



The NSA's Eye in the Sky: Blimp Spies on Americans

The surveillance hawks — it would appear — are never satisfied. When it comes to harvesting the data of American citizens, their mantra seems to be “too much is never enough.” The most recently revealed tool in the considerable arsenal of the surveillance state is a three-engine blimp equipped with eavesdropping apparatus.

As the online magazine [The Intercept](#) is [reporting](#), the 62-foot diameter airship — ominously named the Hover Hammer — was fitted “with an eavesdropping device” back in 2004. The Intercept published a classified document on Monday as part of the Snowden Archive. That [classified document](#) shows that the Hover Hammer “can be manned or remotely piloted and has already done demonstration flights up to 10,700 feet” including a test in which “the airship launched from an airfield near Solomons Island, Maryland and was able to intercept international shipping data emanating from the Long Island, New York area, including lines of bearing.” Just to clarify, both Maryland and Long Island, New York, are in the United States, so the fact that the Hover Hammer intercepted “international shipping data” is considerably less than the whole story. In sweeping up that data, the “Digital Receiver Technology model 1301 receiver onboard the airship” undoubtedly also picked up domestic communications — including mobile phone calls, texts, mobile data traffic, and presumably WiFi and other signals.



Moreover, since the document — dated August 9, 2004 — also says that other experiments were being conducted at that time “including the use of onboard imagery sensors,” it is a foregone conclusion that the past 13 years have been a heyday of domestic surveillance for the NSA (which operates the aircraft) and other three-letter-agencies that make up the surveillance state. After all, “imagery sensors” is just tech jargon for “cameras.” It is to be expected that these “imagery sensors” would include heat signature sensors as well as infrared sensors. This aircraft — even as it existed in 2004 — is a surveillance dream come true and a privacy living nightmare.



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Of course, it is certain that the aircraft is not what it was in 2004; technology never stands still. In fact, the classified document — leaked by Snowden and only recently published by The Intercept as part of the [Snowden Archive](#) — shows that in 2004, the craft was already being sized up for more changes than just the addition of onboard imagery sensors:

The current plans are to develop the airship for unmanned operations at altitudes of approximately 20,000 feet for up to 48 hours. Future variants are planned to be 200 feet in diameter and will operate at 68,000 feet with mission durations of up to six months. NTIO and S3's Tactical Platforms are already collaborating on options for deploying SIGINT systems on this platform.

So, bigger is better in the darkened minds of the surveillance hawks. If the Hover Hammer could read signals from Maryland to Long Island being a mere 62 feet in diameter and topping out at flights reaching just under 11,000 feet, imagine what could be done with a 200-foot diameter craft flying at 68,000 feet.

And, as The Intercept's Ryan Gallagher pointed out in the article linked above, these eyes in the sky are big business for the surveillance state, which has big plans for them:

In recent years, airships — or aerostats, as they are formally called — have been a source of major military investment. Between 2006 and 2015, the U.S. Army [paid Raytheon some \\$1.8 billion](#) to develop a massive missile-defense blimp called the JLENS, which is equipped with powerful radar that can scan in any direction 310 miles. (That's almost the entire length of New York state.) In October 2015, the JLENS attracted national attention after one [became untethered](#) amid testing and drifted north from Maryland to Pennsylvania before it was brought back under control. In 2010, the Army commissioned another three airships — called Long Endurance Multi-Intelligence Vehicles — as part of [a \\$517 million contract](#) with Northrop Grumman. The company stated that the airships would “shape the future” of the military's intelligence-gathering capabilities and provide a “persistent unblinking stare” from the sky.

Of course, the surveillance hawks are not the least bit above misleading or even outright lying to the American people for whom they presumably work. As The Intercept article says:

Unsurprisingly, privacy groups have expressed concerns about the prospect of the blimps being used domestically to spy on Americans. However, military officials have often been quick to dismiss such fears. In August 2015, Lt. Shane Glass [told Baltimore broadcaster WBAL](#) that the JLENS blimps being tested in Maryland were not equipped with cameras or eavesdropping devices. “There are no cameras on the system, and we are not capable of tracking any individuals,” Glass stated.

Even if that were true — and considering the fact that the surveillance state is populated by pathological liars, that would be a thin limb to go out on — it is irrelevant. JLENS is small fries compared to the Hover Hammer, and there are likely other such aircraft that we know nothing of yet.

While Americans have known about much of what the three-letter-agencies of the surveillance state have been up to, the truth, it turns out, is even darker than many may have imagined. The surveillance hawks have built their [Panopticon](#); they just built it in the sky. The all-seeing eye giving them a “persistent unblinking stare” means that when the surveillance hawks in both the intelligence community and Congress have complained about the problem of terrorists and other criminals “going dark,” they were lying.

This does — of course — underscore the importance of encrypting as much of your data and communications as possible. Encryption truly is the great equalizer in the battle for digital privacy. As



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this writer has said time and again: [encrypt everything](#). If the surveillance hawks are going to take to the skies to harvest your data, make them waste their time (and your money) harvesting unintelligible gibberish that does them no good (and you no harm) without the decryption keys.

Image: Screenshot of [YouTube video](#) of Raytheon JLENS airship



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