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Hoosier Robot Killers. Afghanistan Pakistan Private Military Contractors

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The no-frills YouTube video looks like it could be the chronicling of an ambitious science fair project. Inside a spare Indiana warehouse, a young man launches a thin two and a half foot black cylinder into the air, where its propeller blades keep it hovering vertically. Then it moves slowly across the warehouse, past the Purdue University and ROTC signs, before easing its way back into the waiting hands of the same young man who launched it.

But this is no schoolboy experiment, and the small flying cylinder is no model airplane. It is the Voyeur UAV, or unmanned aerial vehicle, also known as a “drone.” According to the website of its manufacturer, West Lafayette-based Lite Machines, Inc., the Voyeur is designed to allow military and law enforcement to conduct surveillance and “human or non-human target acquisition.” The Voyeur can travel as far as 50 miles in the air and can hover over and/or touch its target.

Lite Machines is based in the Purdue Research Park, which promotes the fact that the company has received a $10.5 million contract from the U.S. Navy. The multi-million dollar military investment for a small company in Tippecanoe County represents part of a $4 billion annual Department of Defense budget for UAV technology, a highly secretive world of warcraft, which is being eagerly embraced by U.S. military and intelligence agencies. Last year, for the first time, the U.S. Air Force trained more pilots to operate unmanned vehicles than it did pilots for traditional fighter planes.

But the U.S. drone program is also being sharply criticized for its role in targeted killing in Pakistan and beyond, which has caused significant civilian deaths and which legal experts and peace activists label as both illegal and counter-productive. The Voyeur is one of several Indiana connections to robotic technology that is revolutionizing warfare — for good or for ill.

Other Hoosier sites of drone support include:
• Terre Haute-based Indiana Air National Guard’s 181st Intelligence Wing, which analyzes data collected from drones hovering over Afghanistan and Pakistan and sends back the results to troops in the field.
• The Indianapolis plant of Rolls Royce, one of the largest U.S. military contractors, which manufactures the engine for the drone Global Hawk.
• Southwest Indiana’s Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center, which has received millions of dollars in military contracts to expand the combat capability of drones.

These developments have been touted in elected officials’ press releases applauding the money flowing to Indiana. But some Hoosiers are concerned. “Our state needs jobs, but I hate the fact that people of good conscience may be sucked into the military industrial complex process of creating machines that contribute to the deaths of innocent civilians,” says Lori Perdue, an Air Force veteran and local coordinator for the peace activist group CODEPINK. “If we could create green jobs instead of war jobs, I bet the guy working the line making jet turbines would rather be building a wind turbine.”

The rise of robot killers

Pilotless drones equipped with cameras have been used by the U.S. for military surveillance since the Vietnam War. Drones with names like the Global Hawk and the Predator conducted reconnaissance over Bosnia, Serbia and Yemen, and now regularly fly over Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Shortly after the turn of the century, drones expanded beyond mere surveillance when the Predator was outfitted with Hellfire missiles.

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The drones are operated remotely by computer and video display, often by Air Force personnel in Nevada or Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) staff in Virginia, even when the drone is flying several thousand miles away. The lack of an onboard pilot eliminates direct risk to U.S. personnel, and is part of a movement toward robot-izing military missions chronicled in Brookings Institution senior fellow P.W. Singer's widely acclaimed book, Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century.

As Gordon Johnson of the Pentagon's Joint Forces Command told Singer regarding machines like the drones, "They don't get hungry. They are not afraid. They don't forget their orders. They don't care if the guy next to them has been shot. Will they do a better job than humans? Yes."

The extent of the current U.S. use of drones for attack purposes is not completely clear. The U.S. military and the CIA have resisted requests by Phillip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, for an explanation of the program, and a Freedom of Information Act request for similar information filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has not yet yielded a response. But it is known that the CIA and Joint Special Operations Command maintain a list of individuals to kill or capture, many of them located in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and drone-launched missiles are a preferred method for conducting the assassinations. The New America Foundation recently conducted an extensive study of drone attacks and concluded that the U.S. launched 51 drone missile strikes in Pakistan alone in 2009, with anywhere from 372 to 632 people killed, about a third of whom were civilians.

