmidt

LOL - Not hardly. The Tea Party has much less influence than that. I gave you solid numbers and you give me paranoid delusions. Get your head out of your ass.

1 week ago in reply to Dark_Laser

Like Reply



Dark_Laser

I'm sorry, but you haven't explained at all how anything you say is relevant. So there aren't many Tea Party members, but that doesn't stop the ENTIRE Republican party from being wasteful military spenders. The Tea Party is still the hypocrite in this situation.

1 day ago in reply to James Schmidt

Like Reply



aniptofar

You do realize the military is wasting more money on "green" energy than this project?

1 week ago in reply to Dark_Laser

Like Reply



Anonymous Person

The military spending on green energy is not a waste. I say this because having our military be dependent on Foreign Oil to fuel our fleets is plain stupid and a massive operational readiness risk factor given that at any given moment the world could decide not to sell the US oil and our military would be useless.

1 week ago in reply to aniptofar 2 Likes

Like Reply

aniptofar

It's unbelievably wasteful. If i remember correctly, they paid \$5000 for one gallon of fuel! They build solar farms that will NEVER pay for themselves or create as much energy as is used to manufacture them.



I bet you absolutely know nothing about engineering. Pie in the sky beliefs are a larger operation risk.

1 week ago in reply to Anonymous Person

Like Reply



PeteEllis

We have 88 Million able bodied Adults out of work in the United Sates.
I am sure we can find someone to perform the data analysis and fly the drones.
This could be a great follow on carrier for all those politicians that will be ousted from office this year.

1 week ago 2 Likes

Like Reply



David Rasmussen

88 million people out of work in the US?.... i believe that would make unemployment somewhere north of 50%...o_o

1 week ago in reply to PeteEllis 5 Likes

Like Reply



PeteEllis

We have more than 200 million able body adults in the United States. So, its not fifty percent.

1 week ago in reply to David Rasmussen

Like Reply



Mark B

I am not sure we want the Tea-Baggers we send packing to analyze data, they have already proven to have difficulty with facts and honesty.

1 week ago in reply to PeteEllis 4 Likes

Like Reply



James Schmidt

Like I posted above, 38 out of 535 members of Congress aren't making that much of a difference. I think you need to understand who is really controlling and making these decisions. I doubt your analysis of the situation is all that great.

1 week ago in reply to Mark B 2 Likes

Like Reply

**DavidR**

The first one to go packing, is the Great one, the phoney one, the offspring of Malcomb XXX. Keep on dreaming

1 week ago in reply to Mark B 2 Likes

Like Reply

**PeteEllis**

If we have 88 million adult Tea-Baggers in the United States you can expect that the next president's first name will be Willard!

1 week ago in reply to Mark B

Like Reply

**AlGore777**

People who are qualified for the job and want to enlist in the military, not so much. Although I think it would be wise for the Air Force to pick out promising avionics students from college and even High School under a contract promising them a position as a drone pilot if they meet all the qualifications during training. You'll get an influx of recruits that aren't worried about getting shot somewhere in the Mid-East or Africa, and the Air Force gets its pilots.

That being said, government hiring of people does absolutely nothing to stimulate the economy as the government doesn't actually create wealth. It just takes it from other workers, and gives it to its own, meaning no net wealth is added whatsoever. Otherwise we could stimulate the economy by just paying a bunch of people to dig trenches everywhere.

1 week ago in reply to PeteEllis 2 Likes

Like Reply

**Mike Johnson**, Developer of all sorts of things that need developing

I had wanted that billet when I joined, but then I found out you had to pass a flight physical to fly them... That meant requiring perfect vision. For flying drones.

1 week ago in reply to AlGore777 2 Likes

Like Reply

matteo_1

The Air Force doesn't like the competition between the much cheaper drones and the more sexy (and expensive) F-35 fighter.

