

An MQ-1 Predator drone prepares to launch for a night flight mission over southeastern Iraq in July 2009. (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. Air Force/Airman 1st Class Tony Ritter)



by Jack Gilroy

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 25, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I remember well where I was on Oct. 1, 2014. I was handcuffed tighter than I had ever been, wiggling my fingers to keep my hands from going numb. I had been stuffed prostrate between the front and rear seat of an Onondaga Sheriff's Department car in Syracuse, New York.

DeWitt Town Court Judge Robert Jokl had just sent me on my way to the nearby Jamesville Correctional Facility to begin a three-month sentence for my participation in a die-in at the main gate of the New York Air National Guard 174th Attack Wing at Hancock Field killer drone base.

Lying on the floor, squeezed between the seats, I asked the two deputies to give me room to sit. The deputy in the passenger seat called out: "You'll be at the jail in just 15 minutes or so, live with it."

I lived with it, serving 60 days of my 90-day sentence, with time reduced for "good behavior."

But I'm still mad as hell that my U.S. government continues to assassinate "suspected terrorists," expand its drone war and encourage other countries to do the same.

It's time to promote a treaty to ban weaponized and surveillance drones worldwide.

The Predator

When I became aware of the drone protests at Hancock Field, I had written coming-of-age novels about conscientious objectors from World War II and the Vietnam War, but now war was being waged in my own backyard and few seemed to know about it.

The resisters at Hancock were, of course, trying to educate the public. Sadly, even when some Americans did learn of assassinations operating out of United States

drone bases, the acts of drone terror seemed of little importance to them. After all, the terrorists were in foreign lands and we needed to "take them out" and not to worry about Hellfire missiles and bombs since they were in the Middle East, not in Syracuse. Hancock's 174th Attack Wing just did the electronic firing of weapons hovering over suspects thousands of miles away, seen of course by Attack Wing pilots with high-tech drone cameras via satellite.

I researched Predator and Reaper drones, spoke to folks who had been arrested for trespass at Hancock (and was arrested a couple of times myself).

Advertisement

At the time, I was chair of the Peace and Justice Committee at St. James Parish in Johnson City, New York, 75 miles south of Syracuse. The headquarters of the Syracuse Diocese and the leader, Bishop Robert Cunningham, were hiking distance from the nearby weaponized drone base. I had tried for more than two years with letters and phone calls to speak to Cunningham. My intent was to ask him his views on being so close to an institution that orchestrates assassinations, the 174th Attack Wing of the New York National Guard, just up the road a bit from his residence.

Persistence paid off. The bishop agreed to meet with our team of six resisters.

I asked Cunningham what he thought of the morality of the Hancock weaponized drone base. Cunningham said: "It's one way to keep our boys' boots off foreign soil. We don't need to be sending our young men off to war."

Then, a bit later, he noted: "You do know that a lot of Catholics work at Hancock, don't you?"

We had assumed that to be so since we knew Cunningham had assigned one of his priests to minister to Hancock drone pilots.

Realizing that the bishop's office was a dead end, I began to form a play in my mind of a young woman whose mother was a drone pilot at Creech. I decided to go with the title "The Predator," for obvious reasons.

In November 2013, the first staging of "The Predator" was done at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., with students from Syracuse University and the

University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, as actors. The event was the annual Ignatian Family Teach-In. Thankfully, I had a professional to assist, Aetna Thompson, a former member and singer with the satirical group in Washington called "The Capitol Steps."

An eye-catching prop was set up on campus, a facsimile of a Reaper drone designed and made by Nick Mottern, of Hastings on the Hudson, New York, and coordinator of KnowDrones. Nick drove the disassembled mock drone from his home to Route 81 in Scranton, where he showed me how to assemble it and then covered the mock Hellfire missiles with blankets — "just in case a state trooper wonders about these rockets," he said.

'The Predator'

The play "The Predator" is still available to download (and tweak to bring it up to date) for any group to use. Click here to download the script.

The Reaper was my traveling mate in my old Volvo, the fuselage resting on my dashboard and the tail bumping my rear window.

I drove south for our first gig at Georgetown University and then on to Fort Benning, Georgia, where I stationed the Reaper mockup at the entranceway to the Columbus convention center with a large sign tacked onto it, announcing "THE PREDATOR."

"The Predator" had legs, playing in many college campuses and church halls around the nation from around 2013 to 2017.

Did the reflection, the thinking of the outlandish immorality and cowardly killing of people with high-tech American terrorism lead me to write the play? Quite likely, it was a factor. But I felt that what I had done with the play was not enough, hence my arrest and jailing, noted above.

Going international

Weaponized drones have nothing that is praiseworthy. Weaponized drones are unmanned weapons carriers used to assassinate people in foreign (for now) lands. The use of weaponized drones is immoral, illegal, racist (used mainly to kill people of color) and pragmatically stupid. No other nation does what the United States does

frequently — assassinate with weaponized drones in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Libya.

The United States is still the greatest purveyor of violence in the world, and killer drones have become our deadly calling card.

Bill Quigley, a professor of constitutional law at Loyola University New Orleans, has defended protesters arrested for nonviolent actions. At the same time, he is raising awareness of our immoral and illegal acts of killing suspected "terrorists" by weaponized drones — the dead and wounded almost always including innocent civilians.

A 2020 update by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that it has tracked more than 14,000 drone strikes and up to 16,000 people killed by U.S. drones. Most drone victims remain nameless even to congressional oversight committees studying weaponized drones. Armed drones make bitter enemies around the world and create insecurity as they sow hate and vengeance.

It's important to note that President Joe Biden ended his Inauguration speech with "May God bless America and God protect our troops." That is where we are at: praising America and beseeching God to protect our troops. The arms industry and the religious arm of the military-industrial complex must be smiling.

We should encourage the new president of the United States to end weaponized drones and surveillance drones. We must also reach outside our borders and build an international consensus to drone killing and drone surveillance.

I encourage my readers to join the movement to establish an international ban on weaponized and surveillance drones at www.knowdrones.org.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 30-May 13, 2021** print issue under the headline: Why I support a treaty to ban weaponized and surveillance drones.