

# The Other Drone Casualties: The Whistleblowers Who Tried to Stop It

*by Jesselyn Radack and William Neuheisel, published on Common Dreams, January 4, 2022*

The United States continues to play prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner of anyone on the planet. Despite a decade of air carnage, the only person in prison is the man who exposed it.

**The New York Times'** investigation into the Pentagon's civilian casualty files is some of the most important journalism in the War on Terror. It methodically and thoroughly picks apart the layers of lies around drone warfare and proves that the few examples of civilian casualties that have been investigated previously were not one-off mistakes. Unfortunately, this reporting comes too late for the civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria who bore the brunt of the brutal air campaigns.

Over the years, a number of veterans have been sounding the alarm about precisely these issues, trying to blow the whistle while it could still save lives. We have represented more than a dozen such veterans who, despite being vindicated in their concerns, have suffered dire and ongoing consequences for their whistle blowing, on top of crippling moral injury from participating in a global assassination program.

They began to come forward in 2012 and 2013. Nothing. Some of them participated in the award-winning documentary '*National Bird*' in 2014. Several more risked their freedom and came forward publicly in 2015. They all bore witness to what had become essentially common knowledge among drone pilots, sensor operators, and imagery analysts: civilian casualties were not

an aberration and the much-touted policy safeguards and precision technology were little more than a facade in terms of actually protecting innocents. Operators or their supervisors would minimize concerns of children spotted in a strike with dehumanizing terms such as "*fun-sized terrorists*" or "*terrorists in training*," or by simply insisting the child had been a dog. People fleeing a bombed building were referred to as "*squirters*."

These whistleblowers have had to navigate abnormally high rates of PTSD, anxiety, depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide. They have been berated by anti-war groups, denied veterans' benefits because they were not "*boots on the ground*," and subject to pretextual government investigations targeting them and their families. One former service member described to NY Times Magazine the lasting effects of moral injury, PTSD, and anxiety he suffered after leaving the drone program as well as the threats and harassment he endured after speaking out. When another client was in Germany to testify before the German Bundestag about drone warfare, Air Force officials showed up on his mother's doorstep in Missoula, Montana and told her she was being targeted by ISIS because her son was speaking out.

The most severe consequences have been borne by Afghanistan war veteran Daniel Hale, who was prosecuted under the draconian Espionage Act and is serving a nearly four-year prison sentence because he was the source for a groundbreaking reporting series and book on drone assassinations. Hale had started like other dissenters, speaking out in public forums about his experiences in the drone program after having left the military. But his conscience continued to plague him, and he had started to think of himself as a war criminal. He described his tipping point after he had unexpectedly regained access to classified drone documents at his next job as a military contractor, where his colleagues would watch "*drone porn*"—raw footage of drone strikes—as a form of entertainment.

The documents he later gave to journalists were concrete evidence of what he and other whistleblowers had been saying (and what the Times' investigation would later confirm): the claims of accuracy touted by the military and political leaders were grossly untrue, and they knew it. The military's own studies showed that up to 90% of strike victims were not the intended target. Yet they almost never bothered to investigate the civilian deaths they claimed to work so hard to avoid. Instead, those deaths were deemed "*enemies killed in action.*" And that inflated number of "*enemy*" casualties formed the basis for awards and promotions.

When Hale attempted to explain the motivation for his actions at sentencing, prosecutors protested that he had "*helped ISIS,*" and compared him to a heroin dealer who insisted that his crimes were good for the community.

