

Dirty Wars: Revealing material, but missing the most important questions

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Directed by Richard Rowley; with Jeremy Scahill as producer, writer and narrator

Dirty Wars, directed by Richard Rowley, is a documentary that follows investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill into the murderous, covert world of American Special Forces as the latter prosecute the US government's so-called global war on terror.

Scahill is also responsible for a book, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, covering some of the same material, which was published in April. He is the National Security Correspondent for the *Nation* magazine and author of *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (Nation Books, 2007).

The documentary treats a wide range of material. The filmmakers speak with survivors of night raids and drone strikes in Afghanistan and Yemen and other victims of US aggression: they also interview US Special Forces members, generals and American-backed warlords. Filming took place in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and the US from 2010 to 2012.

Dirty Wars opens with Scahill in Afghanistan talking with survivors of a February 2010 US night raid in Gardez. The brutal attack was launched on a family celebrating the birth of a child. As part of a cover-up, US Special Operations Forces—who killed two men and three women, two of whom were pregnant—spun the story of a family “honor killing.”

In the course of looking into the incident, Scahill begins to investigate the clandestine JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command), made up of units such as the Navy Seals and the Army's Green Berets, which carry out armed missions abroad. “JSOC came to dominate the killing fields in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere,” asserts the journalist. He takes note of the emerging role of Admiral William McRaven, who assumed control of JSOC from General Stanley McChrystal in July 2008.

Scahill goes to Yemen, where a few months prior to the

Gardez attack, cruise missiles struck the Bedouin village of al-Majalah in December 2009. More than forty people were killed, including 14 women and 21 children. About the massacre, a tribal leader angrily tells the camera: “If they kill innocent children and call them al Qaeda, then we are all al Qaeda. If children are terrorists, then we are all terrorists.”

The documentary points to the plight of Yemeni journalist Abdulelah Haider Shaye, who was imprisoned soon after he exposed the US role in al-Majalah. After the Yemeni president decided to pardon him, President Barack Obama personally intervened and the pardon was rescinded.

In Yemen, Scahill also visits Nasser al-Awlaki, the father of Anwar al-Awlaki, the American citizen assassinated by the Obama administration. Anwar was placed on the White House's “kill list” in January 2010. He was the first US citizen known to have been placed on the list.

Anwar and Samir Khan, another US citizen, were killed in a US drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011. Two weeks later, Anwar's 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman, an American citizen, was killed by a US drone. Some of the film's most moving footage involves Nasser and his grief-stricken wife, Saleha, showing family photographs of their son and grandson.

In his accompanying book, Scahill writes that in “October 2009, the CIA reportedly concluded that ‘the agency lacked specific evidence that [Anwar] threatened the lives of Americans—which is the threshold for any capture-or-kill operation’ against an American citizen. Obama disagreed.”

Dirty Wars contends that following the assassination of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 JSOC came out of the shadows and became celebrated in the media, including in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. A still photo of the White House situation room shows Obama, Vice

President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other top US officials as they witness the killing of bin Laden. It is a ghoulish scene. While not comfortable with every aspect of the sordid affair, Scahill comments that the assassination provided some closure for the American people.

“The world has become America’s battlefield,” and the global war on terror has “spun out of control,” conclude Scahill and the makers of the movie. A score by Kronos Quartet—made up of pieces called “drones,” which also refer to the harmonic variation of a musical tone—augments the film’s general eeriness.

It is disturbing to encounter a few of the US military’s many victims. Their stories are horrific and give flesh and blood to human beings only known from the headlines. Moreover, even a partial accounting of American imperialism’s crimes in the past decade and a half underscores how thoroughly the US media has concealed the reality from the American public.

However, taken as a whole, *Dirty Wars* easily raises as many questions as it answers.

First, although there are new facts and faces in *Dirty Wars*, it remains an issue how much of the film’s revelations will come as a shock to its likely audience, especially in the light of the revelations by WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden.

The film’s creators are not political naifs. Besides writing for the *Nation*, Scahill is a regular at such Democratic Party haunts as the *Rachel Maddow Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher* and Amy Goodman’s *Democracy Now!* radio program. *Dirty Wars* was co-produced by Anthony Arnove, a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization and an editor at the group’s *International Socialist Review* and Haymarket Books.

In other words, a distinct, if not clearly spelled out political perspective is at work here.

Numerous establishment publications, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, are still able on occasion of identifying misdeeds, even atrocities, committed by the US military and intelligence.

This media, however, is unable and unwilling to trace the various crimes to their source in the state of American society. These commentators treat the crimes as aberrations performed either by overzealous defenders of the homeland or mere “bad apples.” The objective *inevitability* of such illegal, unconstitutional behavior, given the decay and decline of US capitalism, much less

the revolutionary political conclusions to be drawn, is entirely rejected.

Rowley, Scahill, Arnove, Goodman and company follow in the wake of the liberal media, as its somewhat more abrasive alter-ego. It is a serious question whether *Dirty Wars* is primarily an example of honest, but limited journalism ... or an exercise in damage control on behalf of the American political establishment and the Democratic Party.

How is it possible that *Dirty Wars* offers no explanation whatsoever for the events it covers, no historical perspective? The long history of US machinations in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa is apparently a closed book for the filmmakers. The words “oil” and “neo-colonialism” never find utterance. The film never once considers the geopolitical exigencies that flow from the crisis of US and world imperialism—or the vast social inequality in America that fuels the anti-democratic flames. After all, what does its increasing reliance on global death squads tell us about the American ruling elite?

The illegal, unbridled violence against the populations of Afghanistan, Yemen and much of the planet and the assault on democratic rights in the US are two sides of the same process. Extra-judicial, state-sanctioned killing is not, as Scahill *et al* see it, a semi-legitimate response to 9/11 that has somehow run amok, but a new metastatic condition involving the entire system.

Refusing to analyze the roots of the political crimes it uncovers, the film instead implicitly exhorts the population to get rid of “neo-con” maniacs such as McRaven and turn the war on terror—which is never in dispute—from a dirty war into a “clean” one.

Dirty Wars points to a series of terrible crimes, but rejects drawing any serious conclusions from them, leaving its audience suspended in mid-air. In fact, by default, it encourages the illusion that applying pressure to Obama and the Democratic Party can improve the situation, a fatal illusion.



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