

America's Deadly New 'National Bird'

Officially, America's "national bird" is the eagle, but it is fast becoming the hovering, deadly drone that kills with missiles fired from half a world away, reports Dennis J Bernstein about Sonia Kennebeck's documentary, "National Bird."

By Dennis J Bernstein

In the new anti-drone film, *National Bird*, you meet courageous military drone resisters speaking out against America's forward-fighting drone program and the civilian killing and devastation it is causing all over the Middle East and North Africa.

National Bird "gives rare insight into the U.S. drone program through the eyes of veterans and survivors," says its director, Sonia Kennebeck, "connecting their stories as never before in a documentary. Its images haunt the audience and bring a faraway issue close to home."

You see these soldier technicians struggling to balance their secret lives as long distance assassins with their everyday lives as parents and spouses. Talk of suicide is rampant among these drone workers. And several have already taken their own lives.

Dennis Bernstein: Welcome Sonia Kennebeck. ... Why did you decide to do this film?

Sonia Kennebeck: Well, when I started out with my research, and that was in early 2013, there was really not much public information out there. And there were a lot of people commenting about the drone war, you know, pundits, experts, journalists. But we didn't have a lot of information and that's what I wanted to provide with the film.

I wanted to bring information out about the drone war, transparency, accountability. But, also, really bring the humanity back into this technological war. My film is really about the people, the people who... the veterans ... who had been fighting this war. But also the people in the target countries, who are most affected by the drones.

DB: Was [there a] moment in this process where you decided, "Wow, this is definitely the right film at the right time"? Talk a little bit about that process of discovery.

SK: Well, the more access I got to people, to the veterans who worked in the drone program, the more I realized how important this film was, and is. One of my first characters, or actually the first protagonist, who I found for my film

was my subject Heather. In our very first talk, in our very first conversation (and she had just left the military), she told me that she lost three of her fellow airmen—three of her friends—to suicide. And that was something that I had not heard before. The people who worked in the drone war, or part of the drone program, would be so distressed by their experiences that they would commit suicide. So, this was really one of the first things... one of the first information that I heard about that.

DB: ... And are you sure ... that these suicides occurred in the context of the drone program? Were they talking with these soldiers who ended up committing suicide? How do they know it's that direct link?

SK: Well, Heather, one of the subjects of my film, she actually talks about how she herself was on a suicide watch list. And how her psychologist at that time recommended that she should do a different job. And [the psychologist] said something that did not involve seeing people die all the time. And she was kept in her job because they were undermanned. Heather was really good in her position. And so she actually had that experience herself. She had it and she's sharing it with us.

And so, let me just explain what she was doing. Heather was an imagery analyst, meaning that she was analyzing the live video feed coming from the drones. And she had to make a call, judging the video feed and saying, "What I see on this video is this person is either a terrorist or a civilian"... and that is a very responsible position. And ... a decision that could eventually lead to the killing of a group of people. And that experience, for her, was very traumatizing.

DB: And ... does Lisa [another subject of the film] or Heather know if they actually killed people? Do they have any idea what people they might have helped to murder?

SK: They all participated in killing people. The problem is that it's not exactly clear how many. And that's what all of the three whistleblowers, in my film, are criticizing. They rarely got any feedback. And also, when you drop a bomb... and these military drones, they are large enough to carry 300 – 500 pound bombs.

And so, when you drop a bomb on a building, do you really know who's inside? And that's one of the things they are all criticizing about the program, that it's not exactly clear who is being killed, and how many people are being killed.

DB: And, in that same vein, is that what makes this an especially sort of troubling experience, that you are engaged, you are killing people, and then all of a sudden you are done with the day and you are out at the mall with your

kids? Is there something specific about this kind of way of being, if you will, a bombardier?

SK: Yes. Yes. I think you're mentioning a very important point. And no one wants to compare the experience people have fighting the drone war to the experience of combat soldiers. And, it's a very different experience.

But I think what the people are doing in the drone program is traumatizing in its own way. One of the things is what you were just mentioning, going into this secret environment, fighting a war, being part of a war, and being part of killing people.

And then, after your 12 hour shift, leaving this secret environment, going home to your kids, going home to your families, not being able to share your experiences, the traumatizing experiences that you had with anyone, because of the secrecy surrounding this program.

And, also, Lisa is talking about this, just living your normal life, here in the United States, going to Starbucks or Walmart, and people are talking about T.V. shows. And ... people like Lisa, people like Heather and Danielle, they just came from fighting a war. So, there's something very schizophrenic about this experience.

And, another thing Lisa has been talking about ... and Lisa had an over-20 year career in the U.S. military and she actually had been deployed to combat zones, so she can compare the experience. And she says the problem that she had with working a drone program was that you were actually not under threat. So you're never really defending yourself, or the people left and right of you. And that's what she was struggling with. You are still killing without actually being in danger yourself.

DB: And so, they really can't talk to their kids about their day job. So, this is a huge wall between this kind of killer pilot and everyday life.

SK: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

DB: I wonder if the powers-that-be... they must be reading this, in terms of the people running these programs, they must be very clear about what's happening here. Are they taking precautions? Whether they're counseling or threatening... has that become a part of the drone program? ... The way in which they have to keep people in line?

SK: I think there's more awareness for the trauma caused by working the drone program now than when I started my research, my work, 3, 4 years ago. But I think it's still developing. We still need a lot more research. I think research

in this area is important.

This is a new weapon. It's a fairly new technology. And it hasn't been used for such a long time, just over ten years. I think the first armed... the first military drone strike that has been reported was in October in 2001. So, I think it's still developing. We need more research, we need more transparency, and we definitely need more help for the pilots and the analysts. But there's more awareness. People are leaving the program, too.

DB: ... We don't know about Trump yet, but do we know how many innocents Obama murdered?

SK: That is really the problem.

DB: We don't know.

SK: This information is missing. We don't know how many civilians are being killed. We don't know how many people have been killed by drones over all. And so, it's really difficult for us to judge and compare, also, this weapon: unmanned aircraft to conventional aircraft.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