Hale spent the holidays isolated from friends and supporters by the contact restrictions and intense surveillance of a "*Communications Management Unit*", where he was placed by the Bureau of Prisons under the absurd rationale that he might commit another "*communications-based crime*" from prison, despite having had no access to classified material for almost a decade. He was unable to comment on recent news that yet again, the military absolved itself of any wrongdoing in the horrifically botched but not atypical August drone strike in Kabul—the parting shot of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

**\*Featured Image:** *The most severe consequences have been borne by Afghanistan war veteran Daniel Hale, who was prosecuted under the draconian Espionage Act and is serving a nearly four-year prison sentence because he was the source for a ground-breaking reporting series and book on drone assassinations. (Photo: Flickr/cc/Backbone Campaign)*

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## **Unveiling of Rob Shetterly's Portrait of Daniel Hale**

Peace Action and Veterans for Peace of Broome County NY held a very nice event for our heroic killer drone whistleblower, Daniel Hale, at Cornell, an Ivy League university in Ithaca NY, on Armistice Day, November 11, 2021.

After a year of planning, the solidarity group of Peace Action of Broome County NY and Veterans for Peace of Broome County joined forces to have a heart, soul, and mind-touching event to celebrate seventeen American truth-tellers. Artist Rob Shetterly's portraits (over 250 to date) of *Americans Who Tell the Truth* is a traveling art museum.

Broome County (NY) Peace Action and Broome County Veterans for Peace Chapter 90 showed the seventeen portraits (each 37 x31 inches) for weeks at Broome County Public Library, then at Maine-Endwell High School, and for the whole month of November at Cornell's College of Human Ecology. Sixteen of the

portraits were selected by vote after an intense study of all *Americans Who Tell the Truth* easily found at [www.americanswhotellthetruth.org](http://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org).

Members of Chapter 90 of Veterans for Peace and Broome County Peace Action, Maine-Endwell High School librarian and students, Cornell Human Ecology faculty, and some students studied Shetterly's portraits and text and voted for sixteen individuals to show. Veterans for Peace of Broome County and Peace Action Broome County added Daniel Hale to the group selection.

On Armistice Day, 2021, artist Rob Shetterly spoke with passion about his selection of truth-tellers to paint from Sojourners Truth to his most recent subject, Daniel Hale. Hale is now in federal prison for telling the truth about the United States assassination program, a remote execution project labeled as a war on terror. The portrait of Daniel Hale, resting on a large easel, was the focus of our event at Cornell. Daniel's portrait was unveiled during the well-attended ceremony in the small gallery of Martha Van Rensselaer Hall.

Veterans for Peace and Peace Action of Broome County, NY encourage other national chapters of our organizations to make the effort to get a selection of Shetterly's truth-teller portraits of *Americans Who Tell the Truth* into public libraries and schools.

For more information about how to do this, contact Rob Shetterly at [americanswhotellthetruth.org](http://americanswhotellthetruth.org) or write Jack Gilroy at [jgilroy1955@gmail.org](mailto:jgilroy1955@gmail.org) to learn how our upstate New York solidarity team organized

our two-month exhibit.

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# US Government Seeks Harshest Sentence Ever In Leak Case Against Drone Whistleblower

by *Kevin Gosztola*, published on *The Dissenter*, July 20, 2021

The United States government urged a federal court to sentence drone whistleblower Daniel Hale to at least nine years in prison for disclosing documents to a reporter.

Prosecutors maintained Hale joined the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) to steal classified information so he could “*ingratiate himself*” with journalists. They even submitted secret evidence for the court alleging the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “*distributed*” two of the documents in a “*guidebook for its followers.*”

*“For those like Hale, who unilaterally decide to disclose classified information, the existence of criminal penalties that are theoretically harsh but practically lenient is not sufficient,” prosecutors declare in their sentencing memorandum [PDF]. “It is particularly important to deter those who, like Hale, might be tempted to gain access for the sole purpose of disclosing it. Such individuals must see that using positions in the intelligence community for self-aggrandizement will be harshly punished.”*

*“A significant sentence is necessary to demonstrate that the unauthorized disclosure of classified information is a*

*serious crime with significant consequences,”*

prosecutors add.

Hale was part of the drone program in the U.S. Air Force and later worked at the NGA. He pled guilty on March 31 to one charge of violating the Espionage Act, when he provided documents to Intercept co-founder Jeremy Scahill and anonymously wrote a chapter in Scahill's book, ***The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program.***

He was taken into custody and sent to the William G. Truesdale Detention Center in Alexandria, Virginia, on April 28. A therapist from pretrial and probation services named Michael violated patient confidentiality and shared details with the court related to his mental health.

