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## A Dinner Date and "Dirty Wars": Our Permanent State of Exception

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An anonymized speaker in *Dirty Wars* [2], the new documentary from investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill and filmmaker Rick Rowley, describes the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) – an elite unit spanning all four branches of the US military -- as something of an extraordinarily effective hammer, for which he foresees a process of continually seeking out “nails”. Afghanistan. Yemen. Pakistan. Somalia. Indonesia. Thailand. And so on.

It's a suggestion that lands with no shortage of weight, and harkens back to the opening of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's collaborative work, *Multitude*, which begins with a meditation on the historical relationship between war and politics. “The *separation of war from politics* was a fundamental goal of modern political thought and practice”, they argue, war having been something, “expelled from the internal national social field and reserved only for external conflicts between states,” amidst the emergence of modern democracies. The very function of modern sovereignty was once widely understood in precisely such terms, across the political spectrum, with war considered a limited state of exception. And yet, these two spheres were inextricably bound in an ugly, co-dependent affair. German political philosopher Carl Schmitt once argued that “a world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without distinction of friend and enemy, and hence a world without politics;” a claim borne out by discursive shifts that have in recent decades radically remade a number of domestic policy projects in the US (narcotics, poverty, etc), within a framework of *war*.

Observing the various securitizing effects of war (namely the suspension of democracy and civil

liberties), prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Hardt and Negri note that its unfolding had been something geographically and temporally constrained, and its interventions in the domestic, political sphere similarly circumscribed a by state of exception. By contrast, the so-called war on terror has forced something of a revision of this equation, in as much as “*the state of exception has become permanent and general*; the exception has become the rule, pervading both foreign relations and the homeland,” unfolding endlessly, across a global terrain. The domestic ramifications of these terms is a central preoccupation for Scahill, with *Dirty Wars* offering a rather disturbing and macabre juxtaposition of an administration that has resorted to the extrajudicial execution of its own citizens abroad, and a legislature that fails to so much as show up for official testimony on such developments.

“I don’t watch a lot of documentaries like this, to be honest. I’ve actually *worked* these things, so I go in expecting to find a lot of bullshit,” said my would-be date for the film, in its first days at Baltimore’s Charles Theater. The city made for a viable midway point between my home in Brooklyn, and his, outside DC. We’d originally met in 8th grade, classmates on a US/NATO base in the Mediterranean. Within months, sorties would take off just miles from our classroom, bound for Baghdad in Operation Desert Storm. As is inevitable with kids shuffled around in the world of the military community, our paths split within a few years, sending us in what would prove wildly-divergent directions. Chasing punk history to Washington, DC in the middle of that decade, I played in bands and got arrested in various protests. Faced with dwindling options in Florida, he wound up deployed as a US Army Ranger to Afghanistan (six times), was present in Iraq at the outset of the second Gulf War, and ran down the last half-decade of his thirteen years of service doing counter-terrorism operations in Islamabad and Damascus. Upon leaving the military, he worked as a contractor, training soldiers, and handling drone targeting in Yemen. I could think of no better companion for such a film.

“I follow Scahill on Twitter, so I know he’s reasonably intelligent and knows his shit in 140 characters. But to be honest, I went in expecting something a little more Michael Moore, I guess, where someone’s trying to tell a story, and does it exceptionally well with the available information, but hits a wall in places, filling in – for better or worse -- the gaps left by what isn’t known. I was shocked at how accurate this was,” he told me over dinner afterward, asking that I not use his name. “When I first got to Afghanistan, there were warlords and Chechens actively fighting US forces. The last time I went, we were basically hunting ‘Taliban’ who were little more than dirt-farmers. If someone on the ground has a beef with someone, they’ll tell the Americans that person is Taliban. It becomes a means of settling tribal disputes. Soldiers get bored, want to fight, and we wind up with target lists that are absolute bullshit, have never been vetted, and no one’s going to question any of it because they want a reason to be there. It’s just a horrible cycle of violence.”

The visceral, lethal effects of this trajectory sketch the opening scenes Scahill narrates in *Dirty Wars*. A family in a region of Afghanistan outside the US military presence, known as Gardez, tell of US forces raiding their home in the dead of night, following a family celebration captured in cell phone video spliced into the film. Two of the fatalities were pregnant women. Another was an Afghan police officer who’d participated in a number of the US-led trainings now synonymous with the US military withdrawal from the country. The family describes seeing what they call the American Taliban – soldiers with full beards, uncharacteristic of military standards – and one gets glimpses of them in a single candid photo and cell phone footage of soldiers attempting to establish their version of the killings. “A key distinction has to be made between JSOC and Special Forces. They’re not the same, and Scahill appears conflate them,” my friend noted, having spent

time deployed in the neighboring area of Khost. “In Gardez, they use *reserve* Special Forces, even; part-time soldiers whose normal dayjob is likely working as a Sherriff’s Deputy in the Ozarks. They show up in Afghanistan with a full beard, in a backward baseball cap and a sleeveless Iron Maiden tshirt. JSOC is a highly professional outfit. A whole different skill set.”

While the distinction matters in certain technical respects, both are military outfits, and reflect the reality of US military operations in locales not identified as falling within established zones of conflict for US forces. The film works from this, as the proverbial Rabbit Hole down which Scahill plunges, finding JSOC’s fingerprints on operations across the globe, well outside of established US conflict zones. Ultimately dialing in on the case of Anwar Awlaki – a Muslim cleric and US citizen, killed in a drone attack in Yemen. Days later, his 17-year-old son (also a US citizen) was killed in an identical attack. Despite US citizens’ entitlement to due process in matters of guilt or innocence – no evidence has ever been released to indicate why Awlaki and his son were targeted, much less has any such evidence been put to a jury. Securitization narratives and their ritual reference to existential threats notwithstanding, it marks an austere turn in the abusive marriage of war and domestic politics. “The CIA can kill whoever the fuck they want, internationally. The military has to operate under different terms,” my friend pointed out.

In Hardt and Negri’s examination of war and democracy, our gaze is turned back onto a figure of Jewish mystic fables, the Golem, a destruction-fable iteration of the creation myth of Genesis; a manmade, clay totem brought to life by the utterance of God’s name. One could substitute, here, any number of utterances for our modern era: terrorism, national security, etc. “Like Prometheus, the one who creates a golem has in effect claimed the position of God.” Tellingly, in their use of the metaphor, Hardt and Negri also direct our attention to a modern version of the fable, in which a golem is created as protection for the Jewish community of Prague against its persecutors. “It does attack the enemies of Jews, but also begins to kill Jews themselves” with a destructive violence that proves ultimately indiscriminate and uncontrollable. The proposition is that, as “the isolated space and time of war in the limited conflict between sovereign states has declined, war seems to have seeped back and flooded the entire social field.”

This is the thesis – what Scahill calls the “story without end” – that anchors *Dirty Wars*: The permanent state of exception in which we now live, and the inertia of warfare as a baseline feature of life; a sort of state-capture in which the prospects for democracy, increasingly even in the domestic sphere, are bound up with the creation of entire generations of “terrorists” incensed by the impunity of US violence abroad. Echoing a number of voices the film has brought to audiences, my friend offered a sobering reflection on what he saw Scahill get particularly right: “Ultimately, it’s a war of attrition. And you justify budgets by the number of kills.”

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