

US indicts whistleblower who exposed Obama's drone assassination program

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On Thursday, an indictment by the US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia was unsealed against former intelligence officer Daniel Everett Hale, 31, who was charged with multiple counts of violating the Espionage Act including illegally obtaining secret US government documents and giving them to a journalist.

No reporter or news organization was named in the indictment. However, important details indicate that the journalist is Jeremy Scahill and the publisher is the *Intercept*. In October 2015, the *Intercept* published an eight-part series of articles by Scahill called “The Drone Papers,” based on a cache of top-secret slide presentations provided by an anonymous source.

The series revealed to the public that the Pentagon has been conducting drone-based warfare for more than a decade and that President Barack Obama had been running a drone assassination program out of the White House since at least 2011. In one segment of the series called “Find, Fix, Finish,” the *Intercept* reported that between January 2011 and June 2012, drone strikes killed three US citizens in Yemen, including the radical preacher Anwar al Awlaki, his friend Samir Khan and his 16-year-old son Abdulrahman Awlaki.

Reported on by the World Socialist Web Site at the time, the *Intercept* exposé showed that, under the guise of fighting the “war on terror,” two drone assassination programs were operated in parallel by the Pentagon and CIA to kill specific individuals in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Iraq. In the series, Scahill explained that the Democratic Party administration of President Obama had rebranded “assassination” as “targeted killing.”

Among the details exposed in the leaked documents was that 90 percent of the people killed in the criminal drone strikes were not the targeted individuals. The documents also revealed the step-by-step

procedure—with flow charts, graphs and pie charts—by which individuals were identified for killing and moved through a process dubbed the “kill chain.” With the final death order given by President Obama himself, the individuals were placed into the “targeting cycle,” a two-month window in which the US military has the “authority” to carry through the assassination.

Hale, who is from Nashville, Tennessee, was arrested on Thursday morning and appeared in federal court later that day to face the five charges against him that each carry a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. US Magistrate Judge Alistair Newbern ordered Hale released under pretrial supervision pending a hearing on May 17 in Alexandria, Virginia.

According to the indictment, Hale was in the US Air Force from 2009 to 2013 and received language and intelligence training. Between 2011 and 2013, he was reassigned to work for the National Security Agency, was deployed to Afghanistan as an intelligence analyst and received Top Secret and Sensitive Compartment Information security clearances.

While on assignment in Afghanistan at the Joint Special Operations Task Force at Bagram Airbase, Hale participated in the identification of assassination targets. After his discharge from the Air Force, he was employed by the defense contractor Leidos and was assigned to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA), a combat support agency under the US Department of Defense.

The criminal charges against Hale relate to activities—his online searches, his text messages to a friend, his email messages, phone calls and meetings with a reporter and his printing of documents from an NGA computer—that are alleged to have taken place between April 2013 and August 2014.

Since 2013, Hale has spoken out publicly against the

national intelligence state and the drone wars of both the Obama and Trump administrations. He was a featured speaker at a November 2013 Drone Summit in Washington, DC and at a January 2014 rally outside the White House where he called for the closure of the prison camp at Guantanamo Bay.

The timing of the decision to indict Hale is connected to the offensive of the Trump Administration against the journalist and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and courageous whistleblower Chelsea Manning. Assange is facing extradition to the US on a bogus hacking charge and Manning was just released after two months in jail for refusing to testify before a secret grand jury empaneled to bring additional charges against Assange. Manning may return to jail as soon as next week as she faces a new grand jury subpoena.

Jesselyn Radack, an attorney representing Hale who specializes in cases of whistleblowers, said the Trump administration is escalating “a toxic trend” that began under the Obama administration of aggressively prosecuting people like her client.

“If you look at the charges, what he’s accused of is classic whistleblowing. He contacted a reporter about a matter of extreme importance that’s been shrouded in secrecy,” Radack said.

In an official statement, the *Intercept’s* Editor Betsy Reed wrote that the exposure of targeted drone assassinations is “of vital public importance, and activity related to their disclosure is protected by the First Amendment. The alleged whistleblower faces up to 50 years in prison. No one has ever been held accountable for killing civilians in drone strikes.”

The Eastern District of Virginia is the same federal prosecutor’s office that filed criminal charges against Julian Assange as well as against the former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. Hale is now the sixth whistleblower indicted since the Trump administration took office in January 2017.

Appearing on the television program *Democracy Now!*, the former *New York Times* reporter and current National Security Correspondent at the *Intercept* James Risen said, “Donald Trump has taken the war on the press that George Bush and Barack Obama started and has now escalated it beyond anything that we have ever seen.”

Risen added, “They are going back over every possible leak they can find, over every old open case

and trying to escalate things beyond what Obama did. You saw that with the Julian Assange case. ... The message that they are sending is that talking to a reporter is the same as talking to a spy. It’s [Espionage Act] a very crude weapon to try and silence people.”

The principled stand taken by Hale to expose the murderous actions of the White House and Pentagon must be defended by all workers and young people as a fundamental question of democratic rights. Without the exposures provided by Manning, Snowden and Hale and their publication by WikiLeaks and the *Intercept*, the world would not know about many of the war crimes or mass electronic surveillance conducted in secret by the US government.

The indictment and arrest of Daniel Hale is an attempt by the Trump administration and the US military-intelligence establishment to intimidate and silence anyone who dares to tell the truth about American imperialism. As new wars, military interventions and regime change operations are being prepared against Iran, Venezuela, North Korea and elsewhere, those who have exposed previous crimes are now being prosecuted in an effort to prevent the exposure of even greater crimes that are being prepared.



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