

# A “Traitor” to the American Death Machine Faces Years in Prison – While the Killing Goes On

*By Chris Hedges, Published on [Salon.com](https://www.salon.com), July 13, 2021*

Daniel Hale, an active-duty Air Force intelligence analyst, stood in the Occupy encampment in Zuccotti Park in October 2011 in his military uniform. He held up a sign that read “Free Bradley Manning,” who had not yet announced her transition. It was a singular act of conscience few in uniform had the strength to replicate. He had taken a week off from his job to join the protesters in the park. He was present at 6 a.m. on Oct. 14 when Mayor Michael Bloomberg made his first attempt to clear the park. He stood in solidarity with thousands of protesters, including many unionized transit workers, teachers, Teamsters and communications workers, who formed a ring around the park. He watched the police back down as the crowd erupted into cheers. But this act of defiance and moral courage was only the beginning.

At the time, Hale was stationed at Fort Bragg. A few months later he deployed to Afghanistan’s Bagram Air Force Base. He would later learn that that while he was in Zuccotti Park, Barack Obama ordered a drone strike some 12,000 miles away in Yemen that killed Abdulrahman Anwar al-Awlaki, the 16-year-old son of the radical cleric and U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who had been killed by a drone strike two weeks earlier. The Obama administration claimed it was targeting the leader of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, Ibrahim al-Banna, who it believed, incorrectly, was with the boy and his cousins, all of whom were also killed in the attack. That massacre of innocents became public, but there were thousands more such

attacks that wantonly killed noncombatants that only Hale and those with top-security clearances knew about.

Starting in 2013, Hale, while working as a private contractor, leaked some 17 classified documents about the drone program to investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill, although the reporter is not named in court documents. The leaked documents, published by The Intercept on Oct. 15, 2015, exposed that between January 2012 and February 2013, U.S. special operations airstrikes killed more than 200 people. Of those, only 35 were the intended targets. For one five-month period of the operation, according to the documents, nearly 90 percent of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets. The civilian dead, usually innocent bystanders, were routinely classified as *"enemies killed in action."*

Hale was coerced by President Biden's Justice Department on March 31 to plead guilty to one count of violating the Espionage Act, a law passed in 1917 designed to prosecute those who passed on state secrets to a hostile power, not those who expose to the public government lies and crimes. Hale admitted as part of the plea deal to *"retention and transmission of national security information"* and leaking 11 classified documents to a journalist. He is being held in the Alexandria Adult Detention Center in Virginia, awaiting sentencing on July 27. If he had refused the plea deal, he could have spent 50 years in prison. He now faces up to a decade in prison.

Tragically, his case has not garnered the attention it should. When Nick Mottern, of the Ban Killer Drones campaign, accompanied artists projecting Hale's image on downtown walls in Washington, he found that everyone he spoke to was unaware of Hale's plight. Prominent human rights organizations, such as the ACLU and PEN, have largely remained silent and uninvolved. The group Stand with Daniel Hale has called on Biden to pardon Hale and end the use of the Espionage Act to

punish whistleblowers, mounted a letter-writing campaign to the judge to request leniency and is collecting donations for Hale's legal fund.

*"Daniel Hale is one of the most consequential whistleblowers,"* Edward Snowden said on a May Day panel held at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst on the 50th anniversary of the release of the Pentagon Papers.

*"He sacrificed everything – an incredibly courageous person – to tell us that the drone war, that, you know, is so obviously occurring to everyone else, but the government was still officially denying in so many ways, is here, it is happening, and 90 percent of the casualties in one five-month period were innocents or bystanders or not the target of the drone strike. We could not establish that, we could not prove that, without Daniel Hale's voice."*

Speaking on Democracy Now! with host Amy Goodman a few weeks later, Daniel Ellsberg agreed that Hale *"acted very admirably, in a way that very, very few officials have ever done in showing the moral courage to separate themselves from criminal activities and wrongful activities of their own administration, and resist them, as well as exposing them."*

Because Hale was charged under the Espionage Act, he, like other whistleblowers, including Chelsea Manning, Jeffrey Sterling, Thomas Drake and John Kiriakou, who spent two and a half years in prison for exposing the routine torture of suspects held in black sites, was not permitted to explain his motivations and intent to the court. Nor could he provide evidence to the court that the drone assassination program killed and wounded large numbers of noncombatants, including children. He faced trial in the Eastern District of Virginia, much of whose population has links to the military or intelligence community, and whose courts have become notorious for their harsh sentences on behalf of the government.

The 2012 *“Living Under Drones”* report by the Stanford International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic provides a detailed documentation of the human impact of U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. Drones often fire Hellfire missiles that are equipped with an explosive warhead of about 20 pounds. A Hellfire variant, known as the R9X, carries *“an inert warhead,”* The New York Times reported. Instead of exploding, it hurls about 100 pounds of metal through a vehicle. The missile’s other feature includes *“six long blades tucked inside,”* which deploy *“seconds before impact to slice up anything in its path”* – including, of course, people.