Hale is scheduled to be sentenced in the Eastern District of Virginia on July 27, and the sentencing memorandum from the U.S. government reflects the vindictive posture of prosecutors, particularly since he pled guilty.



**DEFENDING RIGHTS & DISSENT**

**US GOVERNMENT SEEKS HARSHTEST SENTENCE EVER IN LEAK CASE AGAINST DRONE WHISTLEBLOWER DANIEL HALE**

Kevin Gosztola  
The Dissenter  
Jul. 20, 2021

**WAR DAY 7249**

HALE WAS PART OF THE DRONE PROGRAM IN THE U.S. AIR FORCE AND LATER WORKED AT THE NGA. HE PLED GUILTY ON MARCH 31 TO ONE CHARGE OF VIOLATING THE ESPIONAGE ACT, WHEN HE PROVIDED DOCUMENTS TO INTERCEPT CO-FOUNDER JEREMY SCAHILL AND ANONYMOUSLY WROTE A CHAPTER IN SCAHILL'S BOOK, THE ASSASSINATION COMPLEX: INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT'S SECRET DRONE WARFARE PROGRAM. HALE IS SCHEDULED TO BE SENTENCED IN THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF VIRGINIA ON JULY 27, AND THE SENTENCING MEMORANDUM FROM THE U.S. GOVERNMENT REFLECTS THE VINDICTIVE POSTURE OF PROSECUTORS, PARTICULARLY SINCE HE PLED GUILTY.



### **'They Just Don't Want To Play Ball'**

Prosecutors refused to dismiss four additional charges but declined to request a trial on those charges. They left open the possibility of going to trial if they are unsatisfied with the harshness of the sentence. And they now manipulate Hale's guilty plea in their argument for severe punishment in order to render it insignificant.

*"[Hale] apparently does not accept that the documents that he provided to reporter had the potential to cause such 'serious' or 'exceptionally grave' damage to the national*



*security,”*

prosecutors contend.

*“To trigger a reduction in offense level for acceptance of responsibility, a defendant must establish that he has accepted responsibility for all of the charged criminal conduct in the count of conviction (and, of course, all related conduct).”*

Prosecutors indicate they would accept a sentence of seven years and 3 months if Hale admitted his whistleblowing risked “serious” or “exceptionally grave” damage to U.S. national security.

In other words, they do not believe Hale’s guilty plea is good enough to receive a sentence of five years or less, and they have trapped a conscientious and vulnerable individual in a damned if you do, damned if you don’t situation.

Hale could try and withdraw his guilty plea and go to trial, but Judge Liam O’Grady may not allow it. Or he could plead guilty and accept the documents risked “serious” or “exceptionally grave” damage, even though he does not believe that is the truth of what happened.

Either way, Hale is likely to receive the most harsh sentence for an unauthorized disclosure of information ever issued against a former U.S. government employee or contractor.

CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou was targeted in the Eastern District of Virginia with an Espionage Act prosecution under President Barack Obama. He eventually pled guilty to violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act in order to ensure he only went to prison for 30 months.

*“In every other case, including mine, part of the deal was you’ll take the plea to the one charge in exchange for all*

*the other charges being dropped. That's what everybody else does, except of course, for [CIA whistleblower] Jeffrey Sterling, who went to trial,"*

Kiriakou contended.

*"They just don't want to play ball, and they're placing the blame on Daniel."*

*"That doesn't make sense because he's agreed to plead guilty to the most serious charge with the expectation that the other charges would be dismissed. And they're not willing to negotiate in good faith,"*

Kiriakou added.

### **'This Makes Me Sick To My Stomach'**

U.S. prosecutors submitted secret "evidence" to the judge, which they refuse to declassify for the public. The submission is part of an "internet compilation" that they claim was "designed to assist ISIS fighters avoid detection and targeting." It allegedly included parts of two documents disclosed by Hale.

