



## Dirty Wars Discussion Guide

Director: Rick Rowley

Year: 2013

Time: 87 min

**You might know this director from:**

The Fourth World War (2003)

Black & Gold (2001)

This Is What Democracy Looks Like (2000)

## FILM SUMMARY

**DIRTY WARS** unveils the clandestine war that the United States is waging, with the world as its battlefield. Jeremy Scahill, a national security and war correspondent, serves as the film's narrator and guide. His investigation begins with the mysterious tragedy surrounding a night raid in Gardez, Afghanistan in February 2010. Several civilians were killed, including an American-trained Afghan police commander and two pregnant women. The U.S. government claimed that the two women were victims of a Taliban honor killing, but family and friends who were in the house on the night of the raid give a different account. Footage captured on their cell phones reveal the bodies and the gruesome aftermath, and how U.S. soldiers examined the corpses in order to devise their own version of events.

This cover-up leads to the discovery of others, as Scahill delves into the attacks carried out by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), a covert military unit that operates in Afghanistan and other countries in which no war has been declared, including Indonesia, Yemen, Somalia, and The Philippines. The film argues that the war isn't restricted by ethical or legal boundaries either. The film documents how U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki was killed by a drone attack in Yemen on September 2011. He was executed without being tried in court. Two weeks later, his 16-year-old son, also a U.S. citizen, was killed by a drone.

Incendiary and devastating, **DIRTY WARS** argues that U.S. covert ops are growing, extending a cycle of violence for many years to come and setting dangerous precedents for a new world order. Most important, the film allows the families of those who've lost innocent loved ones in botched counterterrorism operations to express their rage and grief, showing the tremendous human cost in a hidden war, whose civilian casualties are also kept secret.

## FILM THEMES

**DIRTY WARS** reveals how war is being waged today, with kill lists, covert ops, drone strikes, and cover-ups to hide civilian deaths. The film seeks to inform Americans about policies the government seeks to keep hidden, and those globally who face the consequences of these policies.

### THE WORLD AS BATTLEFIELD

War is no longer defined by national borders. The U.S. Special Operations Command is operating in 120 or so countries. The Obama Administration claims authority to kill anyone in the world who it considers a major threat to national security. JSOC is not held accountable by the military or Congress, allowing the executive branch to wage a war in which assassinations are a major component. Thus, Obama's administration is setting a dangerous precedent, so future presidents can wage war throughout the world, executing "enemies" without indictment or evidence. Under this "global battlefield" theory, the likelihood of civilian casualties and collateral damage is escalating.

### TECHNOLOGY AND WAR

Technology has changed the way the U.S. military kills its enemies, and how it identifies them. With drone strikes, a human on a kill list becomes a target to be killed from a distance, with no risk to the person operating the drone. American government officials argue that drone strikes are precise, but the targets are ascertained through human intelligence, which has been wrong and is often unreliable. Further dehumanization occurs in "signature strikes," which attack groups of unknown people based on a matrix of metadata compiled by analysts who calculate the probability of someone being a terrorist. The film claims that al-Awlaki's teenage son was killed for the likelihood of who he was to become, not for what he had actually done. In May 2013, Attorney General Eric Holder released an official letter admitting that only 1 of the 4 U.S. citizens killed by drone strikes was "specifically targeted," which casts doubt on the supposed precision and ethical use of drone strikes.

### CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

Many believed the drone attack against al-Awlaki was illegal because he was not indicted and tried in court. Instead, as Scahill claims, the executive branch served as judge, jury, and executioner. Regarding this, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder has made a distinction between "due process" and "judicial process," saying that only the former is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, and that due process doesn't necessarily mean legal review. Under the Obama Administration, U.S. citizens such as al-Awlaki may be executed if they represent an "imminent threat of violent attack" to the U.S. and if U.S. authorities cannot capture them. Furthermore, the strike cannot violate international standards governing the use of force by killing too many civilians or noncombatants. But critics say the Obama Administration has redefined its core legal terms, especially "due process" and "imminence," to justify the drone strikes.

