

National Bird, about drone warfare, currently available on PBS “Independent Lens”

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5 May 2017

Sonia Kennebeck’s documentary National Bird is available for viewing until May 16 on PBS’s “Independent Lens” web site. It can be viewed in full here.

We post below an abbreviated version of Joanne Laurier’s November 2016 review of the film.

The US drone assassination program epitomizes the criminality of the Barack Obama administration and the American military-intelligence machinery.

Launched under George W. Bush in 2002, drone warfare is part of the explosion of American militarism aimed at establishing US global hegemony. That drone strikes constitute war crimes under international law has not slowed their pace. Far from it. The British human rights organization Reprieve currently estimates the “US has used drones to execute without trial some 4,700 people—that we know of.”

The new documentary by Sonia Kennebeck, *National Bird*, takes on America’s use of lethal drones.

Produced by filmmakers Wim Wenders and Errol Morris, the movie brings to light the story of three whistleblowers who speak about their experiences in the drone program.

The documentary presents a wealth of significant material. Its most serious limitation is the failure to challenge head-on the legitimacy of the “war on terror.” The latter is the justification for the US drone strikes that have killed thousands in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia and terrorized far broader sections of the populations in those nations.

The production notes for *National Bird* explain that aerial combat drones “are the tip of the spear in a secret war waged remotely by thousands of service members, men and women, who are bound to silence. Many missions are highly classified, and the official tally of civilian (‘non-combatant’) deaths, first reported in July

2016, has been criticized by many NGOs as misleadingly low.”

National Bird reveals that drone pilots and analysts are eyewitnesses to the fatal blows delivered by their strikes. They further observe the horror of the victims’ families as they collect the remains of their loved ones. As a result, many of the pilots themselves suffer acute psychological trauma, exacerbated by the fact that due to the secret nature of their work, they cannot discuss the details of these experiences, either with professionals or even with family members.

Kennebeck began her research three years ago by speaking to veterans’ organizations and activists. She subsequently familiarized herself with the drone program through declassified military and investigative reports on drone strikes. The three main human subjects in her film are Heather, Daniel and Lisa.

Heather, Kennebeck’s film shows us, is a tormented soul. She can hardly get through an interview segment without unraveling emotionally. She suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. She is in constant “pain and absolute despair.” An experience like no other, Heather explains, is watching “someone in their dying moments,” a nightmare for which she is responsible. “I don’t know how many people I’ve killed...the drone program is wrong,” she asserts, adding that “surgical strikes are not possible.” She was one of the first analysts to publicly criticize the use of drones.

Daniel joined the military “out of desperation.” He was “homeless—on my last legs.” In addition to his war trauma, Daniel faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for speaking out. He describes an FBI raid in which 30 to 50 agents broke into his apartment. Attorney Jesselyn Radack explains that since 1917, “only 12 people have been prosecuted under the Espionage Act. Daniel is in danger of becoming the 13th.”

What makes *National Bird* unusual is that it concerns itself not just with US imperialism's American victims, but also with its overseas victims. While the film contains many moving segments, the footage from Afghanistan is some of the most devastating.

To her considerable credit, Kennebeck chose to find and interview survivors of a February 2010 US drone strike in which 23 family members were killed. One woman weeps over the deaths of two children, four and six years old. Other survivors are missing limbs. All have suffered horrific consequences from the bombing.

A deeply disturbing movie, *National Bird*, however, as noted above, has definite and identifiable limitations. It removes the drone program from the quarter-century of almost perpetual war conducted by the US government, military and intelligence.

In the film's production notes, the director remarks that she wants to "enliven the public debate" and enrich "the existing discourse." But what public debate is she referring to? What existing discourse?

Kennebeck is reduced to clutching at straws. She turns, for example, to retired US Army General Stanley McChrystal for assistance. Her decision to present the latter in a positive light apparently stems from his investigation into the above-mentioned February 2010 drone bombing.

McChrystal occasionally postures as a maverick, but his hands are soaked with blood from his time as commander of US and international forces in Afghanistan. The retired general is now pushing for an obligatory year of "national service" for American youth, which would only be the prelude to the introduction of conscription. That would result in vast numbers of new Heathers, Daniels and Lisas. It is an indication of the current political vacuum that McChrystal could possibly be depicted as a human rights sympathizer.

That being said, *National Bird* is a remarkable film for its concentration on one of the principal deadly tools in the prosecution of America's endless wars.



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