Hale never transferred or provided documents directly to any ISIS member or any person claiming to be associated with the militant group. Prosecutors are further criminalizing him because terrorists have access to the internet just like all citizens of the world do.

The sentencing memorandum invokes the cases of NSA whistleblower Reality Winner and FBI whistleblower Terry Albury, which both ended in plea agreements. Winner was sentenced to 63 months. Albury was sentenced to 48 months.

*"Like Hale, Winner disclosed information classified at the 'Top Secret' level. Unlike Hale, Winner disclosed only a*

single document," the memo states. "Albury was sentenced for retaining 50 classified documents and transmitting some of them to a reporter – but none of the documents Albury disclosed was classified above the 'Secret' level."

"Hale stole documents from NGA on at least seven different dates over a four-month period, and his thefts were the result of a plan premeditated long before that," the memo argues.

Winner's sentence was, at the time, the harshest sentence ever issued against a former government employee or contractor. To act like it was fair and should be a base line for leak prosecutions going forward is extraordinary.

Billie Winner-Davis, the mother of Reality Winner, reacted, "This makes me sick to my stomach to think that they are using Reality's sentence to punish Daniel Hale even more severely."

*"Watching what the government did to my daughter and the way that they destroyed her life completely has shown me just how cruel our government can be. From what I know about Daniel's case, he has also suffered so much already from this experience."*

*"Through my experience with Reality, I've come to believe that only violent offenders and those who are a true danger to our society should be imprisoned,"*

Winner-Davis shared.

*"To imprison those who work to protect us and give us the truth is an injustice. I pray he does not get sentenced to prison."*

*"There are so many other ways that our government could work with him. [Daniel's] already shown in the last five years that he is no threat to anyone."*

But the U.S. government seems to view Hale's case as an opportunity to move away from sentences that are not cruel enough to make an example out of "leakers."

*"We recognize that sentences imposed in some past 'leak' cases were not commensurate with the government's view of the seriousness of the defendants' conduct, or nearly serious enough to deter others from engaging in similar conduct,"*

prosecutors declare, referring to Sterling's case.

*"We cannot justify or explain such sentences, but only point out that a past court's failure to recognize the significance of the need to deter similar behavior by other individuals should not induce this court to make the same mistake."*

### **Sketching A Caricature Of A Conscientious Young Veteran**

The sentencing memorandum sketches a caricature of Hale as a young man who "jumped at the chance" to "fraternize" with Scahill and his colleagues. They take a chat message out of context and suggest he "looked up to [journalists] like rock stars" and wanted to become a journalist to "speak truth to power" while "hav[ing] great sex all the time and mak[ing] just enough to live but not too much that [he] [became] a part of the upper crust."

To this idea that Hale "ingratiated himself" with journalists and wanted to become a rock star reporter, Noor Mir, one of his closest friends, replied,

*"Anyone who knows Daniel knows that he puts himself last in every situation, focused entirely on helping those who are in need, have been silenced, or suffered insurmountable harms. This is a gross mischaracterization of his character to all those that know him to be humble and moral to a fault."*

It was difficult for Hale to speak in public, according to Mir. When he participated in a “*drone summit*” organized by CODEPINK, which Mir was involved in organizing, he “prepared for a long time and was very nervous. But he also knew that there were family members of victims of drone strikes in the audience from Yemen, who had witnessed the injustices of which he spoke.”

Media outlets, who did not know Hale’s identity, referred to Hale as the “*second Snowden*,” a nod to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The Oscar-winning documentary “*Citizenfour*” about Snowden featured a scene where journalist Glenn Greenwald revealed details about Hale to Snowden. Scahill spoke about Hale toward the end of the film.

If Hale wanted to be a “*rock star*” journalist, he could have used all of that as a springboard and fled the country to some place where he could speak out more.

