

The media blackout of Seymour Hersh's exposé on US missile strike against Syria

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A full week has passed since the publication by a major German newspaper of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh's thoroughgoing debunking of the false claim of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack on April 4. The supposed atrocity by the regime of Bashar al-Assad was used to justify the April 6 US cruise missile strike on the al-Shayyat air base. At least nine civilians, including four children, died when 59 Tomahawk missiles rained down on the base in western Syria.

Since the German daily *Die Welt* published Hersh's article, titled "Trump's Red Line," on June 25, its contents have been subjected to a total blackout by the major newspapers and broadcast and cable news networks in the United States.

Hersh's account makes clear that, not only was there no objective evidence to back up Washington's charges of a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, the fact that there was no such attack was known to the US military and intelligence apparatus even before the cruise missile strike was ordered.

"The available intelligence made clear that the Syrians had targeted a jihadist meeting site on April 4 using a Russian-supplied guided bomb equipped with conventional explosives," Hersh wrote. "Details of the attack, including information on its so-called high-value targets, had been provided by the Russians days in advance to American and allied military officials in Doha, whose mission is to coordinate all US, allied, Syrian and Russian Air Force operations in the region."

Basing himself on sources within the US intelligence apparatus who spoke on condition of anonymity, as well as access to "transcripts of real-time communications, immediately following the Syrian attack on April 4," Hersh establishes that a Syrian government plane dropped a conventional 500-pound bomb, not a chemical weapon, on the site of the meeting, which included "representatives of Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Qaida-affiliated group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra."

The target was a cinder block building that served as a

"command and control center" for the so-called "rebels," who used its basement to store "rockets, weapons and ammunition," as well as chlorine, fertilizers and insecticides, Hersh reports.

"A Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) by the US military later determined that the heat and force of the 500-pound Syrian bomb triggered a series of secondary explosions that could have generated a huge toxic cloud that began to spread over the town, formed by the release of the fertilizers, disinfectants and other goods stored in the basement, its effect magnified by the dense morning air, which trapped the fumes close to the ground," he continues.

"Did the Syrians plan the attack on Khan Sheikhoun? Absolutely," a senior adviser to US intelligence told Hersh. "Do we have intercepts to prove it? Absolutely. Did they plan to use sarin? No. But the president did not say: 'We have a problem and let's look into it.' He wanted to bomb the shit out of Syria."

The newsworthiness and political import of Hersh's piece was underscored just one day after its publication by an ominous and unsubstantiated statement issued by the White House. Washington, it claimed, had "identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children." If Syrian President Assad "conducts another mass murder attack using chemical weapons," the White House statement continued, "he and his military will pay a heavy price."

This was followed by an even more sweeping threat from the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, who added: "The goal is at this point not just to send Assad a message, but to send Russia and Iran a message... That if this happens again, we are putting you on notice."

Thus, any allegation of a chemical weapons attack in Syria could serve as justification for the US to go to war against Iran and a nuclear-armed Russia. The US media dutifully reported the White House claims of an imminent chemical weapons attack as unquestionably true.

One could be forgiven for thinking that in the context of a

war threat that could drag the American people and all of humanity into a nuclear conflagration, extensive and convincing evidence that the entire premise for this threat was a pack of lies would at the very least be acknowledged and subjected to a critical examination by the major media.

To believe this, however, one would have to be unfamiliar with the modus operandi of what passes for the “Fourth Estate” in the United States over the past quarter-century of interrupted US wars of aggression. Again and again, the US media has parroted the phony “human rights” pretexts for wars from Yugoslavia, to Iraq, Libya and Syria, all waged in pursuit of US imperialist geostrategic interests. Led by the *New York Times*, in the run-up to the criminal US invasion of Iraq in 2003 the American media not only repeated the Bush administration’s lies about “weapons of mass destruction,” but helped embellish them. They are fully complicit in war crimes that have claimed over a million lives.

Hersh himself calls attention in the article to the criminal role played by the American media. “Trump, who had campaigned as someone who advocated making peace with Assad, was bombing Syria 11 weeks after taking office, and was hailed for doing so by Republicans, Democrats and the media alike,” he writes. “One prominent TV anchorman, Brian Williams of MSNBC, used the word ‘beautiful’ to describe the images of the Tomahawks being launched at sea. Speaking on CNN, Fareed Zakaria said: ‘I think Donald Trump became president of the United States.’ A review of the top 100 American newspapers showed that 39 of them published editorials supporting the bombing in its aftermath, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*.”

In 1969, Hersh broke the story of the My Lai massacre in which US troops slaughtered over 100 Vietnamese men, women and children—a story the US media at first refused to touch. He was also among the first to expose the torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. And he exposed the Obama administration’s lies about the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, as well as the fabricated claims of a Syrian chemical weapons attack in 2013 that brought the US to the brink of another war.

At 80, he continues to practice aggressive investigative journalism aimed at exposing the lies of the American government, even as the corporate media has been turned ever more openly into a propaganda instrument for the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA. It functions to spread government lies while blocking information from reaching the public that runs counter to the geostrategic intrigues of US imperialism and exposes its crimes.

As the “mainstream” media has assumed the role of

mouthpiece and stenographer for the capitalist state and its military and intelligence apparatus, its journalistic standards have continued to plummet, a tendency highlighted by last week’s walkout by hundreds of *New York Times* workers in protest over the drive by the flagship of the capitalist press to “streamline” its editing process through the destruction of dozens of copy editors’ jobs.

One result of the media’s slavish subordination to the government and Wall Street has been the effective blacklisting of Hersh, who used to write regularly for the *New Yorker* magazine. Even the UK’s *London Review of Books*, whose editors first accepted and paid for his article on the Khan Sheikhoun incident, ultimately refused to publish it, telling the journalist they feared being accused of accepting “the view of the Syrian and Russian governments.”

The fact that his article came out in *Die Welt*, part of the right-wing Springer publishing house, is revealing. It no doubt reflects the growing tensions between the US and Germany, which is pursuing an imperialist foreign and military policy that is increasingly at odds with that of Washington.

The attempt to silence Hersh’s exposé, however, reflects the role of the global capitalist media, which has no interest in laying bare the growing threat of war that confronts working people in the US and internationally. This makes all the more crucial the role of the *World Socialist Web Site* in exposing these threats and developing an independent political strategy for the working class in the fight against war. In carrying forward this fight, the support of our readers in financially sustaining the WSWS and laying the basis for the continuous expansion of its coverage and global reach is vital.



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