

THE MAN BEHIND *UNMANNED*

A Hollywood Director On His Fight Against Drone Warfare

By Robert Greenwald

I was reading a newspaper story, I'm pretty sure it was in the *New York Times*, in which somebody was talking about how drone strikes were only killing bad guys. Drones are unmanned aerial vehicles operated by the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities Division to launch attacks on suspected terrorists primarily in Pakistan but in Yemen, Somalia, and Afghanistan as well. U.S. drone warfare began in 2002 during the George W. Bush administration but strikes have dramatically increased in number under President Barack Obama. As of August, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimated that the CIA has launched at least 390 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004, nearly 90 percent of them on Obama's watch.

I'm not a military strategist, but I knew from common sense that it was not possible for drone strikes to target terrorists with pinpoint accuracy and avoid killing innocent people. The idea that there was some magical piece of weaponry that was going to solve all of our problems got my antennae up immediately.

While researching the topic, I became aware of a study being done by the Stanford University Law School and New York University School of Law, "Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, and Trauma to Civilians From U.S. Drone Practices in Pakistan." The study, released in 2012, presented evidence of the damaging and counterproductive effects of U.S. drone strike policy. I produced a short video on the study to help reach a different and larger audience than might be reached with a white paper. By then, I had developed a very strong belief that weapons were being used, people were being killed, and we were not being told the full story. I made the decision to go to Pakistan. Eleven months later, *Unmanned: America's Drone Wars* was completed.

This is the type of work we do at Brave New Films. I have enjoyed a long career in Hollywood, directing commercial film, television, and theatrical projects such as *The Burning Bed* with Farrah Fawcett, *A Woman*

◁ Brandon Bryant, still from *Unmanned: America's Drone Wars*, Aug. 26, 2013. Jeremy Roberts/Brave New Films

of *Independent Means* with Sally Field, *Steal this Movie* about Abbie Hoffman, and *Breaking Up* with Russell Crowe and Salma Hayek. Since 2002, I have concentrated on making documentaries that investigate social issues. Thus far, Brave New Films has made eight documentaries and short films that have been viewed by more than 100 million people around the world. They include three other films about America's recent wars: *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*, *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers*, and *Rethink Afghanistan*. We are a small group of people working out of a broken-down motel in Culver City. Sharing stories, and representing people who otherwise would not have their voices heard, enables us to keep going even on the darkest of dark days.

Our goals are clear: telling stories others aren't telling, connecting the dots, and motivating people to take action. We have criticized Democrats and Republicans, and made enemies in every possible place you can think of. Whether it is war or economic inequality, many of the issues we investigate are systemic issues. We talk about how the system works because it is complicated and because it is hard to do and critically important.

Drones in and of themselves are not the problem. The basic problem, and drones are a way to talk about it, is this belief, even with some of the really smart people in the Obama administration, that, "Yeah, we can fix this militarily." We have a bipartisan agreement on a military, industrial, and legislative complex that works on an assumption that there is no problem in the world that can't be solved by either invading or occupying or using some new military tactic that will solve it. Of course that's not true. We see that year after year. Years of research and history and failed operations and dead people show over and over again that this is not the case. Lives are lost, billions are spent, yet it doesn't seem to shake the essential bipartisan agreement. My colleagues and I don't agree with that, so it becomes our job to try to tell stories that will question that assumption.

Why is it our job to tell those stories? There was a day when news didn't have to drive profit like sports and entertainment do. Those days are gone. You have news divisions who are evaluated for their ability to drive a profit. You don't drive profit by sending precious resources in to cover stories in Pakistan, which takes more time, more energy, more money. Making *Unmanned* was extremely difficult every single step of the way.

