

## **Dirty Wars: Peace Psychologists and the Need to Confront Reality**

### **A Review of *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield***

Jeremy Scahill

Reviewed by Trudy Bond

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It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.  
-- [Noam Chomsky](#) (1967, p.1).

The dominant narrative is that wars happen and that a peaceful but powerful nation such as the United States responds to the aggression of other nations or groups using military force when diplomacy or other efforts at persuasion are not successful. This view presumes decisions to engage in war emanate from decisions by democratically elected officeholders to protect us.  
-- [Marc Pilisuk and Ines-Lena Mahr](#) (2013, p.3).

Jeremy Scahill's recent book, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, is an incisive and disturbing documentation of U.S. covert actions outside the realm of the U.S. Constitution. With 528 pages of penetratingly detailed accounts, Scahill's investigative reporting covers a range of critical topics that do not support the dominant narrative: the U.S. government's engagement with the internal politics of foreign countries, including Somalia and Yemen; the targeted assassinations and kill lists that include U.S. citizens; the vast escalation in drone strikes that have killed civilians and children; and the continuing lies to the public regarding all the above. Scahill repeatedly emphasizes that these U.S. actions are counterproductive by creating more enemies and supporting al-Qaeda's recruitment efforts.

The prologue of *Dirty Wars* describes the drone assassination of 16-year-old Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen who was killed along with several of his teenage cousins. The attack occurred two weeks after his father and Samir Khan, both U.S. citizens, were similarly obliterated in Yemen. By these actions, the U.S. military foretold the frightening specter of the disappearance of the Fifth Amendment. Commenting on the assassination of Abdulrahman, in an audio interview Presidential press secretary Robert Gibbs pronounced that

the dead teenager ["should have a far-more responsible father"](#) (Friedersdorf, 2012). Thus, a criminal execution has supplanted constitutional protections for noncombatants as Americans' rights are curtailed to defeat an unfathomable enemy.

Despite the complexity of the many intertwined facets of *Dirty Wars*, Scahill writes with a clarity and coherence that produce a gripping narrative. Although nonfiction, *Dirty Wars* reads like a gripping novel even as the words carry messages of horror. The events Scahill recounts are brought to life by an extraordinary number of face-to-face interviews with sources that include military figures, numerous foreign journalists, dozens of family members in countries experiencing the ramifications of U.S. military actions, and Somali warlords working for the CIA.

The historical context for *Dirty Wars* began on September 14, 2001. In an unparalleled departure from the Constitution, Scahill documents the "unprecedented latitude to wage a global war, passing the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) given to the President by Congress" (p. 19). This authorization served as the apologia for the many constitutional violations that Scahill documents in *Dirty Wars*.

During his on-the-ground reporting in *Dirty Wars*, Scahill (national security correspondent for *The Nation* magazine) investigated the operations of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), a covert operation that was integral to the majority of the unconstitutional violations previously described. Early in his book, Scahill documents the available knowledge regarding the torture and abuse that occurred at JSOC's Camp NAMA near Baghdad under Stanley McChrystal. After McChrystal was named Commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, night raids, one of the centerpieces of JSOC's maneuvers, increased four-fold in six months.

The night raid in Gardez on February 12, 2010 illustrates well the entropic nature of JSOC. Mohammed Daoud Sharabuddin, a respected police officer in the hearts-and-minds campaign of the U.S., was celebrating the birth of a child with family and friends. Enter JSOC with flawed intelligence and unrelenting lethality, and seven family members, including Sharabuddin and two pregnant women, were dead. Realizing their calamitous error, the troops dug spent bullets from the bodies of the pregnant women and disappeared. British reporter Jerome Starkey first investigated the massacre. Acting on Starkey's information, Scahill

personally investigated and interviewed the family members. After U.S. responsibility could no longer be denied, William McRaven, head of JSOC at the time, visited the family and offered to sacrifice a sheep in exchange for forgiveness for the deaths in the night raid.

It would be distressing enough if *Dirty Wars* were merely a nightmarish account of past U.S. actions. But it is much more as Scahill's history lesson carries us directly into the present. U.S. drone strikes in Yemen are again in the news (along with growing fears of an increased Al-Qaeda presence in southern Africa). *Dirty Wars* is therefore essential reading for anyone interested in better understanding U.S. policy--where we have been and where we may be headed--propelled by the dangerous view that the world is indeed our battlefield.

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### About the Author

Trudy Bond is an independent psychologist in Toledo, Ohio. Licensed in Ohio and Michigan for over 30 years, she has maintained a clinical practice during that time. Dr. Bond is beginning her fourth year as a steering committee member of [Psychologists for Social Responsibility](#) and is a member of the [Coalition for an Ethical Psychology](#).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Trudy Bond, 3131 Executive Parkway, Suite 104, Toledo, OH 43606. E-mail: [drtrudybond@gmail.com](mailto:drtrudybond@gmail.com).