**“If we debate about this in our society, Congress will be forced to do something about it. If we embrace assassination as a central component of our foreign policy and continue with the mentality that we can kill our way to victory—or worse, kill our way to peace—then we’re whistling past the graveyard.”**

Jeremy Scahill

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What did you learn after viewing this film that you didn't know before? What shocked or dismayed you most?
2. In the newspapers you read or on television broadcasts you watch, how has the War on Terror been presented? How does the coverage compare to the topics discussed in the film?
3. What precedent is the U.S. setting by giving themselves the right to launch armed attacks around the world? Do you think other states will follow if they acquire drone capabilities?
4. The film shows how part of the hidden war entails hiring mercenaries, outsourcing kidnapping and murders, and using proxy death squads consisting of local warlords on behalf of the JSOC and the CIA. What are the ethical and political complications and ramifications of this?
5. Do you believe the Obama Administration had justification for assassinating Anwar al-Awlaki? Do you believe his son was indeed not "specifically targeted" as Attorney General Holder claims? Why or why not?
6. In his letter to Congress, Holder wrote that lethal force would only be used against targets who cannot be captured and who pose a "continuing, imminent threat to Americans." How would you define "imminent"? How is the government using the term?
7. What can citizens do to demand more transparency from their government? Should they trust that their government is acting in the best interest of national security and the safety of its citizens?
8. What do you imagine is the psychological effect of executing someone by drone, compared to conventional combat in war?
9. For decades, the military has used video-game technology in its training. What are the ethical and economic complications of private civilian firms doing business with the military? What are the consequences of war video games and military training games becoming more and more similar?
10. Do you value your safety and security above that of people in other countries? Do you agree with the film that current U.S. foreign policy is heightening anti-Americanism abroad? Why or why not?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has a population of 33.4 million. The life expectancy is 49 years. The major religion is Islam, with Sunni Muslim at 80%, Shia Muslim at 19%, and other at 1%. The major languages are Dari and Pashto. The main exports are fruit, nuts, carpets, wool, and opium. The GNI per capita is \$470 USD.
- According to the BBC in 2011, mobile phone coverage was expected to reach 90% in Afghanistan. In contrast, the percentage of Afghans with access to electricity is one of the lowest in the world.
- Jeremy Scahill is the author of “Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield” and “Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army.” As of 2015 he is an investigative reporter at The Intercept.
- Scahill and Richard Rowley are friends and colleagues who worked together in Baghdad. They traveled to Afghanistan in early 2010 to make a film, but did not fully realize their subject until they investigated night raids by U.S. forces.
- In response to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, started on October 7, 2001. It began with allied air strikes on Taliban and al Qaeda targets. Civilians in Afghanistan were at risk from the onset, prompting international concern and protests over these air strikes. As early as October 2001, the Pentagon admitted that a 2,000-pound bomb missed its Taliban target and struck a residential area instead.
- The number of civilian casualties in Afghanistan may never be known. Some independent agencies have tried making estimates. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) only began counting casualties in recent years.
- From December 2010 to February 2011, nearly 20 night raids were conducted each night, nearly 600 per month.
- Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan from 2004–2014, has long criticized the actions of U.S. and NATO troops that have led to civilian casualties. He has repeatedly called for the reduction of night raids in Afghan homes.
- JSOC operates a network of secret prisons used for interrogating high-value targets.
- After WWII, the military provided funding and technical expertise to game and computer developers. In exchange, the military received proprietary technology and consulting.
- “Spacewar!” (1962), considered the first video game, was developed by MIT grad students and funded by the Pentagon. It led to the navigational controls and the use of a monitor that would influence all later games.
- In 1999, the U.S. military had its worst recruiting year in decades. The Army Marketing Brand Group created the free video game “America’s Army” to appeal to teenagers. This war game has been downloaded more than 40 million times.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film with others. Give them the chance to learn from its story. Consider organizing a screening for your friends and community.
2. Read and share Jeremy Scahill’s books: “Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield and Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army”.
3. Visit [Global Drones Watch](#) to learn how you can be active in monitoring and restricting the use of drones.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**