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Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield*. New York: Nation Books, 2013. Pp. xxiv, 642. ISBN 978-1-56858-671-7.

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Investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill is best known for his exposé of the private military contractor Blackwater USA (later Blackwater Worldwide, still later Academi).<sup>1</sup> In his latest book, he considers the “dirty wars” that the United States has been fighting as part of its “global war on terror,” not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in Somalia and Yemen. As national security correspondent for *The Nation*, Scahill has reported from the front lines and interviewed hundreds of participants.<sup>2</sup> In a detailed and episodic account spanning fifty-seven chapters, he traces the evolution of US anti-terrorism policies and actions, especially the rise of the Joint Special Operations Command after the 9/11 attacks, and their effect on the life and beliefs of Anwar al Awlaki, the American imam killed on 30 September 2011 in a drone strike authorized by President Barack Obama.

Scahill begins by recounting the targeted assassination of Awlaki’s sixteen-year-old son, Abdulrahman, also an American citizen, via drone attack on 14 October 2011. Neither father nor son had been formally charged with any crime. Only in May 2013 did the Obama administration admit to the killing of four American citizens, including the Awlakis, by drone strikes; Attorney General Eric Holder called the slaying of Anwar al Awlaki “lawful,” “considered,” and “just.”<sup>3</sup>

What are we to make of a government that assassinates its own citizens overseas without due legal process? That is the key question for Scahill. His answer is troubling, pointing to clear abuses of presidential authority and violations of constitutional protections.

*Dirty Wars* is most original in its detailed exposition of Anwar al Awlaki’s life and beliefs and his transformation from reasonable commentator on Islam, sought out after 9/11 by US media and military as a knowledgeable moderate, to radical exponent of jihad against America. Scahill argues that the US government’s overly aggressive approach to the Muslim world, including the use of “enhanced interrogation techniques” (code for torture), “extraordinary rendition” (i.e., kidnapping), and drone strikes that inflicted “collateral damage” (killed innocents), is perpetuating the very terror it claims to want to end.

The author sets himself to tell “the story of the expansion of covert US wars, the abuse of executive privilege and state secrets, the embrace of unaccountable elite military units that answer only to the White House ... [and] the continuity of a mindset that ‘the world is a battlefield’ from Republican to Democratic administrations” (xxiii). A documentary film<sup>4</sup> furthering his thesis was released concurrently with the book.<sup>5</sup>

In Scahill’s view, it was the excessive violence of the American conduct of the war on terror that changed Awlaki from moderate Muslim to jihadist. Victory in such a war is unachievable, he argues, precisely because US military actions and intelligence operations worsen rather than solve the problem of terror. The increasing radicalization of Awlaki and other Muslims was a consequence of the US government’s turn to, in Vice President Dick Cheney’s words, the “dark side” in its targeting of terrorists for elimination. This has been true through both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations: “US unilateralism and exceptionalism were not only bipartisan principles in Washington, but a permanent American institution. As large-scale military deployments wound down [in Iraq and Afghanistan], the United States had simulta-

1. *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (NY: Nation Books, 2007).

2. See the eighty-three double-column pages of references at the end of the book.

3. C. Savage, P. Baker, “Obama, in a Shift, to Limit Targets of Drone Strikes,” *NY Times* (22 May 2013) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1331.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1331.htm).

4. *Dirty Wars*, dir. Richard Rowley, 2013.

5. See also the associated website, [dirtywars.org](http://dirtywars.org), for additional resources.

neously escalated its use of drones, cruise missiles and Special Ops raids in an unprecedented number of countries. The war on terror had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The question all Americans must ask themselves lingers painfully: How does a war like this ever end?" (521). In Scahill's opinion, so long as the US government continues its present, radically militarized handling of the war, the correct answer is "never."

*Dirty Wars* is a polemical cri de cœur, an angry indictment based on Scahill's long experience as a reporter on the scene. He is outraged at his country's assassination of its own citizens without due process and its killing of innocents of other nations in distant wars as sordid as they are counterproductive. He also laments the growing disconnect between American war-making and the will of the people—a circumstance striven for after 9/11 by Vice President Cheney and his neoconservative allies, who believed that "covert action had been handcuffed by lawyers and unnecessary and intrusive congressional oversight that would hinder what they perceived as life-and-death operations that needed to be conducted in secret" (23). Both Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld usurped powers and pursued policies detrimental to American freedoms:

This war [on terror] would extend to the home front with warrantless wiretapping, mass arrests of Arabs, Pakistanis and other Muslim immigrants and a prodigious rollback of the civil liberties of American citizens. To wage it, they would have to dismantle and manipulate a bureaucracy of oversight and legal review that had been built up over successive administrations. All this would open the door for an array of tactics that had been used before but could now be deployed on an unprecedented scale: covert action, black ops, secret prisons, snatch operations and what amounted to a blanket rebranding of assassinations as "High Value Targeting." (15-16)

Scahill is acutely attuned to post-9/11 dark-side rhetoric. Cofer Black, President Bush's Coordinator for Counter-terrorism, called it "high time for the gloves [to] come off" and recommended unleashing "the junkyard dog" (CIA paramilitaries) against terrorists. Jose Rodriguez, Director of Operations for the CIA, urged "everybody in the government to put their big boy pants on and provide the authorities what we [the CIA] needed [to take action]." Alvin Bernard "Buzzy" Krongard, the number three man at the CIA, advocated using "forces you do not know about, in actions you will not see and in ways you may not want to know about" (21-27).

