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A new documentary film 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. "Drone" identifies the unit conducting CIA strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas as the 17th Reconnaissance Squadron, which is located on the Creech Air Force Base, about 45 miles from Las Vegas. We are joined by the film's director, Tonje Hessen Schei, and Chris Woods, an award-winning reporter who investigates drone warfare. Woods is

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** We end today's show with a new film that 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. The documentary identifies the unit conducting CIA strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas as the 17th Reconnaissance Squadron, which is located on the Creech Air Force Base, about 45 miles from Las Vegas. This is the trailer for *Drone*.

**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.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** 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:** That's the trailer for the new documentary, *Drone*. It premiered this week on

national television in Germany and France. Its director, Tonje Hessen Schei, joins us now from Norway via *Democracy Now!* video

stream. And in London, we're joined by Chris Woods, one of the people in the film, an award-winning reporter who investigates drone warfare. He recently wrote an [article](#)

for

*The Guardian*

called "CIA's Pakistan Drone Strikes Carried Out by Regular US Air Force Personnel." He's featured in the new film,

*Drone*

, working on a forthcoming book called

*Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*

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We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!* Chris, let's start with you. The significance of the Air Force being involved with the drone strikes in Pakistan?

**CHRIS WOODS:** The Air Force, U.S. Air Force, has a long history of working with the Central Intelligence Agency. You go back to the 1950s, the 1960s. U.S. Air Force pilots, for example, flew U-2 CIA flights over Russia. What's different here, of course, is that the CIA

now carries out targeted killings, and it has been doing for more than a decade. And what we found and what Tonje's film shows is that a conventional U.S. Air Force squadron, regular men and women in the Air Force, have actually been carrying out these targeted killings for the CIA

for a decade now. And I think that's going to surprise quite a lot of people.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And the implications of that in terms of the chain of command, in terms of the responsibility of the military versus the CIA?

**CHRIS WOODS:** Well, they're—as I said, they're regular Air Force personnel, but they're taking their orders from a civilian intelligence agency, orders to kill. And as my work and that of others has shown in Pakistan, for example, where many of these targeted killings have taken place—more than two-and-a-half thousand people, I think, have been killed in Pakistan by these drone strikes, among them perhaps 400 civilians—there have been some really problematic kinds of bombings. So, for example, the deliberate targeting of rescuers and of funerals, which is still under investigation as possible war crimes by U.N. investigation teams.

So, where does this leave conventional Air Force answering to a civilian intelligence agency? Where is the chain of command here? We don't actually know. And unfortunately, the CIA

, the National Security Council and the Pentagon all decided that they weren't going to talk on this occasion, and they won't talk about this to us.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's go to another clip from the new film, *Drone*, about how the CIA's Pakistan drone strikes are carried out by regular U.S. Air Force personnel. We hear from two former drone operators, former Air Force pilots Brandon Bryant and Michael Haas. The clip begins with our guest, Chris Woods, followed by Ben Emmerson, the U.S. special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights.

**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, that most secretive of U.S. intelligence organs, protected by huge layers of laws. Anything the CIA is involved in, we're really not supposed to know about.

**BEN EMMERSON:** The crucial obstacle to transparency was the decision to hand a targeted killing by drone program into the hands of an intelligence agency, where accountability is impossible. But United States is engaged in an active program to migrate its drone technology away from the CIA and into the hands of DOD.

**BRANDON BRYANT:** There is a lie in within that truth. And the lie is that it's always been the Air Force that has flown those missions. CIA might be the customer, but the Air Force has always flown it. The 17th Squadron that flies, they're the super-top secret squirrel—can't tell you what I'm doing, but I can tell you that it's supersecret.

**MICHAEL HAAS:** Squadron 17 is Area 51-isolated on a single base. Think it's pretty widely known that the CIA controls their mission. I know right before I left Creech, they actually were putting privacy fences up so you couldn't even see the front doors or the parking lot. And it got to the point you can't even see—you don't even know who's in there anymore.