The numbers of civilian dead from U.S. drone strikes run into the thousands, if not tens of thousands. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), an independent journalist organization, for example, reported that from June 2004 through mid-September 2012, drone strikes killed between 2,562 and 3,325 people in Pakistan, of whom an estimated 474 to 881 were civilians, including 176 children.

Drones hover 24 hours a day in the skies over Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria. Without warning, the drones, operated remotely from Air Force bases as far away as Nevada, fire ordinance that obliterates homes and vehicles or kills whole groups of people in fields or attending community gatherings, funerals and weddings. The leaked banter of the young drone operators, who often treat the killings as if they are an enhanced video game, exposes the callousness of the indiscriminate killings. Drone operators refer to child victims of drone attacks as *“fun-sized terrorists.”*

*“Ever step on ants and never give it another thought?”*

Michael Hass, a former drone operator for the Air Force, told The Guardian.

*“That’s what you are made to think of the targets – as just black blobs on a screen. You start to do these psychological*

*gymnastics to make it easier to do what you have to do – they deserved it, they chose their side. You had to kill part of your conscience to keep doing your job every day – and ignore those voices telling you this wasn't right."*

The ubiquitous presence of drones in the skies, and the awareness that at any moment these drones can kill you and your family, induces feelings of helplessness, anxiety and constant fear.

*"Their presence terrorizes men, women, and children, giving rise to anxiety and psychological trauma among civilian communities,"*

the 2012 report reads of the drone war in Pakistan.

*"Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves. These fears have affected behavior. The U.S. practice of striking one area multiple times, and evidence that it has killed rescuers, makes both community members and humanitarian workers afraid or unwilling to assist injured victims. Some community members shy away from gathering in groups, including important tribal dispute-resolution bodies, out of fear that they may attract the attention of drone operators. Some parents choose to keep their children home, and children injured or traumatized by strikes have dropped out of school."*

Drones have become killing machines that mete out random death and usually permanently cripple those victims who survive.

*"The missiles fired from drones kill or injure in several ways, including through incineration, shrapnel, and the release of powerful blast waves capable of crushing internal organs,"*

the report reads.

*“Those who do survive drone strikes often suffer disfiguring burns and shrapnel wounds, limb amputations, as well as vision and hearing loss.”*

Hale, now 33, always had doubts about the war, but he enlisted in 2009 when Obama assumed office. He hoped that Obama would undo the excesses and lawlessness of the Bush administration. Instead, Obama, a few weeks after he took office, approved the deployment of an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, where 36,000 U.S. troops and 32,000 NATO troops were already deployed. By the end of the year, Obama increased troop levels in Afghanistan again by 30,000, doubling U.S. casualties. He also massively expanded the drone program, raising the number of drone strikes from several dozen the year before he took office to 117 by his second year in office. By the time he left office Obama had presided over the killing of at least 3,000 suspected militants and hundreds of civilians. He authorized what are known as “signature strikes” allowing the CIA to carry out drone attacks against groups of suspected militants without getting positive identification. He spread the footprint of the drone war, establishing drone bases in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other overseas locations to expand attacks to Syria and Yemen. The Obama administration also indicted eight whistleblowers under the Espionage Act, more than all previous administrations combined. The Biden administration, like the Trump and Obama administrations, continues to launch widespread global drone strikes.

*“Before I joined the military, I was well aware that what I was about to enter was something I was against, that I disagreed with,”*

Hale says in the 2016 documentary film “National Bird.”

*"I joined anyway out of desperation. I was homeless. I was desperate. I had nowhere else to go. I was on my last leg. The Air Force was ready to accept me."*

In the film, Hale alludes to a difficult and chaotic childhood.

*"It's kind of funny, a little ironic too, because so far I'm the only adult male in my entire family, immediate and external, who had not been to prison so far," he says. "I come from a long lineage of prisoners, actually, a very proud tradition of fuck-ups who get drunk and go driving, or sell pot, or carry a gun when they shouldn't be carrying a gun, in the wrong place at the wrong time, a lot of that where I'm from."*

He was assigned to the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg and underwent language and intelligence training. He worked for the National Security Agency (NSA) in Afghanistan as an intelligence analyst identifying targets for the drone program. His Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) security clearance gave him access to the vast global drone war hidden from public view and Obama's huge secret "kill lists."

*"There are several such lists, used to target individuals for different reasons,"* he wrote in an essay titled *"Why I Leaked the Watchlist Documents,"* originally published anonymously in the book ***"The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program"*** by Jeremy Scahill and the staff of The Intercept. The book is based on the leaked documents provided by Hale that first appeared as an eight-part series called *"The Drone Papers"* published by The Intercept.

*"Some lists are closely kept; others span multiple intelligence and local law enforcement agencies,"*

Hale writes in the essay.

