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It is terrifying even in the quiet moments; it is most terrifying in the quietest moments.

[National Bird](#), a new documentary by filmmaker Sonia Kennebeck, co-produced with Errol Morris and Wim Wenders, is a deep, multilayered, look into America's drone wars, a tactic which became a strategy which became a post-9/11 policy. To many in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the world, America's new national symbol is not the bald eagle, but a gray shadow overhead armed with Hellfire missiles.

The Silence

Scattered throughout the documentary are silent images from drones and aerial cameras, sweeping, hypnotic vistas taken from above both Afghan villages and American suburbs. The message could not be more clear: the tools used over there can just as easily be used over here, not merely for surveillance (as is already happening in America) but perhaps one day soon to send violence down from the sky. Violence sudden, sharp, complete and anonymous.

The Americans

The anonymity of that violence comes at a price, in this case in the minds of the Americans who decide who lives and dies. *National Bird* presents three brave whistleblowers, two former uniformed Air Force veterans ([Lisa Ling](#) , [Heather Linebaugh](#))

and a former civilian intelligence analyst (Dan), people who have broken cover to tell the world what happens behind the scenes of the drone war. There are elements of “old hat” here, chilling in that we have grown used to hearing that drone strikes kill more innocents than terrorists, that the people who make war justify their actions by calling their victims hajjis and ragheads, that America draws often naive young people into its national security state on the false promises of hollow patriotism and turns them into assassins.

Heather suffers from crippling PTSD. Lisa is compelled to travel to Afghanistan with a humanitarian group to reclaim part of her soul. Dan is in hiding as an Espionage Act investigation unfolds around him. A sobering side to this all is the presence of the whistleblowers’ attorney, [Jesselyn Radack](#), who currently also helps defend Edward Snowden. Radack ties the actions of the drone whistleblowers into the larger post-9/11 narrative of retributive prosecutions and government attempts to hide the truth of America’s War on Terror from everyone but its victims.

The Afghans

The final layer of *National Bird* is what may be some of the first interviews with innocents who have suffered directly from drone attacks. The film interviews at length members of an Afghan extended family attacked from the air in a case of mistaken targeting even the Department of Defense now acknowledges.

The family members speak six years after the fact as if still in shock. Here’s a boy who shows off his leg stump. Here’s a woman who lost her husband, the boy’s father, in the same attack. Here is another father discussing the loss of his own child. In a critical piece of storytelling, *National Bird* does not seek to trivialize the deaths in Afghanistan by weighing them against the psychological trauma suffered by the Americans, but rather shows the loss to everyone done in our names.