

School Shooters and Drones

Allegra Harpootlian links gun violence at home to U.S. wars abroad.

By [Allegra Harpootlian](#)

[TomDispatch.com](#)



In the wake of the Feb. 14, 2018, mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 students and staff members, a teacher [said](#) the school looked “like a war zone.” And to many young Americans, that’s exactly what it felt like. But this shooting was different. Refusing to be victims, Parkland survivors disrupted the [“thoughts and prayers”](#) cycle by immediately rallying student activists and adults across the country, mobilizing them around such tragedies and the [weapons of war](#) that often facilitate them.

[Recent history](#) suggested that such a movement, sure to be unable to keep the public’s attention or exert significant pressure on lawmakers, would collapse almost instantly. Yet, miraculously enough, the same fear – of their school being next – that had kept young Americans paralyzed for almost 20 years was what drove these newly impassioned activists not to back down.

Let me say that, much as I admire them, I look at their remarkable movement from an odd perspective. You see, I grew up in the “school-shooting era” and now work for a non-profit called [ReThink Media](#) tracking coverage of the American drone war that has been going on for 17 years.

To me, the U.S. military and CIA drones that hover constantly over eight countries across the Greater Middle East and Africa, and regularly terrorize, maim, and kill civilians, including children, are the equivalents of the disturbed shooters in American schools. But that story is hard to find anywhere in this country. What reports Americans do read about those drone strikes usually focus on successes (a major terrorist taken out in a distant land), not the “collateral damage.”

With that in mind, let me return to those teenage activists against gun violence who quickly grasped three crucial things. The first was that such violence can't be dealt with by focusing on gun control alone. You also have to confront the other endemic problems exacerbating the gun violence epidemic, including inadequate mental health resources, systemic racism and police brutality, and the depth of economic inequality. As Parkland teen organizer Edna Chavez explained, “Instead of police officers we should have a department specializing in restorative justice. We need to tackle the root causes of the issues we face and come to an understanding of how to resolve them.”

The second was that, no matter how much you shouted, you had to be aware of the privilege of being heard. In other words, when you shouted, you had to do so not just for yourself but for all those voices so regularly drowned out in this country. After all, black Americans represent the majority of gun homicide victims. Black children are 10 times as likely to die by gun and yet their activism on the subject has been largely demonized or overlooked even as support for the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students rolled

in.

The third was that apathy is the enemy of progress, which means that to make change you have to give people a sense of engagement and empowerment. As one of the Parkland students, [Emma Gonzalez](#), put it: “What matters is that the majority of American people have become complacent in a senseless injustice that occurs all around them.”

Washington’s Expanding Drone Wars

Here’s the irony, though: while those teenagers continue to talk about the repeated killing of innocents in this country, their broader [message](#) could easily be applied to another type of violence that, in all these years, Americans have paid next to no attention to: the U.S. drone war.

Unlike school shootings, drone strikes killing civilians in distant lands rarely make the news here, much less the headlines. Most of us at least now know what it means to live in a country where school shootings are an almost weekly news story. Drones are another matter entirely, and beyond the innocents they so regularly slaughter, there are long-term effects on the communities they are attacking.

As [Veterans for Peace](#) put it, “Here at home, deaths of students and others killed in mass shootings and gun violence, including suicide gun deaths, are said to be the price of freedom to bear arms. Civilian casualties in war are written off as ‘collateral damage,’ the price of freedom and U.S. security.”

And yet, after 17 years, three presidents, and little transparency, America’s drone wars have never truly made it

into the national conversation. Regularly marketed over those years as “precise” and “surgical,” drones have always been seen by lawmakers as a “sexy,” casualty-free solution to fighting the bad guys, while protecting American blood and treasure.