**BRANDON BRYANT:** People brag. People talk about how they were so secret and that they were kicking so much [bleep] killing terrorists. And the CIA label is just an excuse to not have to give up any information. That's all it's ever been. Nothing's going to change, at least nothing that we can see.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's Brandon Bryant and Michael Haas, both drone operators, a clip from the new film, *Drone*, as we turn now to the filmmaker who made this film, Tonje Hessen Schei, speaking to us from Oslo, Norway. The significance of what you have found, Michael Haas speaking to you for the first time, is that right, Tonje?

**TONJE HESSEN SCHEI:** Yes, that is correct. Michael was getting very frustrated with the amount of secrecy that clouds the CIA war, and he decided that it's important that the American people know what is going on. And he also felt it was very wrong that Brandon Bryant, the other drone operator that we have in the film, had been the only one speaking out for all this time. So, both their stories, I think, are very important for us to know what is happening from the inside of the drone program.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Tonje Hessen Schei, the relationship between the CIA and the Pentagon and video gamers, and their desire to recruit gamers, could you talk about that?

**TONJE HESSEN SCHEI:** Yeah. In the film, we look at how militaries now across the world are targeting gamers in their recruiting strategies. The U.S. military has been doing this for a long time with games like America's Army. And in the film, we visit several Scandinavian gaming conferences, where the militaries very actively recruit gamers as our new warriors for the modern warfare—not just drone war, but also cyberwarfare. And I think the line between the virtual and real war is very interesting and something that we need to take seriously.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And what does that do, as well, not only to—between virtual and real world, but to the moral responsibility of people who are recruited to do these kinds of attacks?

**TONJE HESSEN SCHEI:** Well, I think that's a very interesting question. I actually got the idea

for this film when I heard the story of a gamer who dropped out of college, or high school, and joined the Army, and he was quickly recruited as a drone pilot. And at the age of 19, he became an instructor for other drone pilots. And, to me, this was very concerning, and that's how I started looking into this. And I don't believe that the drone pilots think that they're actually playing a video game, but I think that the similarities are very, very obvious and something we need to look at.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And—

**TONJE HESSEN SCHEI:** Also—I'm sorry, but, yeah, it's just—you know, as far as the interface and the joystick, I know there's been a very close relationship between the world of entertainment and the world of the militaries. So—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Tonje, you're showing this in Europe. You've shown it in Germany, in France. What is the reaction to the U.S. drone strikes?

**TONJE HESSEN SCHEI:** We've had very good reactions from our premier. We're just releasing this film right now. But I do think that here in Europe there is a great concern about the U.S. precedent of the drones, using targeted killing. So, it will be very interesting to see, also because here EU and NATO are now really pushing to acquire armed drones, so I think it's very important that we're coming out with this film right now.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And, Chris Woods, there is this film that's being shown on American television now, a video, supposedly that shows al-Qaeda in Yemen threatening attacks on the U.S. It features footage of what appears to be a large al-Qaeda gathering in Yemen, with hundreds welcoming the release of prisoners freed in a jailbreak. There was some commentary yesterday on U.S. television: Is this as a result of—is this growing in Yemen because of the pressure not to have drone strikes in Yemen? Your response, Chris Woods? And do you know about this video?

**CHRIS WOODS:** Well, the drone strikes have temporarily stopped in Pakistan, but they certainly haven't stopped in Yemen. They're still going on. As far as we understand, JSOC strikes are presently banned there, but

CIA

strikes continue. So this was very daring, I would say, of al-Qaeda to be so public and so in the open, holding this gathering. And, in fact, their number two of al-Qaeda in Yemen was present. He's very, very rarely seen in public. So this was a public taunting, if you like, of both the Yemen government and of the United States. The very act of appearing outside in large numbers is, if you like, you know, thumbing your nose at this ability of the United States to strike anywhere with drones. But it is worrying. And al-Qaeda certainly hasn't been broken. It's carried out a number of appalling attacks both on civilians and on the military in Yemen in recent weeks. So, it's still there. It's still a problem. And the drone strikes against them are continuing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Chris Woods, we want to thank you for being with us, award-winning reporter who investigates drone warfare, recently wrote a [piece](#) in *The Guardian* about CIA's Pakistan drone strikes carried out by regular U.S. Air Force personnel. He is featured in *Drone*, which is this new film that has just come out, just premiered in France and Germany, by Tonje Hessen Schei. We want to thank you for being with us, as well, from Oslo, Norway.