Yet a recent feature story on Hale by New York magazine reporter Kerry Howley makes clear, “*Nearly no one knew who Second Snowden was then or for years afterward.*” He grew a “*ZZ Top beard*” during the COVID-19 pandemic (after his trial was delayed). He wore donated clothing, and friends “*pressed him to go public with the story of how and why*” he disclosed documents. “*But Daniel maintained that in talking about himself he would be taking the spotlight from victims of the drone war.*”

Even after an intervention was staged at a tavern in Washington, D.C. in November 2020, and his friends insisted he tell his story so the prosecution’s story did not go unchallenged, Hale still waited until early April to talk with a reporter.

Kiriakou said the thought that Hale wanted to “*ingratiate himself*” to journalists is so ridiculous that it’s laughable.

*"They said the same thing about me. That I was trying to ingratiate myself with journalists and to seek a career as a commentator with ABC News,"*

Kiriakou recalled.

*"Nothing could have been further from the truth. I had a job that was paying me four times what ABC News offered me. I didn't need a job from ABC News. I never sought a job at ABC News."*

All anybody had to do was look at Kiriakou's bank account that was empty to see the prosecutors were pushing a false narrative, he added.

Like Kiriakou described, this has become fairly standard. The U.S. prosecutors try to *"make the defendant look like a narcissist."* They maintain *"it's all about fame, and it's all about the money. And they just ignore the facts."*

After Hale returned from his Air Force deployment in Afghanistan, Howley reported, *"He wanted to go to school, and for this he needed money, and as an analyst with a security clearance, money was easily made."*

*"Six months after meeting Scahill, Daniel had left the Air Force and started working for Leidos, a company that makes more than \$10 billion a year in revenue by convincing the federal government of its utility. He said he would only do it for six months, a promise he kept."*

Hale did not work at the NGA to steal classified documents. He worked for the intelligence agency because he needed to pay for a college education.

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# We Gotta Stand with Daniel Hall, Drone Warfare Truth-Teller

On Saturday, July 17, 2021, activists representing many organizations, including the Ban Killer Drones campaign and Peace Action New York State, held a press conference in support of the whistleblower Daniel Hale, who revealed information about the U.S. drone warfare program.

Daniel Hale served in the Air Force as an intelligence analyst. His task was to identify targets for the US drone assassination program. Troubled by what he did and saw, after leaving the Air Force in 2013, Hale provided documents about the drone program to the media. In 2019, four years after the documents were published, the Trump administration had him arrested and charged under the 1917 Espionage Act. He is being held in prison in Alexandria, VA, and will be sentenced to up to 10 years in prison on July 27, 2021.

Incomplete reports about US drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen alone found 16,901 people killed and 3,922 wounded. The use of drones is spreading. Drone attacks have been carried out by at least 12 nations, primarily by the USA, but also by other governments, including France, Israel, Turkey, and the UK.

***“Some people call me a whistleblower or a patriot, but I was simply concerned with speaking the truth.”*** – Daniel Hale

*Video by Wilton Vought*



To learn more about Daniel Hale's case and how you can support him, go to [standwithdanielhale.org](http://standwithdanielhale.org).

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

*By Chris Hedges, Published on [Salon.com](http://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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**Chris Hedges** is the former Middle East bureau chief of the New York Times, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and a columnist at Scheerpost. He is the author of several books, including “America: The Farewell Tour,” “American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America” and “War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning.”

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# Why Daniel Hale Deserve Gratitude, Not Prison

by *Kathy Kelly* published on *Countercurrents*, July 07, 2021

*“Pardon Daniel Hale.”*

These words hung in the air on a recent Saturday evening, projected onto several Washington, D.C. buildings, above the face of a courageous whistleblower facing ten years in prison.

The artists aimed to inform the U.S. public about Daniel E. Hale, a former Air Force analyst who blew the whistle on the consequences of drone warfare. Hale will appear for sentencing before Judge Liam O’Grady on July 27<sup>th</sup>.

The U.S. Air Force had assigned Hale to work for the National Security Agency. At one point, he also served in Afghanistan, at the Bagram Air Force Base.

