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Has the U.S. drone war "fueled the feelings of hatred that ignited terrorism and groups like ISIS" ? That's the conclusion of four former Air Force servicemembers who are speaking out together for the first time. They've issued a letter to President Obama warning the U.S. drone program is one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism. They accuse the administration of lying about the effectiveness of the drone program, saying it is good at killing people—just not the right ones. The four drone war veterans risk prosecution by an administration that has been unprecedented in its targeting of government whistleblowers. In a Democracy Now! exclusive, they join us in their first extended broadcast interview.

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**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Since the Paris attacks one week ago, France has escalated bombings of Syria, and the U.S. has vowed an intensification of its war on the Islamic State. With only a small number of U.S. special forces on the ground, Iraq and Syria have become new fronts in a global drone war that has launched thousands of strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia.

But now an unprecedented group is calling for the drone war to stop. In an [open letter](#) to President Obama, four U.S. Air Force servicemembers who took part in the drone campaign say targeted killings and remote control bombings fuel the very terrorism the government says it's trying to destroy. The four whistleblowers write, quote, "We came to the realization that the innocent civilians we were killing only fueled the feelings of hatred that ignited terrorism and groups like ISIS

, while also serving as a fundamental recruitment tool similar to Guantanamo Bay. This administration and its predecessors have built a drone program that is one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world."

They continue, saying, quote, "We witnessed gross waste, mismanagement, abuses of power, and our country's leaders lying publicly about the effectiveness of the drone program. We cannot sit silently by and witness tragedies like the attacks in Paris, knowing the devastating effects the drone program has overseas and at home."

**AMY GOODMAN:** On top of the toll on civilian victims, the letter also addresses the personal impact of waging remote war. All four say they have suffered PTSD and feel abandoned by the military they served, with some now homeless or barely getting by. The letter

brings together the largest group of whistleblowers in the drone war's history. Three of the signatories operated the visual sensors that guide U.S. Predator drone missiles to their targets. Two are speaking out for the first time; three in a TV broadcast, they've never done it before. The other two have previously raised their concerns about the drone program, including in the documentary,

*Drone*

. The film, premiering in New York City and Toronto today, reveals how a regular U.S. Air Force unit based in the Nevada desert is responsible for flying the CIA's drone strike program in Pakistan.

**BRANDON BRYANT:** We are the ultimate voyeurs, the ultimate peeping Toms. I'm watching this person, and this person has no clue what's going on. No one's going to catch us. And we're getting orders to take these people's lives.

**MICHAEL HAAS:** You never know who you're killing, because you never actually see a face. You just have a silhouette. They don't have to take a shot. They don't have to bear that burden. I'm the one that has to bear that burden.

**P.W. SINGER:** There's always been a connection between the world of war and the world of entertainment. The military has invested in creating video games that they're using as recruiting tools.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** War is an unbelievably profitable business.

**CHRIS WALLACE:** The drones have been terrifically effective. They've taken out a lot of the al-Qaeda leadership. It's cheap. It doesn't involve putting troops on the ground.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I believe the United States of America must remain a

standard-bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** United States is violating one of the most fundamental rights of all: the right to life.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** There's a large number of innocent civilians who are being killed, and that has to be reported.

**CHRIS WOODS:** The majority of the secret drone strikes that have taken place have, we have always understood, been carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency.

**BRANDON BRYANT:** There is a lie hidden within that truth.

**AMY GOODMAN:** The trailer for the documentary *Drone*, premiering today in New York City and Toronto. In speaking out together, the four former servicemembers risk prosecution under the Espionage Act by an administration that's waged an unprecedented campaign against government whistleblowers. They also set their sights on a cornerstone of President Obama's national security policy just as it threatens to escalate in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. After being elected to office on a platform of Iraq War opposition and a vow to bring the troops home, President Obama has quietly expanded the drone war far beyond its size and lethality under President George W. Bush.

