

Man takes responsibility for drone over White House

January 26 2015, by Josh Lederman And Joan Lowy



Secret Service officers search the south grounds of the White House in Washington, Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the White House grounds during the middle of the night while President Barack Obama and the first lady were in India, but his spokesman said Monday that it posed no threat. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

A small drone flying low to the ground crashed onto the White House grounds before dawn Monday, triggering a major emergency response and raising fresh questions about security at the presidential mansion. A man later came forward to say he was responsible and didn't mean to fly it over the complex.

The man contacted the Secret Service after reports of the crash spread in the media, a U.S. official said. The man told the agency that he had been flying the drone recreationally. The man is a Washington resident and is cooperating with investigators.

Secret Service agents are now interviewing other people to corroborate the man's story, and they don't currently have any reason to doubt the man's story, the official said.

The official wasn't authorized to discuss the ongoing investigation publicly and spoke only on condition of anonymity

Although President Barack Obama was not at home, the security breach prompted a lockdown of the entire complex until officials could examine the drone. The White House later said it did not pose a threat.

The drone crashed on the southeast side of the White House grounds just after 3 a.m., Secret Service spokesman Brian Leary said.

The device was described as a two-foot-long quadcopter—a commercially available unmanned aircraft that is lifted by four propellers. Many small quadcopters are essentially sophisticated toys that can also be useful for commercial operations like aerial photography and inspections. Often weighing only a few pounds, they sell for as little as a few hundred dollars or less, and were popular Christmas gifts last year.

The president and first lady Michelle Obama were traveling in India, but their daughters, Sasha and Malia, may have been at home. White House officials declined to comment on the daughters' whereabouts Monday, but ahead of the president's trip aides had said the daughters would remain in Washington so as not to miss school.



This image made with an iPhone shows emergency vehicles surrounding the southeast corner of the White House complex, near the main Treasury building, right, after a device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the lawn early in the morning Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. (AP Photo/Nedra Pickler)

"The early indications are that it does not pose any sort of ongoing threat to anybody at the White House," said presidential spokesman Josh Earnest.

Still, the incident was likely to reinvigorate a long-running public debate about the use of commercial drones in U.S. skies—as well as White House security. The Secret Service is still recovering after a string of breaches that raised questions about whether the president is adequately protected.

House Oversight Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, a chief critic of Secret Service leadership, said the agency has been working for

some time to figure out how to deal with the threat posed by unmanned aircraft. He said a wake-up call came in 2013 when a camera drone crashed in front of German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a campaign event in Germany.

"Any time you can breach the White House perimeter, it's deeply concerning," Chaffetz said in an interview Monday. "You don't know if it's some guy in a van down by the river controlling the drone or somebody who has some very nefarious intentions."

Although remote-controlled airplanes and related toys have been available for decades, White House aides could not recall any similar incidents having occurred in the past. The incident comes just as policymakers are, for the first time, grappling seriously with how to integrate unmanned aircraft into the nation's skies.

The recent proliferation of inexpensive drones has prompted growing fears about potential collisions with traditional aircraft. Technological advances have also made it easier to equip drones with advanced capabilities such as cameras, raising privacy issues as well as concerns that such devices could carry weapons.



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Industry experts said that to carry and fire a weapon, a drone would need more engines and more propellers than most commercially-manufactured quadcopters.

At the urging of the drone industry, the Obama administration is on the verge of proposing rules to permit commercial flights by small drones, but no date has yet been set for release of the proposal. Currently, the Federal Aviation Administration bans commercial drone flights—with some exceptions—and hobbyists are barred from flying drones above 400 feet in altitude or within 5 miles of an airport.

Airspace around the White House is heavily restricted to protect the

president and other sensitive sites in the vicinity. Yet Monday's crash wasn't the first time police have responded to reports of drones in the area. Last August, District of Columbia police reported the arrest of a person who got stuck in a tree while trying to retrieve a small drone lodged in the branches. And in July, U.S. Park Service police investigated reports of a small quadcopter in the vicinity of the Lincoln Memorial, according a compilation of recent incidents by the FAA.



Members of the Secret Service search the grounds of the North Lawn of the White House in Washington, Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the White House grounds during the middle of the night while President Barack Obama and first lady were in India. It was unclear whether their daughters, Sasha and Malia, were at home at the time of the incident with their grandmother, Marian Robinson. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

The response from emergency officials to Monday's crash was swift and intense. Police, fire and other emergency vehicles swarmed the White House, and the entire perimeter was locked down for about two hours. After daylight, more than a dozen officers fanned out to search the lawn with flashlights, and there was a heavier-than-usual presence of Secret Service agents on the roof of the White House.

The agency recently has faced persistent questions about its effectiveness and ability to protect the president.

Four high-ranking executives were reassigned this month, and former Director Julia Pierson was forced to resign last year after a Texas man armed with a knife was able to get over a White House fence and run into the executive mansion before being subdued.



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The South Lawn of the White House in Washington is seen on Monday, Jan. 26, 2015. A device, possibly an unmanned aerial drone, was found on the White House grounds during the middle of the night while President Barack Obama and first lady were in India. It was unclear whether their daughters, Sasha and Malia, were at home at the time of the incident with their grandmother, Marian Robinson. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)



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