

# Dirty Wars – Review

— Written by [John Parrot](#) On 11th November 2013

The last ten years have possibly been an incredibly fertile period for political documentaries. This trend continues with Jeremy Scahill and Richard Rowley's new film *Dirty Wars* which looks at the continuing brutal impact of the ongoing War on Terror.



Considering President Obama has sought to distance himself from the term 'war on terror' (sometimes known as the WOT), there is still rather a lot of fighting going on across the globe. Campaigning journalist Scahill and his director Richard Rowley illustrate this fact with formidable effect. They travel to Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia to investigate just how dirty this non-war really is.

In 2007 [Scahill's](#) book *Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army* won the prestigious George Polk Award given for the **best political journalism**. As the title suggests, the book looked at the dubious practises of Blackwater, the American company that is the world's largest supplier of 'private military services' i.e. mercenaries. (Scahill won the Polk award the following year once more with Amy Goodman for best radio reporting.)

*Dirty Wars* accompanies Scahill's latest book, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, published in April 2013. Richard Rowley, the film's director, however has explained that this is not a direct 'film version' of the book. In a director's statement, he says that during filming they realised there were two parts to the story: the exposé of a war gone wrong and how a person (journalist) is changed by reporting on this. Unlike the book, the film includes both the political and personal strands.

They hired a fiction screenwriter, David Riker, to help work on the script. The resulting film is one of intense moods. Anger is probably the most pronounced emotion that pervades the story – fury at the US's bullying, brutality, law-breaking and sometimes just plain stupidity. The best political documentaries are motivated by a righteous anger, whether *The Fog of War* and Michael Moore's films, while others like *The Most Dangerous Man in America* and *Dirty Wars* also extend themselves to paranoia and melancholia too.

It is saddening to see what America is doing around the world, and frightening to think what their shadowy outfits might do to those who challenge this way of operating. There is one particular quip made by the US talk show host Jay Leno, wondering why Scahill hasn't met some unfortunate accident. The way the CIA and other covert US bodies operate, one is left wondering why indeed. After watching this film the [grisly death this summer of Scahill's friend Michael Hastings](#), a fellow campaigning journalist, will seem highly suspicious indeed. This paranoid tone is enhanced by a haunting original soundtrack by the Kronos Quartet and with extra contributions from Muslim gauze and Godspeed You! Black Emperor.

However, it is exposure of skeletons rotting under floorboards that Scahill specialises in. He begins by looking at a ['nighttime raid'](#) in Afghanistan on a family wedding which ended up with two pregnant women and several unarmed men shot dead. For all the media's interest in drone strikes, it seems that nighttime raids are just as devastating for innocents. Indeed, one might wonder that raids carried out by troops at close quarters would allow an element of restraint, not afforded to a drone floating about in the sky. Not so, shows *Dirty Wars*. Scahill interviews a broad range of subjects on all sides, and none, in the WOT. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that America and her allies (including us), have gone seriously over the top in their efforts to tackle the perceived threat from Islamist extremists. Sometimes it looks like the US is employing a zeal that is extremely damaging, while at others is reminded of aphorism coined by Brigadier General John Charteris in the First World War. Charteris is the first man who wrote that [military intelligence is a contradiction in terms](#).

*Dirty Wars* is out in cinemas on 29 November and on 16 November, 2013 it will be screened at the [Aldeburgh Documentary Festival](#) in Suffolk where it will be followed by a discussion between Andrew Feinstein and Olly Lambert and director Richard Rowley.