And traditional media doesn't question the fundamental DNA. They go along with it. That's why I think that the work we do at Brave New Films is so important. We are questioning those assumptions. We are saying, are you safer because of the use of drones? Are you safer because we added more troops in Afghanistan? Initially the news coverage of drones was awful. Virtually all the news stories simply took Pentagon press handouts—"ten terrorists killed today, twenty terrorists killed today"—as gospel with absolutely no evidence, absolutely no proof, absolutely no indication of who was actually being killed. To their credit, hopefully prodded and encouraged by us and others, more reporters did begin to investigate. And they began to see that many of the people

being killed were not High-Value Targets. In fact, many have been innocent, many even children caught in the crosshairs of this war.

Making a Movie

The only thing harder than making a film is raising money for a film, especially for a film that nobody wants to see or have made. That was the case when we started with drones. Brave New Films has a few different sources of funding. The ARCA Foundation gives us general ongoing support. We have some generous donors, and we have thousands of amazing people who give us what they can, be it \$5, \$50, or \$500. To help make *Unmanned*, there was a great supporter of ours who is very focused on war-peace issues, Guy Saperstein, a former civil rights attorney and past president of the Sierra Club Foundation. We also benefited from the involvement of Jemima Khan (former wife of Imran Khan, the Pakistani politician and former cricket star), who helped us interview key people, helped provide research and also helped us find other financial supporters.

The film cost about \$500,000 to make, a relatively small sum even for a documentary. It cost Brave New Films another \$150,000 to distribute the documentary and to send it to a variety of groups across the globe—colleges, student groups, peace groups, and even members of Congress. Thanks in part to a large donor we were able to offer the film for free and used this free element as a way to reach people who had not made up their minds on the issue of drones. I am a full-time volunteer, which helps keep costs down. There are multiple people on our team who are willing and able to work for periods of time when they don't earn what they would make on a reality TV show or some big Hollywood shoot-'em-up. We were also very careful with our spending. I went to Pakistan alone, because we didn't have the money (and I was not comfortable having anybody take that risk). My trip was a filming mission. We didn't have the resources to be able to scout, come back and think about it, and then return to do the filming. I hired a Pakistani cameraman, sound person, and someone to help make arrangements and help with security. From the moment I hit the ground I was filming almost around the clock.

We were able to set up the filming in advance however. Once I'd made the decision to make *Unmanned*, I started reaching out to people who had been to Pakistan. Everybody came up with the same advice: "You should talk to Shahzad Akbar." Shahzad is a Pakistani human rights lawyer who heads the Foundation for Fundamental Rights. In 2010, he had begun representing the families of drone victims in Pakistan's courts. He is in the film, and is the one who helped arrange for some of the drone survivors to talk to me. Shahzad also introduced us to another critical partner, Clive Stafford Smith, who runs Reprieve, a London-based non-governmental organization. Reprieve specializes in aiding prisoners accused of the most extreme crimes including terrorism, in the belief

that human rights abuses are more likely to occur in such instances. Stafford Smith has energetically campaigned against the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

The lawyers put me in an obscure hotel—you looked out the window and there was barbed wire completely surrounding the place—because they’d said, “Do not stay at a high-profile hotel in case of a terrorist attack.” We filmed on and off for twelve to fourteen hours each day. We would go where the people were or invite them to a hotel room. Some people didn’t show up, some people changed their mind.

Tariq’s Story

Early on, I came up with the three-act structure for the film. Act one is the story of Tariq Aziz, who was killed in a drone strike in 2011. The soccer-playing 16-year-old died just three days after attending a public meeting in Islamabad that condemned U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan. The second act is the story of a so-called “signature strike”—targeting people based on their lifestyle patterns—one drone strike that killed more than forty people attending a jirga, a meeting of tribal leaders, in Waziristan in 2011. The third act is the story of a 67-year-old grandmother, Momina Bibi, who was killed in a drone strike in 2012. At the time, she was gathering okra in a field along with two of her grandchildren, the day before a Muslim Eid.

I came upon the grandmother’s story while I was in Pakistan. I was interviewing the woman’s son, Rafiq ur Rehman, a schoolteacher, along with his young children, Zubair, Nabila, and Asma. These girls were quite amazing, and convinced me that the grandmother’s story should be filled out. You couldn’t look at those children and say their 67-year-old grandmother who was killed by our drones represented a threat to us. There is no possible way to say that.