According to reports, President Donald Trump actually expanded the U.S. global drone war, while removing the last shreds of transparency about what those drones are doing – and even who’s launching them. One of his first orders on entering the Oval Office was to secretly reinstate the CIA’s ability to launch drone strikes that are, in most cases, not even officially acknowledged. And since then, it’s only gotten worse. Just last week, he revoked an Obama-era executive order that required the director of national intelligence to release an annual report on civilian and combatant casualties caused by CIA drones and other lethal operations. Now, not only are the rules of engagement – whom you can strike and under what circumstances– secret, but the Pentagon no longer even reveals when drones have been used, no less when civilians die from them. Because of this purposeful opaqueness, even an estimate of the drone death toll no longer exists.

Still, in the data available on all U.S. airstrikes since Trump was elected, an alarming trend is discernible: there are more of them, more casualties from them, and ever less accountability about them. In Iraq and Syria alone, the monitoring group Airwars believes that the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS is responsible for between 7,468 and 11,841 civilian deaths, around 2,000 of whom were children.

(The U.S.-led coalition, however, only admits to killing 1,139 civilians.)

In Afghanistan, the U.N. recently found that U.S. airstrikes (including drone strikes) had killed approximately the same number of Afghan civilians in 2018 as in the previous three years put together. In response to this report, the U.S.-led NATO mission there claimed that “all feasible precautions” were being taken to limit civilian casualties and that it investigates all allegations of their occurrence. According to such NATO investigations, airstrikes by foreign forces caused 117 civilian casualties last year, including 62 deaths – about a fifth of the U.N. tally.

And those are only the numbers for places where Washington is officially at war. In Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and Libya, even less information is available on the number of civilians the U.S. has killed. Experts who track drone strikes in such gray areas of conflict, however, place that number in the thousands, though there is no way to confirm them, as even our military acknowledges. U.S. Army Colonel Thomas Veale, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, put it this way last year: “As far as how do we know how many civilians were killed, I am just being honest, no one will ever know. Anyone who claims they will know is lying, and there’s no possible way.”

After a U.S. strike killed or injured an entire Afghan family, the trauma surgeon treating a 4-year-old survivor told NBC, “I am sad. A young boy with such big injuries. No eyes, brain out. What will be his future?”

In other words, while America’s teenagers fight in the most

public way possible for their right to live, a world away [Afghanistan's](#) teenagers are [marching](#) for the same thing – except instead of gun control, in that heavily armed land, they want peace.

Trauma Is Trauma Is Trauma

Gun violence – and school shootings in particular – have become the preeminent fear of American teenagers. A [Pew poll](#) taken last year found that 57 percent of teens are worried about a shooting at their school (1-in-4 are “very worried.”) This is even truer of nonwhite teens, with roughly two-thirds of them expressing such fear.

As one student told [Teen Vogue](#): “How could you not feel a little bit terrified knowing that it happens so randomly and so often?” And she’s not exaggerating. More than 150,000 students in the U.S have experienced a shooting on campus since the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, considered the first modern mass school shooting.

And in such anticipatory anxiety, American students have much in common with victims of drone warfare. Speaking to researchers from Stanford University, [Haroon Quddoos](#), a Pakistani taxi driver who survived two U.S. drone strikes, explained it this way:

“No matter what we are doing, that fear is always inculcated in us. Because whether we are driving a car, or we are working on a farm, or we are sitting home playing... cards – no matter what we are doing, we are always thinking the drone will strike us. So we are scared to do anything, no matter what.”

Similar symptoms of post-traumatic stress, trauma, and anxiety are commonplace emotions in countries where U.S. drones are active, just as in American communities like Parkland that have lived through a mass shooting. Visiting communities in Yemen that experienced drone strikes, forensic psychologist Peter Schaapveld found that 92 percent of their inhabitants were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with children the most significantly affected. Psychologists have come up with similar figures when studying both survivors of school shootings and children who have been psychologically affected by school-lockdown drills, by the media's focus on violence, and by the culture of fear that has developed in response to mass shootings.

Voices Left Out

The Parkland students have created a coherent movement that brings together an incredibly diverse group united around a common goal and a belief that all gun violence victims, not just those who have experienced a mass shooting, need to be heard. As one Parkland survivor and leader of the March For Our Lives movement, David Hogg, put it, the goal isn't to talk for different communities, but to let them "speak for themselves and ask them how we can help."