1 week ago 1 Like

Like Reply

**gfish3000**

You do know that the drones can't do what a fighter jet can, right? Predators and Reapers aren't stealthy, have a very limited amount of weapons they can carry, and are made for long range surveillance and precision strikes. If they were to venture into the kind of well defended territory the F-18s, F-22s, and F-35s are meant to go, they would last about as long as it took for the nearest missile turret to lock on and fire. They also have a snowball's chance in Hell on an unseasonably hot day of evading even the most mediocre interceptor because they were originally designed to hunt down small bands of terrorists or spies, not fight full blown wars.

1 week ago in reply to matteo_1 2 Likes

Like Reply

**Chuckiechan**

But someday that will change... there is something alluring about a platform that can take unlimited G's, and doesn't carry a pilot.

In fact, China is working mightily on drone to defeat our quality advantage.

1 week ago in reply to gfish3000 2 Likes

Like Reply

**gfish3000**

Well yes, of course, it's coming and one day relatively soon, manned fighters will be a small minority on the battlefield. But that day is not here yet and will take decades of R&D to arrive, hence the idea that the Air Force is cutting down on drones to make room for fighter jets is misplaced.

1 week ago in reply to Chuckiechan 1 Like

Like Reply



Jay

But we have no money for food stamps.

1 week ago 1 Like

Like Reply



aniptofar

We have record spending on food stamps and other gov't handouts. 60% of the budget is handouts.

1 week ago in reply to Jay 1 Like

Like Reply



Randy

Brrrrrandy

1 week ago

Like Reply



srmm

WOW, if you guys want to fly drones go for it. For all the AF pilots I know it's a soul killing/destroying experience. And the military wonders why people want out! They train for years to get to fly real airplanes and then get stuck in a box for hours on end.

1 week ago

Like Reply



Parazo

That's the problem with the USAF way, they use pilots of manned aircraft. Maybe if they use Xbox trained teen agers then it might actually be a fun experience.

1 week ago in reply to srmm

Like Reply

Levi Pembroke

I've been trying to get this job for two years now and i cant because I'm 15 lbs. over weight. I'm not fat by any means but this is ridiculous to not let people in that want to do the job. I got a 97 on my asvab but I guess that doesn't mean dick squat.

1 week ago

Like Reply

**Apoctopus**

Do you find that the extra weight makes it difficult to put on your clown shoes?

1 week ago in reply to Levi Pembroke 1 Like

Like Reply

**Soylent_Green_is_people**

I know, how about you do some jumping jacks, tubby.

1 week ago in reply to Levi Pembroke 1 Like

Like Reply

**Levi Pembroke**

How about I do 100 every day. I'm sure you were joking but this pisses me off. Does it really matter if I weigh 15 lbs less? Is there a weight limit on the office chairs they use? Shit.

1 week ago in reply to Soylent_Green_is_people

Like Reply

**Bearded_Vet**

Then do some push ups, run, and cut back on your fucking calorie intake. 15lbs should take all of 2 weeks to lose. And it's not just weight, you must be busting tape too. Don't blame anyone but yourself because you lack the discipline to do what you say you want to.

1 week ago in reply to Levi Pembroke 1 Like

Like Reply

**toxicunderGroov**

I am aware u US folk use some sort of weird math or metric stuffs, but 15 of anything doesn't sound like a lot, suck it up and go for it if flying drones is what u think u like to do.

Cheer up!

1 week ago in reply to Levi Pembroke

Like Reply



Don_Bacon

When the Congress Unmanned Systems Caucus.says "buy," you buy.

1 week ago

Like Reply



jasvll

This is clearly due to that GSA guy who was overspending by \$700,000 or so. Since they scapegoated him, all government corruption and overspending should be taken care of.

1 week ago

Like Reply



Randy

It' jest like a Box of Chocolates. Corruption is as corruption does. Big Brothers watches jest who ever Big Brothers wants too. What is you'r favorite Video Game? Shooting or Planting?

1 week ago in reply to jasvll

Like Reply

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