I filmed virtually all the interviews, but I was unable to go into Waziristan. The Pakistani army and police would have stopped me. This is the region bordering Afghanistan where the Taliban and their allies have sought refuge and established bases. Apart from security concerns, remember that on one side you have Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence, or ISI, and America’s CIA, who don’t want people filming there, and on the other side you have the Taliban who don’t want people filming there either.

Two incredibly courageous Pakistanis literally put their lives at risk and went into these areas and got some of the footage of Tariq and his friends and family, and also of the schoolteacher whose mother was killed. I don’t want to reveal the names of the Pakistani colleagues because danger still exists. They had connections. One of them came from the area. He had family and friends there who were able to help. I think both of these men were motivated because of their feelings about the losses and the deaths. Neither of them had had a close family member killed, but knew people who had died. We also had another close ally, Neil Williams, a London-based journalist and

photographer, who spent time in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan collating drone interviews. He travelled the length and breadth of Pakistan filming footage over a three-month period.

The cameraman and soundman went into Waziristan for as short a period of time as possible, with very specific parameters. There's nothing like being able to see the grandmother's family at home, or to talk to Tariq's brother. A lot of those things were vital to filling out the story so it wasn't just talking heads. We found a video of Tariq actually playing soccer before he was killed; it took somebody going into the community, talking to a friend of a friend, and obtaining that footage.

Brandon's Story

Whenever we approached the U.S. government, we would never get answers. They wear you down by not responding, which is a pretty effective technique. They almost never answer except when it serves their needs. We constantly asked the CIA for comment. We asked if they would like to review the film and make comment. We asked at one point if there were any drone pilots they could have us interview. We never heard back from them.

Nonetheless, the story of a former drone sensor operator, Airman First Class Brandon Bryant, became a critical element in the film. Before leaving active service in the United States Air Force, he operated Predator drones from 2007 to 2011. His job entailed sitting in front of computer screens in an air-conditioned container on an Air Force base in Nevada and later New Mexico and guiding Predators in for their kills some 6,000 miles away in Pakistan. We found Brandon because he had done an interview with *Der Spiegel* in 2012; he had begun to have misgivings about drone warfare after one of his attacks appeared to have killed a child. We contacted him and made a trip to interview him in June 2013. Two of our people went to meet him in Montana. But at the last minute, he backed out. That's a huge deal for us on our budget.

Jeffrey Kanjanapangka, one of our associate producers, asked if he could continue trying to build a relationship with Brandon. He did an amazing job of bonding with him. They were playing video games together, Jeffrey here and Brandon where he was in Montana. A week before I absolutely had to lock the film and couldn't make any more changes, Jeffrey came into the office and said Brandon was ready to talk. It was not an easy decision to delay locking the film. We were running out of time and money. Fortunately, I decided to take the chance.

Jeffrey and Jeff Cole interviewed Brandon for about four hours in a hotel room, and they got that amazing footage that is in the film. Why did Brandon decide to speak out? He was trying to make something good come out of his drone experience. His story became the bookends to the Pakistani stories we tell in the film.

Going to America

Our job is not just to make a film. Our job is to get the film seen and acted on. We don't have the money to buy awareness. So with every film, we're always thinking and strategizing about what we could do to get attention and maximize impact. I had a strong idea when I was interviewing Momina Bibi's schoolteacher son, and his young daughter was falling asleep during the interview. If I could bring Rafiq and his family to the United States—not only the cute children, but this guy was a schoolteacher for crying out loud—this could counter the obfuscation and distortion in the official statements on drones and make something clear: here are real people whose innocent relatives are being killed by our drones.