The Parkland survivors have essentially created an echo chamber, amplifying the previously unheard voices of young African-Americans and Latinos in particular. At last year's March For Our Lives, for instance, 11-year-old Naomi Wadler started her speech this way: "I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African-American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national

newspaper, whose stories don't lead the evening news."

In 2016, there were nearly 39,000 gun deaths, more than 14,000 of them homicides and almost 23,000 suicides. Such routine gun violence disproportionately affects black Americans. Mass shootings accounted for only about 1.2 percent of all gun deaths that year. Yet the Parkland students made headlines and gained praise for their activism – Oprah Winfrey even donated \$500,000 to the movement – while black communities that had been fighting gun violence for years never received anything similar.

As someone who spends a lot of her time engrossed in the undercovered news of drone strikes, I can't help but notice the parallels. Stories about U.S. drone strikes taking out dangerous terrorists proliferate, while reports on U.S.-caused civilian casualties disappear into the void. For example, in January, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command claimed that a precision drone strike finally killed Jamel Ahmed Mohammed Ali al-Badawi, the alleged mastermind behind the deadly October 2000 suicide bombing of the *USS Cole* in Yemen. Within a day, more than 24 media outlets had covered the story.

Few, however, focused on the fact that the U.S. command only claimed al-Badawi's death was "likely," despite similar reports about such terrorists that have repeatedly been proven wrong. The British human rights group Reprieve found back in 2014 that even when drone operators end up successfully targeting specific individuals like al-Badawi, they regularly kill vastly more people than their chosen targets. Attempts to kill 41 terror figures, Reprieve reported, resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,147

people. That was five years ago, but there's no reason to believe anything has changed.

By contrast, when a U.S. airstrike – it's not clear whether it was a drone or a manned aircraft – killed at least 20 civilians in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in December 2018, only four American media outlets (Reuters, the Associated Press, Voice of America, and The New York Times) covered the story and none followed up with a report on those civilians and their families. That has largely been the norm since the war on terror began with the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. In the Trump years so far, while headlines scream about mass school shootings and other slaughters of civilians here, the civilian casualties of America's wars and the drone strikes that often go with them are, if anything, even more strikingly missing in action in the media.

When Safa al-Ahmad, a journalist for PBS's Frontline, was asked why she thought it was important to hear from Yemenis experiencing American drone strikes, she responded:

“I think if you're going to talk about people, you should go talk to them. It's just basic respect for other human beings. It really bothered me that everyone was just talking about the Americans... The other civilians, they weren't given any names, they weren't given any details. It was like an aside to the story... This is part of the struggle when you construct stories on foreign countries, when it comes to the American public. I think we've done [Americans] a disservice, by not doing more of this... We impact the world, we should understand it. An informed public is the only way there can be a functioning democracy. That is our duty as a

democracy, to be informed.”

This one-sided view of America’s never-ending air wars fails everyone, from the people being asked to carry out Washington’s decisions in those lands to ordinary Americans who have little idea what’s being done in their name to the many people living under those drones. Americans should know that, to them, it’s we who seem like the school shooters of the planet.

Waking Up an Apathetic Nation

For the better part of two decades, young Americans have been trapped in a cycle of violence at home and abroad with little way to speak out. Gun violence in this country was a headline-grabbing given. School shootings, like so many other mass killings here, were deemed “tragic” and worthy of thoughts, prayers, and much fervid media attention, but little else.

Until Parkland.

What changed? Well, a new cohort, Generation Z, came on the scene and, unlike their millennial predecessors, many of them are refusing to accept the status quo, especially when it comes to issues like gun violence.