*“In this role as a signals analyst, Hale was involved in the identifying of targets for the US drone program,”*

notes Chip Gibbons, policy director for Defending Rights and Dissent, in a lengthy article about Hale's case.

*"Hale would tell the filmmakers of the 2016 documentary National Bird that he was disturbed by 'the uncertainty if anyone I was involved in kill[ing] or captur[ing] was a civilian or not. There's no way of knowing.'"*

Hale, thirty-three, believed the public wasn't getting crucial information about the nature and extent of U.S. drone assassinations of civilians. Lacking that evidence, U.S. people couldn't make informed decisions. Moved by his conscience, he opted to become a truth-teller.

The U.S. government is treating him as a threat, a thief who stole documents, and an enemy. If ordinary people knew more about him, they might regard him as a hero.

Hale was charged under the Espionage Act for allegedly providing classified information to a reporter. The Espionage Act is an antiquated World War I era law, passed in 1917, designed for use against enemies of the U.S. accused of spying. The U.S. government has dusted it off, more recently, for use against whistle blowers.

Individuals charged under this law are not allowed to raise any issues regarding motivation or intent. They literally are not allowed to explain the basis for their actions.

One observer of whistleblowers' struggles with the courts was himself a whistleblower. Tried and convicted under the Espionage Act, John Kiriakou spent two and a half years in prison for exposing government wrongdoing. He says the U.S. government in these cases engages in "*charge stacking*" to ensure a lengthy prison term as well as "*venue-shopping*" to try such cases in the nation's most conservative districts.

Daniel Hale was facing trial in the Eastern District of Virginia, home to the Pentagon as well as many CIA and other federal government agents. He was facing up to 50 years in prison if found guilty on all counts.

On March 31, Hale pled guilty on one count of retention and transmission of national defense information. He now faces a maximum of ten years in prison.

At no point has he been able to raise before a judge his alarm about the Pentagon's false claims that targeted drone assassination is precise and civilian deaths are minimal.

Hale was familiar with details of a special operations campaign in northeastern Afghanistan, Operation Haymaker. He saw evidence 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. During 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.”*

Had he gone to trial, a jury of his peers might have learned more details about consequences of drone attacks. Weaponized drones are typically outfitted with Hellfire missiles, designed for use against vehicles and buildings.

***Living Under Drones***, the most complete documentation of the human impact of U.S. drone attacks yet produced, reports:

*“The most immediate consequence of drone strikes is, of course, death and injury to those targeted or near a strike. 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. Those who do survive drone strikes often suffer disfiguring burns and shrapnel wounds, limb amputations, as*



*well as vision and hearing loss."*

A new variation of this missile can hurl about 100 pounds of metal through the top of a vehicle or building; the missiles also deploy, just before impact, six long, whirring blades intended to slice up any person or object in the missile's path.

Any drone operator or analyst should be aghast, as Daniel Hale was, at the possibility of killing and maiming civilians through such grotesque means. But Daniel Hale's ordeal may be intended to send a chilling message to other U.S. government and military analysts: keep quiet.

Nick Mottern, of the Ban Killer Drones campaign, accompanied artists projecting Hale's image on various walls in D.C. He engaged people who were passing by, asking if they knew of Daniel Hale's case. Not a single person he spoke with had. Nor did anyone know anything about drone warfare.

Now imprisoned at the Alexandria (VA) Adult Detention Center, Hale awaits sentencing.

Supporters urge people to "*stand with Daniel Hale.*" One solidarity action involves writing Judge O'Grady to express gratitude that Hale told the truth about the U.S. use of drones to kill innocent people.

At a time when drone sales and usage are proliferating worldwide and causing increasingly gruesome damage, President Joe Biden continues to launch killer drone attacks around the world, albeit with some new restrictions.

Hale's honesty, courage, and exemplary readiness to act in accord with his conscience are critically needed. Instead, the U.S. government has done its best to silence him.

A version of this article appeared in The Progressive Magazine.

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**\*Featured Image:** Projection on a wall in DC, ~Nick Mottern