In such terms, Scahill shows, men with no military experience talked tough after the debacle of 9/11. Malcolm Nance, a career Navy counterterrorist expert, described Cofer Black and his ilk as "civilian ideologues" who embraced "Tom Clancy Combat Concepts [of ] going hard, ... popping people on the streets, ... dagger and intrigue all the time" (58). These ideologues found like-minded men within the US military establishment. Special Ops legend Maj. Gen. William "Jerry" Boykin, for example, rejected the criterion of *actionable* intelligence and boasted "Give me action. I will give you intelligence" (99).

Two days after 9/11, L. Paul Bremer, later the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that "Our retribution must move beyond the *limp-wristed* attacks of the past decade, actions that seemed designed to 'signal' our seriousness to the terrorists without inflicting real damage. Naturally, their feebleness demonstrated the opposite. This time the terrorists and their supporters *must be crushed*" [my emphases] (110). For Bremer and the other Bush-Cheney neocons, it was time to man up.

In the event, manning up meant adopting methods of "questionable legality," especially the use of Special Ops personnel "to spy without the knowledge of the State Department or the Central Intelligence Agency ... to go in and capture or kill people who were supposedly linked to extremist organizations around the world, in some cases allied countries." Scahill cites here a source code-named "Hunter," who spoke to him on condition of anonymity. For Hunter, the new mentality was as obvious as it was dangerous: "The world is a battlefield and we are at war. Therefore the [US] military can go wherever they please and do whatever it is that they want to do, in order to achieve the national security objectives of whichever administration happens to be in power" (183).

Such thinking justified, for instance, the secretive interventions in Somalia and Yemen and the Awlaki assassinations. Paralleling the famous "surge" in Iraq led by Gen. David Petraeus in 2007 was a less publi-

cized dramatic increase in the Special Ops budget, which grew 60 percent from 2003 to 2007. Unanticipated consequences ensued: the Somalia intervention “backfired spectacularly, transforming a ragtag group of relative nobodies ... into the new heroes of al Qaeda’s global struggle” (229); worse yet, it further radicalized Muslims like Anwar al Awlaki, who came to see the United States and its allies as a “scourge,” “the greatest terrorists of all” (264).

So it was that the sensible cleric from New Mexico and “go-to guy” for Americans seeking to understand Islam in 2001 had become by 2009 an outspoken anti-American jihadist. Anwar’s father, Nasser, wrote directly to President Obama: “my son is innocent, has nothing to do with violence and he is only a scholar of Islam.... I plead again to you that you respect American law and if Anwar ever did anything wrong he should be prosecuted according to the principles of American law” (327). The response was a “signature strike” that killed Anwar al Awlaki and drew the praise of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: “Like Osama bin Laden and so many other terrorist leaders who have been killed or captured in recent years, [Awlaki] can no longer threaten America, our allies, or peace-loving people anywhere in the world. Today we are all safer” (503).

Not all Americans agreed. Former Bush CIA director Michael Hayden, hardly a dove, wrote that “Right now, there isn’t a government on the planet that agrees with our legal rationale for these operations, except for Afghanistan and maybe Israel.... We needed a court order to eavesdrop on [Awlaki], but we didn’t need a court order to kill him” (504) or to assassinate Awlaki’s teenage son purely, Scahill notes, for the sins of his father. More than that we cannot know—the Obama administration invoked State Secrets Privilege in the matter.

In a recent interview, Scahill observed that “a popular Democratic president ... has expanded, intensified, ... and ... legitimized, in the eyes of many liberals, some of the most egregious aspects of ... the Bush administration[’s] ... counterterrorism policy ... [including] what’s called the targeted killing program, [which is] ... anything but targeted, as we’ve seen so often—it’s an assassination program. And this administration has sold the idea ... that this is a clean war, that it’s a smarter war than the ones ... waged by [President Obama’s] predecessor.”<sup>6</sup> Excoriating this supposedly “smarter” warfare, Scahill, in an interview promoting his book, described the US government as often the puppet rather than the puppeteer of its “dirty” wars:

in Afghanistan and Iraq ... various factions, or in the case of Yemen, the dictator of Yemen, used the United States to bump off political opponents by tarring them as al-Qaeda members when they weren’t .... These forces play the American government like a piano.... [T]he United States does not have anything resembling credible intelligence about who’s who in Yemen. The use of ... signature strikes ... where we’re potentially targeting individuals whose identities we don’t know ... [without] any evidence that they’re involved with terror plots or criminal activity—that’s bound to make scores of fresh enemies who probably wouldn’t be inclined to be against the U.S. in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

Scahill’s critique of the American war on terror recalls the witticism attributed to Talleyrand: It’s worse than a crime—it’s a mistake.

*Dirty Wars* is no measured work of disinterested history. It is intended expressly to alert Americans to the imperilment of their constitutional freedoms by their government’s abuse of power and untrammelled exertion of military force. The nightmare issue haunting its pages is that of US citizens recategorized as terrorist enemies of the state, subject to summary state-sponsored assassination. Jeremy Scahill’s urgent warnings deserve the careful and serious reflection of all Americans.

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6. “The Truth about America’s Secret, Dirty Wars,” *AlterNet.org* (16 May 2013) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1332.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1332.htm).

7. S. Jaffe, “Scahill: Dirty Wars Institutionalized despite Obama Promises,” *Truthout.org* (28 May 2013) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1333.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1333.htm).