Every time there was a mass shooting, millennials would hold their breath, wondering if today would be the day the country finally woke up. After Newtown. After San Bernadino. After Las Vegas. And each time, it wasn’t. Parkland could have been the same, if it hadn’t been for those meddling kids. Having witnessed the dangers of apathy, Gen-Z seems increasingly to be about movement and action. In fact,

in a Vice youth survey, 71 percent of respondents reported feeling “capable” of enacting change around global warming and 85 percent felt the same about social problems. And that’s new.

For so long, gun violence seemed like an unstoppable, incurable plague. Fed up with the “adults in the room,” however, these young activists have begun to take matters into their own hands, giving those particularly at risk of gun violence, children, a sense of newfound power – the power to determine their own futures. Whether it’s testifying in front of Congress in the first hearing on gun violence since 2011, protesting at the stores and offices of gun manufacturers, or participating in “die-ins,” these kids are making their voices heard.

Since the Parkland massacre, there has been actual movement on gun control, something that America has not seen for a long time. Under pressure, the Justice Department moved to ban the bump stocks that can make semi-automatic weapons fire almost like machine guns, Florida signed a \$400 million bill to tighten the state’s gun laws, companies began to cut ties with the National Rifle Association, and public support grew for stricter gun control laws.

Although the new Gen Z activists have focused on issues close to home, sooner or later they may start to look beyond the water’s edge and find themselves in touch with their counterparts across the globe, who are showing every day how dedicated they are to changing the world they live in, with or without anyone’s help. And if they do, they will find that, in its endless wars, America has been the true

school shooter on this planet, terrorizing the global classroom with a remarkable lack of consequences.

In March 2018, [according to](#) Human Rights Watch, American planes bombed a school that housed displaced people in Syria, killing dozens of them, including children. Similarly, in Yemen that August, a Saudi plane, using a [Pentagon-supplied](#) laser-guided bomb, blew away a school bus, killing 40 schoolchildren. Just as at home, it's not only about the weaponry like those planes or drones. Activists will find that they have to focus their attention as well on the root causes of such violence and the scars they leave behind in the communities of survivors.

More tolerant, more [diverse](#), less trustful of major institutions and less inclined to believe in American exceptionalism than any generation before them, Generation Z may be primed to care about what their country is doing in their name from Afghanistan to Syria, Yemen to Libya. But first they have to know it's happening.

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Moral Corrosion of Drone Warfare

Exclusive: The U.S. government uses drones to eliminate risk to its soldiers and

thus domestic opposition to war, but that heightens the moral imperative to challenge the remote-controlled killings, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Required by court order to appear before a judge in Syracuse, New York, on July 12, some out-of-towners had already arrived there when the court granted the prosecution's last-minute request for more time to prepare its case against us, the Jerry Berrigan Brigade, for our nonviolent witness against drone warfare on Jan. 28, 2016. A trial date is likely to be set in a month or two, or perhaps three (so much for our Sixth Amendment right to a speedy trial).

Back in January 2016, we stood behind 30 larger-than-life-sized wooden silhouettes of Syracuse peacemaker Jerry Berrigan, who died at age 95 on July 26, 2015.

A widely loved and respected educator, Jerry – like his brothers Dan and Phil – was himself larger than life. Even in his early 90s, Jerry could be seen braving the elements, witnessing against the extrajudicial killings enabled by Hancock drone base in Syracuse.

Jerry was asked at one point if there were anything he would change in his life. "I would have resisted more often and been arrested more often," he said.

On Jan. 28, 2016, we – the Jerry Berrigan Brigade – brought images of Jerry to the gates of Hancock as a tangible reminder that this is where he would have been standing that day, putting his body on the line to say a clear, physical "NO" to killing. Jerry's widow and daughter were there with us, cheering us on.

Most Americans are blissfully unaware that, from states-side drone bases like Hancock, drone "pilots" – with a push of the joystick, a click of a mouse, or simply a keystroke – can incinerate "suspected terrorists," on the other side of the globe WITHIN THREE SECONDS.

