Commercial Drones and the Slippery Slope

Ed Kinane's latest Op Ed, originally published on Truthout.org as: The FAA's Broadening Regulations: Commercial Drones and the Slippery Slope

The Federal Aviation Administration, bowing to persistent corporate and congressional drone caucus pressure, on February 15 issued "A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" seeking public input. The proposed rules seek to regulate the commercial and government flight of small (under 55 lbs.) domestic drones. The FAA, charged with keeping our airways safe, is opening wider the door to the multi-billion domestic drone industry…impairing both our safety and our civil liberties.

The drone industry is drooling.

Like their military counterparts, commercial drones are being rushed off assembly lines with insufficient quality control. With drones crowding the air, crashes and collisions – accidental and otherwise – can and will happen. And not only on the White House lawn.

While commercial drone operators will have to pay some fees (about $300) and pass a written test to be certified, there can be no guarantee that they will conform to the discipline of keeping their airborne vehicle within sight (as currently required) or below the newly expanded height (500 ft.) or far from airports (five miles). There is no guarantee that drone operators, even when sober, will be prudent. Boys love their toys. And who will be keeping track?

Given drone surveillance capabilities, normalizing much denser drone traffic will further erode civil liberties. The new regs help consolidate "1984." The newly legalized commercial drone will be a terrific FBI, NSA, Homeland Security, etc. front for

both retail and wholesale surveillance on all of us – and on some of us in particular. These agencies have already demonstrated their contempt for the Fourth Amendment – which Amendment forbids search and seizure without specific cause or warrants. Already when Congressional hearings or other investigators challenge them, some agency spokespeople and Bush/Obama administration appointees readily lie about their overseas drone crimes. (Think John Brennan.) Will they be any more candid about their domestic dirty work?

The more commercial drones become a visible fixture in our skies, the less we will question them. This normalizing will provide cover for those drone operators up to no good. On February 15, according to the New York Times, President Obama signed a memorandum requiring government agencies "to report publicly each year a 'general summary' on their drone use…." The Times goes on to note that "the order includes a loophole allowing secrecy for operations involving national security or *law enforcement*." [italics mine]

With their dandy new tools, police and intelligence agency drones will step up surveillance of citizens engaged in Constitutionally-protected First Amendment activity. This can chill such activity, eroding democratic space and leading to more heavy-handed prosecutions. Uppity and organizing people of color will be profiled and made more vulnerable. Already those of us nonviolently protesting US Reaper drone assassination and civilian killing in Afghanistan and elsewhere are subject to imprisonment by retrograde local and federal courts. (Think Hancock and Whiteman air force bases.)

Mission creep: Some surveillance drones are designed with bigger things in mind. Some can be converted to weaponized drones, whether lethal or "non-lethal": with license plate and facial recognition technology, crippling lasers, bean bags, rubber bullets, etc…Such devices can be deployed by night (not permitted by those new regs) by criminal, insurgent, terrorist or police elements.

Drone technology is developing rapidly. The projected quantum leap in domestic commercial development will cross-fertilize and boost military drone research – making the police state/empire all the mightier. The commercial leap will contribute to proliferation as other nations and entities scramble for their own regional or global dominance…if only in self-defense. The tinder keeps accumulating. The planet keeps getting less safe.

Dozens of other lesser powers are now importing (mostly from the US or Israel), or looking to develop their own, weaponized drones. This dronification of domestic and foreign policy bodes ill. Not only do drones make the violation of other nations' sovereignty easier, they tempt militarists – state-sponsored and otherwise – to make mini-war. As drones proliferate, assassinations, whether extra-territorial or domestic, thanks to US (and Israeli) precedent, will multiply.

The Pentagon, the CIA, and their ilk, in undermining others' sovereignty, can more blatantly encroach on our own. With drones, the distinction between "over there" and "here" dissolves. What goes around comes around. The drone is altering the power ratio, already lopsided, between we, the citizens, and the US power structure. The drone gives government elements more power than it's prudent to let them have.

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Returning to the FAA: That agency, now struggling to keep up with drone developments, may, with time, publish tested, prudent, responsible, democratic regulations. But like the drone regs thus far, these will be difficult, if not impossible to enforce – even if the FAA were somehow to acquire the will, expertise, political clout and budget to do so.

Export of Armed Drones Approved

The United States government has just eased regulations on selling drones to other countries. According to the New York Times, "*The Obama administration is amending its regulations for weapons sales to allow the export of armed military drones to friendly nations and allies.*" In a later article they say that State Department Officials say "*sales must be made through government programs and that recipient nations must agree to certain 'end-use assurances*.'" However, one of the issues that triggered this is loss of contracts from Israel by armed drone manufactures. Israel uses armed drones to police the border and prosecute wars against the people of Gaza.

The first reference that came up was in Al Jazeera. After that there was UNB (Bangladesh), Ntv (India), Dawn (Pakistan), New Europe (EU), WN, (Australia), and more.

Many countries are interested in this opportunity. According to an Editorial in *Barchart,* a Wall Street Blog, 3 Defense Stocks Ride on New Armed Drone Policy. Of course, the money guys are excited about this policy change as well. The policy itself is a response to demands by General Atomics (maker of Reaper and Predator drones), Northrup Grumman and other manufacturers of armed drones who felt they were losing out on lucrative contracts while Israel, China, Russia and others are developing weaponized drones and entering the market.

Now, when you read that the US will be selling armed drones to our friends and allies, you probably think ‘England, France, Germany . . . ‘, our old friends. Leaving aside the fact that one of these countries was the central opponent in the last world war, whose leadership from that period remain the archetype for evil in international dealings, the fact is that our allies include the Gulf Emirates including Qatar, which is the publisher of Al Jazeera, NATO ally Turkey and Saudi Arabia. These latter countries are governed by conservative regimes that are supporting the Islamist insurgencies and driving much of the violence in the Greater Middle East from Lebanon to Pakistan. Will we sell them armed drones?

Perhaps there remain some restrictions on selling armed drones. But, we are opening Pandora’s Box, and when we will find the bottom, no one can know. One thing is certain, all the demons will fly out first.

For another Upstate Drone Report on this subject, read Mickie Lynn’s latest blog post in the Alabany Times Union, Armed Drones for the World, What a Brilliant Idea!