The election of Barack Obama ushered in an era of significant reliance on drone warfare. Jane Mayer recently reported in The New Yorker that, within three days of Obama taking office, a U.S. Predator airstrike in Pakistan hit the wrong target, killing an entire family including a five-year-old child. Despite that inauspicious beginning, the Obama administration has conducted drone attacks at a rate that far exceeds that seen during the George W. Bush administration. The current CIA director Leon Panetta has said of drone attacks, "Very frankly, it is the only game in town in terms of confronting and disrupting the al Qaeda leadership."

At one strategic level, the attraction is understandable: drone attacks do not put any U.S. soldiers or pilots at immediate risk, and the strikes are potentially more precise than traditional aerial bombing. Recent drone-launched missiles reportedly killed the two top leaders of the Pakistani Taliban. Lack of media access to the rugged areas of Pakistan where drone attacks occur limit the U.S. public's exposure to the unintended effects of such attacks, including the children and civilians killed by Hellfire missiles.

But there is also substantial evidence that drone attacks carry with them significant long-term negative impacts for the U.S. David Kilcullen, who served as a chief counterinsurgency strategist for the U.S. State Department and who helped design the U.S. military surge in Iraq, has estimated that drone attacks kill 50 non-targeted persons for each intended target. Kilcullen told Congress last year that robot-launched missiles lead to a groundswell of anger against the U.S. and spikes of extremism worldwide. New York Times reporter David Rohde recently emerged from seven months as a Taliban hostage to report that his captors' hatred for the U.S. was fueled in part by civilians being killed by drones. "To my captors, they were proof that the United States was a hypocritical and duplicitous power that flouted international law," Rohde wrote.

Cycles of violence and international law

In recent months, an object lesson in drones' role in perpetuating a cycle of violence played itself out in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Multiple drone attacks last summer directed toward Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud reportedly killed over 80 people — many attending funeral services for previous drone strike victims — without

claiming Mehsud. The CIA finally got its man in a well-publicized August 2009 missile strike that also killed Mehsud's wife, physician and in-laws. Then, on December 30th, a CIA informant conducted a suicide mission at a U.S. base in Khost, Afghanistan, killing himself and seven CIA agents. The informant, Hamam al-Balawi, left behind a video stating he intended to avenge Mehsud's death. In response, the U.S. stepped up its drone attacks in Pakistan in early 2010, killing hundreds, including the alleged planner of the al-Balawi suicide bombing.

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It seems inevitable that the cycle of drone violence will soon include robot attacks on U.S. targets as well — over 40 countries are reportedly developing UAV technology, including Iran, Russia and China, and Hezbollah has already deployed UAV's during its 2006 war with Israel. In P.W. Singer's March 23rd testimony to the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, he compared the current state of robotics in war to the early 20th century use of the automobile or the state of computers around 1980. "The point here is that every so often in history, the emergence of a new technology changes our world," Singer told Congress. "Like gunpowder, the printing press, or even the atomic bomb, such 'revolutionary' technologies are gamechangers not merely because of their capabilities, but rather because the ripple effects that they have outwards onto everything from our wars to our politics."

University of Notre Dame law professor Mary Ellen O'Connell, who has conducted a case study of the use of combat drones in Pakistan, says these ripple effects have already led to multiple aspects of U.S. drone warfare directly violating international law. Among the illegal acts O'Connell cites are the CIA's involvement in aerial killing, the targeting of individuals in Pakistan — where the U.S. is not at war and does not have explicit permission from civilian authorities to conduct attacks, and the refusal to provide information to the U.N. regarding the program's criteria for selecting human targets.

She also stresses that the large civilian impact of drone attacks violates centuries-old agreements on the rules of war, which limit military strikes to proportional responses that do not unnecessarily risk the lives of non-combatants. "The questions of legality and effectiveness are bound up in each other," says O'Connell, who advocates for a law enforcement-oriented approach of capture and trial of alleged terrorists. "Most of the rules of international law, especially the law on deadly force, are good for us. Not killing people in a way that foments revenge is a rule that goes back to St. Augustine."