Thanks to a media that is heavily influenced by what Pope Francis (speaking before Congress in 2015) called the "blood-drenched arms traders," it's largely a comfortable case of out-of-sight-out-of-mind. However, the more the killing is hidden, the more we feel a moral imperative to bring the killing out into the open and appeal to the consciences of U.S. citizens – including those of drone "pilots" many of whom have moral qualms about what they are being ordered to do and end up with bad cases of PTSD.

Many of us protesters – Catholic Workers and Jewish grandmothers alike – take our cue from anti-war activist Rabbi Heschel, who braced us all with this

admonition: “When injustice takes place, few are guilty, but all are responsible. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.”

Rabbi Heschel got that right. And Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. reassured us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But how long and how to make it bend?

Seventeen-plus months since our Jerry Berrigan Brigade witness at Hancock, we cannot avoid wondering just how long it will take for our case to find justice. Nor are we sure what kind of “justice” will befall us. Whatever it is, though, it will be a small price to pay, when one considers the price paid by families who slip into the crosshairs of drone-fired Hellfire missiles.

Some well-meaning soul suggested we consider apologizing – a notion far from our minds. Were we to issue an apology, it would be patterned on the one given by Jerry Berrigan’s brothers Dan and Phil and the others of the Catonsville Nine, who burned draft cards with homemade napalm 50 years ago at the height of the war in Vietnam:

“Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children.”

Good Friday Witness, 2017

“Justice” is likely to be meted out more quickly to those of us who decided that Good Friday this year would be a fitting time to honor the memory of innocent victims of Empire, given what happened to Jesus of Nazareth when he challenged Empire. This time nine nonviolent resisters, including from Upstate Drone Action and Catholic Worker, were arrested at the main entrance to Hancock drone base witnessing against Hancock’s role in drone killings.

Three hung on large wooden drone crosses representing victims of U.S. drone strikes in seven majority Muslim countries. Eleven others held smaller drone crosses headed by the phrase, “DRONES CRUCIFY,” each followed by one of these: Children, Families, Love, Peace, Community, the US Constitution, UN Charter, Rule of Law, US Treaties, Due Process, or Diplomacy (in all, 14 “Stations of the Cross”). All the crosses were confiscated by Base personnel.

Perceiving a need to explain our Good Friday action we issued a statement, that includes the following:

“Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus. Recognizing that 70% of our

nation identify as Christian, we come to the gates of the Hancock drone base to make real the crucifixion today. As Jesus and others were crucified by the Roman Empire, drones are used by the U.S. Empire in similar fashion.

“In Roman times, crosses loomed over a community to warn people that they could be killed whenever the Empire decided. So, too, our drones fly over many countries threatening extrajudicial killings upon whoever happens to be in the vicinity. On this Good Friday, we recall Jesus’ call to love and nonviolence. We’re asking this Air Force base and this nation to turn away from a policy of modern-day crucifixion.

“What if our country were constantly being spied upon by drones, with some ‘suspected terrorists’ killed by drones? What if many bystanders, including children, were killed in the process? If that were happening, we would hope that some people in that attacking country would speak up and try to stop the killing. We’re speaking up to try and stop the illegal and immoral drone attacks on countries against which Congress has not declared war.”

(A [five-minute video](#) of Nativity Scene Action at Hancock, the theme of which was: “If Herod Had Drones, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Would Have Been Incinerated.”)

Several of those arrested on Good Friday, including me, were the same “perps” awaiting trial for the action of our Jerry Berrigan Brigade action a year and a half ago. But the judge hearing this more recent case told us when we appeared before him on July 13 that he will now set a trial date for us Good Friday protesters.

Other Witness Against Drones

Over the last couple of years there have been many protest actions and arrests at one of the most important drone bases – Creech AFB in Nevada, where many from many parts of the U.S. and abroad have demonstrated against the brutality of drone killing.

Lesser known are actions in other parts of the country to raise awareness of the expansion of drone bases in localities like Des Moines, Iowa. There the Des Moines Catholic Worker and Veterans For Peace have launched a campaign to call attention to the drone assassinations in which the 132nd Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard plays a role from Des Moines airport. There have been several arrests, trials, and convictions.

