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Under Obama, an emerging global apparatus for drone killing



U.S. Air Force/GETTY IMAGES - A crew chief from the 46th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron completes post-flight inspections of the RQ-1 Predator after one of its sorties in Balad Air Base, Iraq. The RQ-1 is a medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle.

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By Greg Miller, Published: December 27

The Obama administration's counterterrorism accomplishments are most apparent in what it has been able to dismantle, including CIA prisons and entire tiers of al-Qaeda's leadership. But what the administration has assembled, hidden from public view, may be equally consequential.

In the space of three years, the administration has built an extensive apparatus for using drones to carry out targeted killings of suspected terrorists and stealth surveillance of other adversaries. The apparatus involves dozens of secret facilities, including two operational hubs on the East Coast, virtual Air Force cockpits in the Southwest and clandestine bases in at least six countries on two continents.

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Clandestine drones: Obama administration's critical tool

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Other commanders in chief have presided over wars with far higher casualty counts. But no president has ever relied so extensively on the secret killing of individuals to advance the nation's security goals.

The rapid expansion of the drone program has blurred long-standing boundaries between the CIA and the military. Lethal operations are increasingly assembled a la carte, piecing together personnel and equipment in ways that allow the White House to toggle between separate legal authorities that govern the use of lethal force.

In Yemen, for instance, the CIA and the military's Joint Special Operations Command pursue the same adversary with nearly identical aircraft. But they alternate taking the lead on strikes to exploit their separate authorities, and they maintain separate kill lists that overlap but don't match. CIA and military strikes this fall

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The emergence of hunter-killer and surveillance drones as revolutionary new weapons in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in counterterrorism operations in places such as Pakistan and Yemen, has spawned a multibillion-dollar industry.

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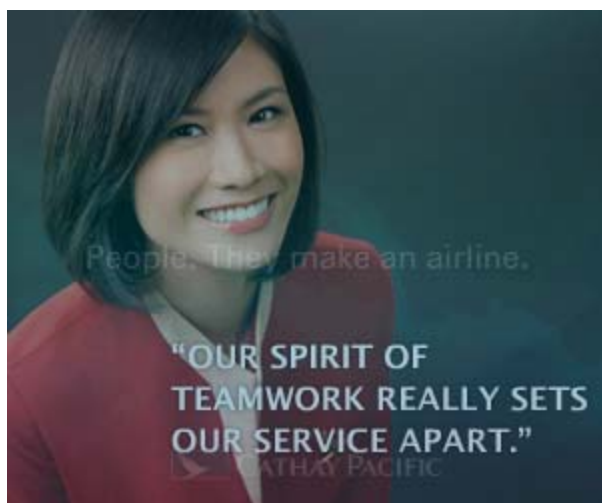
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they are not allowed to discuss.

killed three U.S. citizens, two of whom were suspected al-Qaeda operatives.

The convergence of military and intelligence resources has created blind spots in congressional oversight. Intelligence committees are briefed on CIA operations, and JSOC reports to armed services panels. As a result, no committee has a complete, unobstructed view.

With a year to go in President Obama's first term, his administration can point to undeniable results: Osama bin Laden is dead, the core al-Qaeda network is near defeat, and members of its regional affiliates scan the sky for metallic glints.

Those results, delivered with unprecedented precision from aircraft that put no American pilots at risk, may help explain why the drone campaign has never attracted as much scrutiny as the detention or interrogation programs of the George W. Bush era. Although human rights advocates and others are increasingly critical of the drone program, the level of public debate remains muted.

Senior Democrats barely blink at the idea that a president from their party has assembled such a highly efficient machine for the targeted killing of suspected terrorists. It is a measure of the extent to which the drone campaign has become an awkward open secret in Washington that even those inclined to express misgivings can only allude to a program that, officially,

Live

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, described the program with a mixture of awe and concern. Its expansion under Obama was almost inevitable, she said, because of the technology's growing sophistication. But the pace of its development, she said, makes it hard to predict how it might come to be used.

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MayorEd wrote:

3:24 AM PST

Do some people think this is a bad thing? Increasing security and saving lives is good. Improved technology is exactly how the United States has won every war except the American Revolution.

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jralger wrote:

2:59 AM PST

Of course, you realize that the similarities between this network of drones and the possibility of it's origination on 9/11 is nothing more than fighting fire with fire, right ?

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For all we are doing here is taking their idea of droned hits of the World Trade Center and Pentagon and applying it, globally.

So much for this idea being developed in someone's garage, in the U.S.

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ticked wrote:

2:34 AM PST

Drones and mercenaries are immoral and unethicalthe US uses both extensively....

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