

US intelligence and media fail to debunk Seymour Hersh on bin Laden

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More than 10 days had passed since the *London Review of Books* published the devastating exposure by Seymour Hersh of US government lies about the killing of Osama bin Laden, before the American intelligence apparatus could muster even the semblance of a rebuttal.

It came Wednesday in the form of a release by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) of 100 or so documents supposedly recovered during the May 1, 2011, raid by Navy Seals that killed bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

The DNI was at pains to deny there was any connection between the document release and Hersh's exposé. The documents were said to have been collected inside bin Laden's compound, translated from Arabic by the CIA, scrutinized by intelligence analysts, then prepared for declassification, which the CIA normally resists furiously.

This protracted and contentious process, extending over more than four years, resulted in the release of documents supposedly substantiating the official US account of the raid on bin Laden only 10 days after this account had been comprehensively dismantled by the premier investigative journalist of the past generation.

Even the compliant American media could not swallow the claim that this was a pure coincidence. Instead, the corporate-controlled press did the best it could to portray the newly declassified documents as a dramatic new revelation about bin Laden's final years, perhaps hoping it would overshadow the Hersh story, which the US media has largely buried. If readers got the impression that the new material refuted Hersh's exposure of US government lies, so much the better.

Actually, the new material does nothing to undermine Hersh's account. His main source for the *London Review of Books* article, a retired US intelligence official, told him bin Laden was a prisoner of the Pakistani military, and not in day-to-day leadership of Al Qaeda. Consequently, the raid produced little of intelligence value. Hersh wrote: "'Despite all the talk,' the retired official continued, there were 'no garbage bags full of computers and storage devices.' The

guys just stuffed some books and papers they found in his room in their backpacks."

The "100 letters and documents found during the raid," as the *Guardian* describes the material just released by the DNI, hardly contradict this picture. There are no computer hard drives or memory sticks which, as Edward Snowden demonstrated, can carry millions of documents, not just a few dozen. The documents are certainly nothing like the mass of material that supposedly generated 400 intelligence reports in the first few days of exploitation, as the Obama administration had claimed.

The only other significant attempt to rebut Hersh's account also had the CIA as its source. Michael Morell, former deputy director of the agency, now retired and serving as a highly paid media "expert" on terrorism, gave a detailed rejoinder to Hersh that was published in the *Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page and widely cited by other commentators.

Morell denied that the raid on bin Laden was carried out with the knowledge and cooperation of the Pakistani military, denied that the CIA learned of bin Laden's location from a "walk-in" seeking a monetary reward (rather than from torturing prisoners, as the agency and its propaganda video, *Zero Dark Thirty*, claimed), denied that the CIA obtained DNA samples to confirm bin Laden's identity before the raid, denied that there was little intelligence material collected in Abbottabad, and denied that the Navy Seals tossed bin Laden's bullet-shredded body from their helicopter rather than sending it for burial at sea, with full Muslim rites.

The retired CIA official offered as the sole evidence for all his arguments—himself! He, Michael Morell, was present at White House meetings that discussed concealing the raid from the Pakistanis; he, Michael Morell, oversaw the intelligence-gathering and interrogations that located bin Laden; he, Michael Morell, saw the "treasure trove" of documents and viewed photographs of the burial at sea. And of course, no top CIA official, active or "retired," would ever lie about these matters to the American people. The

entire argument is ludicrous, self-evidently so.

As for the American media, it has sought to deal with the Hersh revelations by suppressing their content and smearing Hersh as delusional. In a scathing review of the media response, published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Trevor Timm, executive director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, wrote:

“The media’s reaction to Seymour Hersh’s bin Laden scoop has been disgraceful.

Seymour Hersh has done the public a great service by breathing life into questions surrounding the official narrative of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Yet instead of trying to build off the details of his story, or to disprove his assertions with additional reporting, journalists have largely attempted to tear down the messenger.”

Timm attacked the media focus on Hersh’s use of anonymous sources, noting the cynical double standard, since most major US newspapers and television networks routinely cite anonymous “senior government officials” to spout the official propaganda line on any subject, from sensitive military-intelligence issues to everyday political infighting.

He continued, “anonymity is sometimes warranted, and the idea that Hersh’s sources were anonymous should not come as a surprise. These are highly classified operations. The Defense Department has openly threatened to prosecute people for talking about the bin Laden raid, even as the CIA leaks its own version of events to friendly reporters and movie producers.”

One exception to the media derision of Hersh was Carlotta Gall, a longtime *New York Times* reporter in Central Asia, who backed his claim that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had concealed bin Laden in the compound in Abbottabad and that a former ISI officer was the “walk-in” who told the CIA where he was hiding. “On this count, my own reporting tracks with Hersh’s,” Gall wrote.

As for Hersh, he has fought back vigorously against both the personal attacks on his reporting and the overall silence of the media on the content of his allegations against the Obama administration. He has given numerous media interviews, but perhaps the most comprehensive came May 13 with National Public Radio’s “On the Media” program (the podcast is available here).

There are three important observations from this interview. First, Hersh readily admitted that his account is based on interviews with key witnesses, not documents. His main source, the former US intelligence official, was known to Hersh’s editors at the *London Review of Books*, and was interviewed by them several times in fact-checking his article. This is not unusual, Hersh says: his famous exposure of the My Lai massacre also relied on witnesses, not

documents, although he had seen one solitary piece of paper on the atrocity which he was not allowed to keep.

Secondly, Hersh rebutted the claim that it is unlikely that the US government could have sustained a false narrative of the bin Laden raid for four years, given all the thousands of people—American soldiers, seamen, airmen and intelligence officers, Pakistani military and civilians—who must have known the truth. His response: Tens of thousands of employees and contractors of the National Security Agency knew of its vast and illegal surveillance operations over the dozen years since the 9/11 attacks, but not until a single contractor, Edward Snowden, came forward with his revelations, were the American people given a true account of the police-state methods of their “own” government. “Clearly,” Hersh said, “it’s not that hard to hide very, very explosive information.”

Finally, Hersh responded to suggestions that, at 78, he has become delusional, paranoid and even senile. His methods are no different than they were when he was a young journalist investigating the My Lai massacre and CIA domestic spying, he said. Then as now, he relied on sources within the national security apparatus and developed a “counter-narrative” to the official story being peddled by the media more generally. Then as now, the reaction to his exposures from government and media circles is to vilify the reporter in order to avoid dealing with the story.

He might have added that while he remains true to his own principles and methods of work, the American corporate media has moved drastically to the right, in lockstep with the shift in official bourgeois politics. Just as there is no constituency in the US ruling elite for the defense of democratic rights, there is no one in the leadership of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* willing to challenge the military-intelligence apparatus as they did more than 40 years ago in publishing the Pentagon Papers.

That is why Hersh, who once wrote investigative reports for the *Times*, before being pushed out to the *New Yorker*, now must go to the *London Review of Books* to find an outlet willing to publish his exposés.



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