The plan was to have Rafiq and his children testify before Congress about the innocent victims of drone strikes, and make him available for the inevitable press interest in his story—and release the film simultaneously amid the media buzz. I had no idea what we were in for. Some of our people worked for three or four solid months on this. The first step was to reach out and see if Rafiq and his children would be willing to consider it. Shahzad Akbar called them and they agreed. And of course they wanted Shahzad, their lawyer and protector, to come along with them. We then began the incredibly difficult process of getting them passports and visas. In some cases they were not exactly sure of birthdates, which are required for official documents.

No drone survivor families from Pakistan had ever been to the United States and some combination of the CIA and State Department was not exactly jumping up and down for this to happen. One of the most frustrating experiences was trying to work with State Department, a place where you never get the name of anybody. We eventually got elected officials to make phone calls and write letters in support of the visa applications.

Then we had to work on getting somebody in Congress to host a hearing or briefing. Representative Alan Grayson, a Democrat representing the 9th District in central Florida, was the one who stepped up. Alan is a man of enormous integrity and principle. He is very articulate on war and peace issues, and is not bound by partisan politics. His involvement was a major case of sticking your neck out. There were many congressmen and women whom I'd talked to who were not willing to come anywhere near this in any shape and form.

All the pieces were coming together. But then we received a blow just a few weeks before locking in the date for the congressional briefing: the U.S. government rejected Shahzad Akbar's application for a visa. We never got a fair answer as to why. Shahzad received his law degree from the University of Newcastle, and qualified as a Barrister from Lincoln's Inn. Before focusing on human rights, he worked as special government prosecutor for corruption and money laundering cases, and later joined

Farooq Law Associates, a leading legal practice in Pakistan. Shahzad's biography on the Reprieve website notes that he "likes to cook, sin, read, and daydream." Shahzad had even previously traveled to the United States numerous times before speaking out as a critic of the drone program. In his human rights work on behalf of drone victims, Shahzad has rightfully been critical of the CIA. We believe that this was the reason that he could not secure a visa.

It looked like our plan for the *Unmanned* launch was collapsing. Rafiq had stipulated that he would travel to the United States only if Shahzad would accompany him. Shahzad contacted Rafiq, and much to our surprise and delight, was able to persuade him to make the journey anyway. Reprieve sent Jennifer Gibson, an attorney who specializes in counterterrorism abuses, to escort Rafiq and his children in Shahzad's place.

I went to meet Rafiq and the children at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, DC. I could only imagine what was going through their minds. Here were people who had barely traveled outside their tribal area in Waziristan now going to Islamabad, then to Dubai, and eventually to Washington, DC. They were held up in customs for two or three hours for reasons we'll never be able to know. Once they emerged, I thanked Rafiq for coming. I'll never forget what he said to me. "The people in my village told me not to come, because they told me that because the United States had killed my mother, it might also kill me," he said. "But I feel as a teacher it is very important to tell the United States what is going on."

We all ate together on their first night in the United States. Somebody ordered Pakistani food. They couldn't believe the amount of food that arrived. They were shocked and concerned that it was going to be going to waste. It was a simple reminder of the different universes we are dealing with.

Rafiq, Zubair who was 13 at the time, and Nabila who was nine at the time, were incredible. Their testimony at the briefing literally had congressmen tearing up. People in DC said they almost never had seen anything like it. It was very powerful. We released the film on the day of the congressional briefing. Thousands and thousands of people were seeing it online and passing clips of it around. We proceeded to take Rafiq and the children on an amazing whirlwind of almost non-stop press interviews and photos; the family and their case was featured in over eight hundred articles and television slots. Their visit allowed us to personalize the drone story. If you debate policy in the abstract, it is very hard for most people to get a grasp of it. It seems too distant or academic. But here we had a teacher and his children. They talked about what it meant to be out in the field, and then suddenly their grandmother is killed by a drone strike. I grew very attached to them, and felt enormous emotion when we were saying goodbye as they left from JFK in New York.

On Every Screen

The wonder of having some amazing financial supporters is that we were able to offer the film free of charge. It has been on multiple TV stations in Pakistan. I remember the emails flying back and forth, every station wanting it and competing for it. The film is still available online where hundreds of thousands of people across the globe have seen it.