*"There are lists used to kill or capture supposed 'high-value targets,' and others intended to threaten, coerce, or simply monitor a person's activity. However, all the lists, whether to kill or silence, originate from the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment, and they are maintained by the Terrorist Screening Center at the National Counterterrorism Center. The existence of TIDE is unclassified, yet details about how it functions in our government are completely unknown to the public. In August 2013 the database reached a milestone of one million entries. Today it is thousands of entries larger and is growing faster than it has since its inception in 2003."*

The Terrorist Screening Center, he writes, not only stores names, dates of birth and other identifying information of potential targets, but also stores "medical records, transcripts, and passport data; license plate numbers, email, and cell-phone numbers (along with the phone's International Mobile Subscriber Identity and International Mobile Station Equipment Identity numbers); your bank account numbers and purchases; and other sensitive information, including DNA and photographs capable of identifying you using facial recognition software."

Data on suspects is collected and pooled by the intelligence agencies known as the Five Eyes, the intelligence alliance formed by Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Each person on the list is assigned a TIDE personal number, or TPN.

*"From Osama bin Laden (TPN 1063599) to Abdulrahman Awlaki (TPN 26350617), the American son of Anwar al Awlaki, anyone who has ever been the target of a covert operation was first assigned a TPN and closely monitored by all agencies who follow that TPN long before they were eventually put on a*



*separate list and extrajudicially sentenced to death,”*

Hale wrote.

He also exposed that the more than one million entries in the TIDE database include about 21,000 U.S. citizens.

After leaving the Air Force in July 2013, Hale was employed by the private defense contractor National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency as a political geography analyst between December 2013 and August 2014. He said he took the job, which paid \$80,000 a year, because he was in desperate need of money and hoped to go to college. But by then he was disgusted with the drone program and determined to make the public aware of its abuses and lawlessness. Inspired by the peace activist David Dellinger, he, like Dellinger, had decided to become a traitor to *“the American way of death.”* He would make amends for his complicity in the killings, even at the cost of his own security and freedom.

*“When the president gets up in front of the nation and says they are doing everything they can to ensure there is near certainty there will be no civilians killed, he is saying that because he can’t say otherwise, because anytime an action is taken to finish a target there is a certain amount of guesswork in that action,”*

Hale says in the film.

*“It’s only in the aftermath of any kind of ordinance being dropped that you know how much actual damage was done. Oftentimes, the intelligence community is reliant, the Joint Special Operations Command, the CIA included, is reliant on intelligence coming afterwards that confirms that who they were targeting was killed in the strike, or that they weren’t killed in that strike.”*

*"The people who defend drones and the way they are used say they protect American lives by not putting them in harm's way," he says. "What they really do is embolden decision makers, because there is no threat, there is no immediate consequence. They can do this strike. They can potentially kill this person they are so desperate to eliminate because of how potentially dangerous they could be to the U.S. But if it just so happens that they don't kill that person, or some other people involved in the strike get killed as well, there are no consequences for it. When it comes to high-value targets, every mission you go after one person at a time, but anybody else killed in that strike is assumed to be an associate of the targeted individual. So as long as they can reasonably identify that all of the people in the field view of the camera are military-aged males, meaning anybody who is believed to be age 16 or older, they are a legitimate target under the rules of engagement. If that strike occurs and kills all of them, they just say they got them all."*

Drones, he warns, make remote killing "too easy, too convenient."

On Aug. 8, 2014, the FBI raided Hale's home. It was his last day of work for the private contractor. A male and female FBI agent shoved their badges in his face when he opened the door.

*"Immediately behind them came about 20 agents, basically all of them with pistols drawn, some wearing body armor,"*

he says in the film.

*"At this point I was extremely scared. I did not understand what was going on. Altogether, there might have been at least 30 to 50 agents in and out of the house at different points throughout the evening taking photos of every room and everything, searching for different things."*

By the time they finished his house was stripped of all electronics, including his cell phone.

For the next five years he lived with the uncertainty of his fate. He struggled to find work, fought off depression and contemplated suicide. He was barred by law from speaking about his plight, even with a therapist. In 2019, the Trump administration indicted Hale on four counts of violating the Espionage Act and one count of theft of government property.

The thousands of targeted assassinations carried out by drones, often in countries that are not at war with the United States, are an egregious violation of international law. They are turning huge swaths of the planet against us. The secret kill lists, which include U.S. citizens, have transformed the executive branch into judge, jury and executioner, obliterating the right to due process. Those that commit these killings are unaccountable. Hale sacrificed his career and his freedom to warn us. He is not a danger to the country. The danger we face comes from the secret drone program, which is spiraling out of control and ominously being adopted by domestic law enforcement agencies. If left unchecked, the terror we impose on others we will soon impose on ourselves.

***\*Featured Image:**Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Drone Attack (Getty Images/koto\_feja)*

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