Today, in this *Democracy Now!* exclusive, these four war whistleblowers join us in their first extended broadcast interview. We're joined by Brandon Bryant and Michael Haas, who have spoken out to a certain extent before, both former sensor operators for the U.S. Air Force Predator program. Stephen Lewis, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, is also a former sensor operator for the Air Force Predator program and this week is speaking out for the first time. Also going public for the first time is Cian Westmoreland, a former Air Force technician who helped build a station in Afghanistan used to relay drone data.

But first, I want to turn to Jesselyn Radack, national security and human rights director at the Government Accountability Project, former ethics adviser to the U.S. Department of Justice. As an attorney, she is representing several former drone operators, including this group of four young men who are speaking out today.

Jesselyn Radack, how much do they risk in speaking out on *Democracy Now!* today?

**JESSELYN RADACK:** They're taking an enormous and very brave public risk in speaking out. I have clients in the national security and intelligence communities who have done nothing more than tell the truth about some of America's darkest secrets, like torture and secret surveillance—and now, in this case, drones—and those clients, a number of them, have been prosecuted under the Espionage Act—and Edward Snowden, of course, another one, is living in exile—not because they've done anything wrong or even revealed classified information, which they're not here to do today, but because they have embarrassed the U.S. government. All of these men—a number of them, half of them, have complained internally, to no avail. They have gone through internal channels.

And we're hoping that today, by going public, that this will have more of an influence in the debate, because somehow there's a complete disconnect between these terrorist attacks in Paris and elsewhere and the fact that the drone program has fueled ISIS and al-Qaeda and a number of terrorist groups, and that really needs to be addressed.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And I'd like to ask Brandon Bryant—we've had you on *Democracy Now!* a [couple of years ago](#), and these guys here worked with you, as well. Could you talk about the decision to come out as a group, how you came to that and why at this particular point?

**BRANDON BRYANT:** Well, you know, when I first started talking out about my experiences, it was more to get a bunch of stuff off my chest and to actually try to come clean with what I have done and reveal what exactly is going on. And I'm actually really honored to be with these gentlemen right here, is that I trust them. And this is their decision to come out, and I'm here to support them, because I've already been doing this for three years, and it's time that we just get a bigger coalition of people together to attack this issue.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Why did you sign this letter? And what are you calling on President Obama to do?

**BRANDON BRYANT:** We want the president to have more transparency in this issue, and we want the American people to understand exactly what's being done in their name. And I think that all this fear and hatred that keeps going on is just out of control, and we need to stop it somewhere.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Michael Haas, I wanted to ask you, in terms of your experience in the drone program and the culture that the military basically allowed to flourish in the drone program, you've talked about how your fellow servicemembers talked about the children that they were targeting, as well.

**MICHAEL HAAS:** Yes, the term "fun-sized terrorists" was used to just sort of denote children that we'd see on screen.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What was it?

**MICHAEL HAAS:** "Fun-sized terrorists."

**AMY GOODMAN:** "Fun-sized terrorists"?

**MICHAEL HAAS:** Yes. Other terms we'd use would be "cutting the grass before it grows too long," just doing whatever you can to try to make it easier to kill whatever's on screen. And the culture is—that mentality is very much nurtured within the drone community, because these—every Hellfire shot is sort of lauded and applauded, and we don't really examine who exactly was killed, but just that it was an effective shot and the missile hit its target.

**AMY GOODMAN:** When did you start to have questions?

**MICHAEL HAAS:** Shortly after I became an instructor and I started to see how much the mentality had shifted since I had been in. And the 11th hadn't really changed how they had trained their sensor operators from a basic-level standpoint.

**AMY GOODMAN:** The 11th is?

**MICHAEL HAAS:** The basic training squadron up at Creech. They train all the sensor operators.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is at Creech in Nevada.

**MICHAEL HAAS:** Yes.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And you were a video game addict as you were growing up. Can you talk about this whole impact of sort of the video game approach to war?

**MICHAEL HAAS:** The thing that makes the gamers a prime target for this job field is that ability to just multitask and do a lot of things subconsciously and just sort of out of reflex. And you don't really even have to think about it, which is, you know, paramount to doing this job. But a lot of it is getting used to just seeing something on screen, killing it and then going about your business as though you don't really—you don't really pay it a second thought. It was just an objective to be completed.