Our distribution strategy involves almost zero focus on movie theaters. Our goal is to move people, to get them to take action, to reach people who may not know or who may not care, or who may disagree with us. It is one hundred percent impossible to get people to pay \$10 to \$15 to see a movie when they are uncertain about the issue, uncertain about their political opinion about it, or don't care about the issue.

Don't misunderstand me. I love going to movie theaters. I was bought up going to movie theaters. I've made movies for movie theaters. But from a political effectiveness point of view, it's not where you want to put your focus. You want to put your focus on everything from house parties to Twitter to Facebook, and the like, places where you can interact, and where you can get people to take action. The full film is available, sections of the film are available, short pieces are available. We have clips on Instagram and on Twitter. We're going to have screenings on college campuses through Brave New Films' Educators program. I would like to have *Unmanned* shown in every small town, but more importantly I would like it shown on every screen, on every person's phone, on every person's home computer, in every church and college and union hall and 4-H club.

We have a very clear goal: to reach many, many people who don't know what they think about drones and our military policy in general. There are some people who were against drone strikes from the beginning. But when we started making the film, many people including liberals were saying, "Well, they're OK. We're getting terrorists." Our goal is not just to rouse up people who are already with us. Our goal is to reach an extended audience around the world. I'd like the film to be on television, but we're already on Hulu, on Netflix, on Amazon, and on iTunes. You can watch the film on your phone. That's where I believe the future of this kind and all kinds of distribution will be. And we are putting enormous effort into it.

We are fortunate in that we don't have to monetize. Our supporters want us to impact the public. Our supporters want us to create media that will drive people to action. This gives us an extraordinary opportunity that many of my colleagues don't have.

Unmanned has had an impactful result in many different ways. The conversation has since changed on Capitol Hill and more members of Congress are paying attention and asking the right questions. The media is now actively asking the necessary questions of their sources. Many groups around the globe including the United

Nations are using all or parts of the film to engage on this issue. The impact of the film is a combination of five or six different things. If you put together all the press stories about the drone survivor family, and calculate the number of eyeballs we reached, it was an extraordinary number. Some sixty million people have had some access to the story. Then you look at the number of people posting comments, the number of in-depth news stories we had, and the number of follow up stories. It would be great if there was an easy measurement. Or, if the day after *Unmanned* came out all drones stopped. But that's not how social change or social movements work. We know we have certainly made a contribution to what is now widely acknowledged as significant public pressure against drone strikes.

String that Holds the Pearls

Unmanned brought me very close to death, to people who are in great physical and emotional pain because of deaths caused by the policies of my country. That's something you know intellectually, but when you talk to people who can't move their legs, or to somebody who has had a relative killed by our drones, when we are being told that they are only killing High-Value Targets, it affects your heart and your soul. It moved me deeply.

This film and our other films on Iraq and Afghanistan have a common overall theme: there are very difficult complicated problems in the world and they can't be solved by a simplistic militaristic notion. Whether it's an invasion, whether it's an occupation, whether it's an escalation, whether it's sending in drones rather than foot soldiers. Everyone wishes there was a magic solution to solve all the problems. But year after year, war after war, the magic military solution just doesn't seem to work. We have got to come to terms with that. Then we will begin to look for other solutions. Yes, there are very dangerous situations in the world. There are dangerous people. There are dangerous organizations. Security is an issue. But we are not making ourselves safer or more secure by a constant knee jerk bipartisan response: "Oh, there's got to be a military solution to this."

Almost every person I interviewed in Pakistan would turn to me afterwards and say, "Mr. Greenwald, could you please tell President Obama that we are not terrorists." I developed a very strong sense of responsibility to tell their stories. I remember what Rafiq testified at the congressional briefing about the drone strike that killed Momina Bibi. He said: "In Urdu we have a saying: *aik lari main pro kay rakbna*. It means the string that holds the pearls together. That is what my mother was. Since her death, the string has been broken and life has not been the same. We feel alone and we feel lost. We also feel scared."