



CHALLENGE OF DRONES IN AMERICA

By Molly Nance

It's not every day that a drone flies over the Capitol, hovers over the National Mall, or crash lands on the White House lawn. But over the last few decades, it has happened—and each time, the same question surfaces from federal leadership: “Why didn't you shoot it down?”

This question was asked of Cathy Lanier (MA 0401/0402) when she was the Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) in Washington, D.C. between 2007–2016. Lanier would explain that law enforcement cannot fire into the air over Washington, D.C.; additionally, the act of hitting a small, fast-moving drone with a handgun is not realistic. At the time, when Lanier was police chief, there were no policies or tools which authorized the D.C. police to stop a drone—even if it appeared to pose a threat.

“Rules of engagement for law enforcement are not the same as rules of engagement for the military,” Lanier said. “Trying to shoot down a drone moving at those speeds and that size? Not as easy as one might think.”

Years later, the conversation is still taking place. In June 2025, the current administration introduced two Executive Orders—Unleashing American Drone Dominance (EO 14307) and Restoring America's Airspace Sovereignty (EO 14305)—to strengthen domestic drone manufacturing, clarify federal guidance, and address security risks posed by foreign-made drones. These executive orders now allow state and local officials to do training on counter-drone equipment. But training does not grant authority—and actual mitigation authority must come from law, which, for most state and local agencies, remains limited.

“Not having a viable means to mitigate drones in this country is inexcusable,” said Lanier, who is now the Chief Security Officer for the NFL.

Although the technology to detect and track drones exists, only four federal agencies currently have the authority to disable them, leaving most responders without mitigation power. Congressional efforts to expand counter-drone authority and pilot state and local programs have been introduced but not yet fully realized.

“We've seen what drones can do globally, from cartel operations in Mexico to attacks on police in Brazil and warfare in Ukraine,” Lanier added. “Congress needs to move.”

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—CATHY LANIER

While federal policy moves slower than mud, local agencies are adapting. For Captain Joe Finch (MA 1501/1502) of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD), their drone program started in 2018 with a single drone purchased from Best Buy. Today, the department operates more than 80 drones with over 60 trained pilots, making it one of the largest police drone programs in the country. Legislative and executive action is also underway in Indiana.

“Our governor just signed the “Indiana Initiative for Drone Dominance,” and part of that is getting local law enforcement more involved in defensive uses of drones and counter-drone work,” Finch said. “Our community is not hesitant about cameras

or drones, and our elected officials are very supportive.” Indiana is currently pitching to be one of the new national drone test sites for the FAA.

IMPD uses drones for search and rescue, suspect apprehension, crash reconstruction, and has tested a Drone as First Responder (DFR) model, where drones launch automatically on certain 911 calls, providing information to officers before they arrive on scene. In some cases, suspects surrendered simply because they realized the drone had already located them.

To maintain flexibility in emergencies, IMPD operates under a Certificate of Authorization (COA) from the FAA, which includes the FAA's Part 107 waiver for beyond visual line of sight (BVLOS) operations. This waiver allows officers to fly drones outside a pilot's line of sight during critical incidents, such as active shooter situations or large-scale events.

Without the COA, departments operating under only Part 107 rules would need to request BVLOS permission from the FAA. This process can take months—far too long for real-time emergencies. IMPD renews its COA every two years.

“If there's an active shooter on a rooftop, we are going to take the aircraft and do what's necessary to stop the killing. The waiver gives us that ability without waiting months for FAA approval,” said Sgt. Ron Shelnett, head of the IMPD's drone program. “One of the most powerful things these drones do is de-escalate situations.”

The department also uses drones during major events including parades, NFL games and NCAA Final Four.

Cities nationwide prepare for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, where 11 NFL stadiums will host the matches. At the national level, these events

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Cathy Lanier, Senior Vice President Security National Football League, MA0401/0402



Captain Joe Finch, Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, MA1501/1502



Angi English, Doctoral Candidate, Intelligence and Global Security, NPS-CHDS, MA1303/1304

show how drone security shifts from local improvisation to large-scale coordination.

"We've shared our best practices with FIFA," Lanier said. "Our stadiums operate under DHS Safety Act protections, which means we follow extremely progressive and aggressive standards for hardening facilities and events."

Lanier explained that operators must be certified pilots with strong safety records. The NFL coordinates frequencies with broadcasters and, for large-scale events, may involve FAA air traffic controllers.

While frontline agencies focus on operations, the broader strategic picture is shifting too—and that's what Angi English (MA 1303/1304), subject-matter expert and CHDS contractor, has been researching.

She calls drones a "game changer" for emergency management, but notes significant gaps, as the United States still lacks a unified traffic management system (UTM) for small uncrewed aircraft (drones).

English said the June Executive Orders attempt to balance competing goals—accelerating U.S. drone dominance while securing airspace—creating a "wicked problem" where progress in one area generates new challenges elsewhere.

Under current FAA rules, drone pilots are responsible for making these conflicting requirements work in real-world operations.

"The Part 107 is a hard study program and a hard exam," English said. "If you want a top-notch drone pilot, you're going to have to pay for the training and exams, instead of having officers pay those costs out of their own pocket."

Heavy reliance on foreign-made drones (especially DJI, a Chinese manufacturer) has raised security concerns. Nearly 80 percent of all first responder programs use DJI drones. While they are dependable

and affordable, the U.S. worries about data security. Domestic options exist, but U.S.-made drones are often more expensive and might lack some operational features.

AI integration adds another layer of complexity. English warned that current initiatives aim to integrate large language models into autonomous systems, enabling them to make life-or-death decisions.

"That's a big mistake. Our current, narrow AI offers speed and pattern recognition, but it lacks judgment. These systems currently have no creativity, no morality, and no reasoning beyond what we program. We need a human in the loop for critical decisions," she said. English also noted how small drones are changing warfare, citing Ukraine's use of \$500 First-Person View drones to destroy \$82 million dollars' worth of Russian aircrafts.

As drones redefine modern conflict, new governance and policy must follow. Aviation experts call the missing piece a "common operating picture"—a real-time view of everything in American airspace, from 747s to delivery drones to hobby quadcopters. Without this foundation, English said, both the economic dreams and security goals in these orders are "built on sand."

Across the country, groups like IMPD and the NFL are tackling the drone problem in different ways. Local departments improvise with drones to improve outcomes.

Private organizations use drones to keep flexibility within the demands of their rigid environments. Federal policy continues to inch forward, but not fast enough to meet operational reality.

The reality of a drone crossing into restricted U.S. airspace, should not prompt the question "Why didn't you shoot it down?" The question should be, "What systems are in place to prevent it from happening at all?" ■

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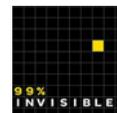
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