Yet the U.S. drone program is clearly gaining momentum. Seven thousand drones are operated by the U.S. currently, the military budget for drones has more than doubled in just the past four years, and the New America Foundation reports that as many as 211 people have been killed by U.S. drone missiles in just the first three months of 2010. The Star Wars-like technology and the remote locations of drone missile strikes do not seem to suggest an affiliation with Midwest settings, but it turns out that there are several Hoosier connections to this trend in warfare. An ongoing investigation by NUVO, including multiple Freedom of Information Act requests to military agencies, has revealed Indiana-based activity in drone manufacture, research and operations.

Indiana's connections to drone warfare

Department of Defense records indicate that West Lafayette-based Lite Machines received nearly $2.5 million in U.S. military contracts for fiscal year 2008 alone, including a $1.5 million contract from U.S. Special Operations Command for research and development. Lite Machines did not return several messages requesting an interview for this article, but the company's website touts the Voyeur's applications for military and law enforcement, including its ability to locate and detonate improvised explosive devices.

Lite Machines promotes the Voyeur's ability to fly in swarms, and many military observers say that such mini-drones can carry weapons as well as surveillance equipment. "Mini-drones can be used for the same purposes as larger

ones," Notre Dame's O'Connell says. "They can be used like a flying missile with explosives that can be dropped by the drone or the drone itself can be triggered to explode. The sky is the limit here."

The Indiana Air National Guard's 181st Intelligence Wing, based at Terre Haute's International Airport-Hulman Field, embodies the military's transition to robot warfare. In 2008, the base switched from a focus on F-16 fighter jets to processing information gathered by drones. First Lt. Randi Brown, the 181st's executive staff officer, said that the Guardsmen in Terre Haute are reviewing information obtained by Predator drones and relaying their analysis back to troops and aircraft around the world.

"We receive near-real time video feeds from UAV's, and intelligence airmen analyze that information and send it back out," Brown said. "It is like a customer service job, in that we respond to the requests of the folks in the field, whether it be for humanitarian or combat purposes." Although Brown could not confirm whether the 181st has been involved in the planning of controversial bombings in Pakistan or elsewhere, it has been widely reported that such video analysis provides information used to plan and conduct drone missile strikes.

The Indianapolis plant of Rolls Royce, according to Department of Defense reports, received over $473 million in government contracts in fiscal year 2008 alone, in part to pay for the manufacture of the AE 3007H turbofan engine for the drone Global Hawk. While the Global Hawk does not carry or fire missiles like the Predator does, it is known for its ability to cover tens of thousands of square miles in surveillance while staying in the air for up to 35 hours, gathering data that is used for the planning of drone and other military attacks.

Finally, southwest Indiana's Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center received $3 million in 2005 to expand the capability of drones in "electronic warfare," according to a statement by Senator Evan Bayh. Requests for an explanation of Crane drone activity for this article were not replied to, but Freedom of Information Act requests remain pending.

Drone technology's impact seems destined to expand beyond the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan toward more domestic uses. Lite Machines, for example, advertises the Voyeur's law enforcement capacity in addition to its military uses, and mini-drones are known for their ability to perch and observe via tiny video cameras in places where humans cannot go. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection is already flying drones as part of its border security, and the Miami-Dade Police Department has sought and obtained authorization to create a program of drone surveillance in urban law enforcement.

To Notre Dame's O'Connell, the CIA's drone use in Pakistan is already replacing a difficult but achievable law enforcement challenge—arresting and putting to trial suspected terrorists in a country where we are not at war—with summary executions accompanied by civilian casualties Thus, a slippery slope is already being descended. "We quickly moved from using drones just for data collection to weaponizing them, and we quickly moved from battlefield use of drones to killing people beyond the lines of any battlefields," O'Connell says. "So what will keep us from using them with other crimes and in other locations, including the U.S.? In the civilian context, that is something we should definitely be concerned about."

The overall Indiana picture is of a state with substantial and varied ties to a robotics revolution that is already transforming war and may soon do the same for law enforcement and domestic surveillance. While elected officials like Senator Bayh and institutions like Purdue University celebrate Indiana's drone connections as an economic victory in a competition to bring some of the billions of dollars in robotic combat spending to local communities, activists like CODEPINK's Perdue see no reason to celebrate. "It breaks my heart to see what we are doing in Indiana to sustain a form of warfare that both causes civilian deaths and creates problems for the U.S. in terms of our global image," she says.