The July issue of the Des Moines Catholic Worker community newspaper, *Via Pacis*, carries the words of Frank Cordaro, a Catholic priest, before his latest arrest in late May at the National Guard drone command in Des Moines. Frank reached

back to the prophet Ezekiel to address the imperative to “blow the trumpet,” saying:

“This protest is an Ezekiel ‘Watchman’ witness. Ezekiel was a priest of the First Temple and only became a prophet after he was kicked out of Jerusalem and sent into captivity in Babylon. Once there, he started to have visions: ‘The Lord said to me, when the Watchman sees the sword coming against the land, he should blow the trumpet to warn the people.’

“The Des Moines Catholic Worker community has been a kind of Watchman for the city of Des Moines on the issues of war and peace for the past 40 years. It’s probably because we Catholic Workers have been protesting US-led wars for over 80 years nationally and 40 in Des Moines. And it’s very personal for me too. I grew up on the south side of Des Moines and this airport is just blocks away from the neighborhood I grew up in.”

Needed: more Watchmen and Watchwomen. A drone base may soon be coming to your own neighborhood.

Ray McGovern works for a publishing arm of the Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He has written about the moral imperative of activism and tries to heed it. He was an Army officer and then a CIA analyst for 30 years, and is now on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Finding New Homes for Lethal Drones

America’s expanded use of drone warfare to kill targets half a world away is spreading from a base outside Las Vegas to other state-side locales, including Syracuse, New York, as Norman Solomon discovered.

By Norman Solomon

At dusk I stood on a residential street with trim lawns and watched planes approach a runaway along the other side of a chain-link fence. Just a few dozen yards away, a JetBlue airliner landed. Then a United plane followed. But the next aircraft looked different. It was a bit smaller and had no markings or taillights. A propeller whirled at the back. And instead of the high-pitched screech of a jet, the sound was more like ... a drone.

During the next half-hour I saw three touch-and-go swoops by drones, their

wheels scarcely reaching the runway before climbing back above Syracuse's commercial airport. Nearby, pilots were at the controls in front of Air Force computers, learning how to operate the MQ-9 Reaper drone that is now a key weapon of U.S. warfare from Afghanistan to the Middle East to Africa.

Since last summer the Defense Department has been using the runway and airspace at the Syracuse Hancock International Airport to train drone operators, who work at the adjoining Air National Guard base. Officials say it's the first time that the federal government has allowed military drones to utilize a commercial airport. It won't be the last time.

No longer will the pilots who steer drones and fire missiles while staring at computer screens be confined to remote areas like the Nevada desert. With scant public information or debate, sizable American communities are becoming enmeshed in drone warfare on other continents. Along the way, how deeply will we understand – in human terms – what the drone war is doing to people far away? And to us?

Seen But Not Seen

The takeoffs and landings of military drones at the Syracuse airport get little attention in New York's fifth-largest city. Already routine, the maneuvers are hardly noticed. In an elevator at a hotel near the airport, I mentioned the Reaper drone exercises to an American Airlines flight attendant who had just landed on the same runway as the drones. "I had no idea," she said.

The Reaper drones using the Syracuse runway are unarmed, the Air Force says. But when trainees go operational, their computer work includes aiming and launching Hellfire missiles at targets many thousands of miles away.

Despite the official claims that drone strikes rarely hit civilians, some evidence says otherwise. For example, leaked classified documents (obtained by *The Intercept*) shed light on a series of U.S. airstrikes codenamed Operation Haymaker. From January 2012 to February 2013, those drone attacks in northeast Afghanistan killed more than 200 people, but only about one-sixth of them were the intended targets.

Even without a missile strike, there are traumatic effects of drones hovering overhead. The former *New York Times* reporter David Rohde has described what he experienced during captivity by the Taliban in tribal areas of Pakistan: "The drones were terrifying. From the ground, it is impossible to determine who or what they are tracking as they circle overhead. The buzz of a distant propeller is a constant reminder of imminent death."

As civic leaders in Syracuse and elsewhere embrace the expanding domestic

involvement in day-to-day drone warfare, clear mention of the human toll far away is almost taboo. Elected officials join with business groups and public-relations officers from the military in extolling the benefits and virtues. Rarely does anyone acknowledge that civilians are maimed and killed as a result of the extolled activities, or that – in the name of a “war on terror” – people in foreign lands are subjected to the airborne presence of drones that is (to use Rohde’s word) “terrifying.”

Such matters are a far cry from Syracuse, where the local airport’s role in drone warfare is visible yet virtually unseen. My random conversations with dozens of Syracuse residents in many walks of life turned up scant knowledge or concern about the nearby drone operations. What’s front and center is the metropolitan area’s economic distress.

Unlike the well-financed Air National Guard base, the city’s crumbling infrastructure and budgets for relieving urban blight are on short rations. When I talked with people in low-income neighborhoods of Syracuse – one of the poorest cities in the United States – despair was often unmistakable. A major study by the Century Foundation identified Syracuse as the city with the highest concentrations of poverty among African-Americans and Hispanics in the United States. Locally, the latest influx of federal largesse is for the drone war, not for them.

Opposing the Drones

A group called Upstate Drone Action has been protesting at the Air National Guard base on the outskirts of Syracuse with frequent vigils and persistent civil disobedience. A recent demonstration, on Good Friday, included nine arrests.

The participants said in a joint statement: “What if our country were constantly being spied upon by drones, with some of us killed by drones? What if many bystanders, including children, were killed in the process? If that were happening, we would hope that some people in that attacking country would speak up and try to stop the killing. We’re speaking up to try and stop the illegal and immoral drone attacks on countries against which Congress has not declared war.”

The last couple of months have not gone well for authorities trying to discourage civil disobedience – what organizers call “civil resistance” – at the base. In early March, a jury in the Dewitt Town Court took just half an hour to acquit four defendants on all charges from an action two years ago that could have resulted in a year behind bars for disorderly conduct, trespassing and obstruction of government administration.

Later in March, citing a lack of jurisdiction, a local judge dismissed charges against four people who set up a “nativity tableau” in front of the main gate at the Hancock Air Force Base two days before Christmas last year. In a press release, Upstate Drone Action said that the activists had been “protesting the hunter/killer MQ-9 Reaper drones piloted over Afghanistan by the 174th Attack Wing of the New York National Guard” at the base.

Expanding War

The U.S. drone war is escalating in numerous countries. A year ago the head of the Air Combat Command, Gen. Herbert Carlisle, told a Senate subcommittee that “an insatiable demand” was causing U.S. drone operations to grow at a “furious pace.” That pace has become even more furious since President Trump took office. In early April a researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations, Micah Zenko, calculated that President Trump had approved an average of one drone attack per day – a fivefold increase from the rate under the Obama administration.

Upstate New York is leading the way for the Pentagon’s plan to expand its drone program from isolated areas into populous communities, which offer ready access to workers. One hundred and sixty miles to the west of Syracuse, just outside the city of Niagara Falls, an Air National Guard base – the largest employer in the county – is in the final stages of building a cutting-edge digital tech center with huge bandwidth. There, pilots and sensor operators will do shifts at computer consoles, guiding MQ-9 drones and firing missiles on kill missions. The center is on track to become fully operational in a matter of months.

At the main gate of the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station, a sergeant from the public-affairs office was upbeat about the base “operating the MQ-9 remotely piloted aircraft.” At city hall the mayor of Niagara Falls, a liberal Democrat, sounded no less pleased, while carefully sidestepping my questions about whether he could see any downsides to the upcoming drone role. A local businessman who chairs the Niagara Military Affairs Council – a private organization that has long spearheaded efforts to prevent closure of the base – told me that getting the drone mission was crucial for keeping the base open.

In such ways, functioning locally while enabling globally, the political economy and mass psychology of militarism do the work of the warfare state.

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