

Seymour Hersh's *Reporter*: A life exposing government lies and crimes

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Seymour Hersh, the investigative journalist who played a leading role in exposing the 1968 My Lai massacre and the Bush administration's torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, has published a long-awaited autobiography.

Hersh is one of the world's most renowned investigative journalists. But despite his decades of journalistic experience, which won him numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, two National Magazine Awards and five George Polk Awards, Hersh has been all but ostracized by the American press.

No prominent American, or for that matter British, newspapers or periodicals, will publish his stories. And each one of his exposures are met with vituperative denunciations, or worse—silence.

But there is nothing defensive about his memoir. Instead, Hersh has written the story of his own colorful life the same way he writes his articles. The book is a clear, gripping narrative from beginning to end, describing, first-hand, the revelation of some of the greatest crimes since the second world war.

The book's title, *Reporter*, reflects its contents. The memoir is not, at first glance, a rebuttal to his contemporary critics, who call him an apologist for the Putin government because he dares question the CIA's narrative of foreign policy; rather, he often puts the most generous interpretations on the actions of his fellow journalists.

In narrating his life, he is narrating what a reporter does, beginning with a profound skepticism about everything, most of all official statements. If the book has a leitmotif, it's the phrase, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out," meaning that the job of the reporter is to question and independently verify everything he hears.

The clear, but unstated, allegation of Hersh's book is: "I am a real reporter, and my critics are not."

Hersh phrases it more diplomatically in his preface:

"I am a survivor from the golden age of journalism," he writes. "There were no televised panels of 'experts' and journalists on cable TV who began every answer to every question with the two deadliest words in the media world—I think."

"The newspapers of today far too often rush into print with stories that are essentially little more than tips, or hints of something toxic or criminal. For lack of time, money, or skilled staff, we are besieged with 'he said, she said' stories in which the reporter is little more than a parrot. I always thought it was a newspaper's mission to search out the truth and not merely to report on the dispute."

"My career," Hersh writes, "has been all about the importance of telling important and unwanted truths and making America a more knowledgeable place."

Seymour Hersh was born to a lower-middle-class Jewish family in

Chicago, where he helped run the family's dry cleaning business. After graduating from the University of Chicago, he began work at local newspapers first as a copyboy, then as a crime reporter. He moved on to work as a correspondent for United Press International in South Dakota, before working as a Chicago and Washington correspondent for the Associated Press.

His first national break came from his reporting on the Pentagon's secret program to develop chemical and biological weapons, of which Agent Orange, the chemical defoliant deployed on a massive scale in Vietnam, was a product. Hersh's research was vindicated by a March 14, 1968 chemical weapons test at Utah's Dugway Proving Ground, which led to the deaths of over 6,000 sheep. Hersh noted, "it took the army more than a month to acknowledge responsibility for the macabre event, and it did so only after a fact sheet sent to a Utah senator for his personal use was inadvertently made public by an aide."

Hersh's reporting led to an offer to serve as the press secretary for Senator Eugene McCarthy's unsuccessful 1968 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Hersh was a poor fit for job; he returned to journalism and to the biggest story of his life.

In October 1969, Hersh received a tip that the US Army was in the process of court-martialing a soldier for killing 72 Vietnamese civilians. He spent days trying to find the soldier's name, until a recently-promoted general he knew casually dropped it in conversation: William Calley.

Now that Hersh had a name, he found the truth lying in plain sight, which had been concealed by the *New York Times* and the television evening news treating the matter as a routine military disciplinary procedure.

"No one in my profession asked any questions at the time," Hersh wrote. "News of the charges against Calley even made the Huntley-Brinkley evening news, a popular and highly regarded show on NBC, with the network's Pentagon correspondent simply parroting the official press release."

But unlike his peers, who were content to toe the Pentagon line, Hersh set out to find Calley. Possessing the ability to strike up a rapport with seemingly anyone, Hersh, who had served in the army for six months, managed to drink his way into the confidence of Calley's roommates at Fort Benning, and then earned the trust of Calley himself.

Hersh tracked down other witnesses and participants in the massacre. He describes how he found a soldier named Paul Meadlo, who "had mechanically fired clip after clip of rifle bullets, at Calley's orders, into groups of women and children who had been rounded up amid the massacre."

When Hersh arrived at Meadlo's home, his mother told the reporter "I sent them a good boy, and they made him a murderer."

Hersh recalled: "He'd been asked to stand watch over a large group of women and children, all terrified survivors of the carnage, who had been gathered in a ditch. Calley, upon arriving at the ditch, ordered Meadlo and others to kill all. Meadlo did the bulk of the killing, firing seventeen-bullet

clips—four or five in all, he told me—into the ditch, until it grew silent.”

In a note he penned to editor Bob Loomis as he was writing his book-length account of the My Lai massacre, Hersh reveals a fundamental truth about the Vietnam war: that it was a crime not just against the Vietnamese, but against the soldiers who were sent into a criminal war to commit unspeakable acts.

Some will claim that I have attempted to exploit some dumb, out of service, overly talkative GIs. But few men are exposed to charges of murder... it is not a “naming names and telling all affair.” In fact, one of the strengths is that discriminating readers will know how much more I know—and did not tell. I’m convinced that to give the name and hometown of a GI who committed rape and murder that day, or one who beheaded an infant, would not further the aim of the book. It is an exposé, but not of the men of Charlie Company. Something much more significant is being put to light ... Both the killer and the killed are victims in Vietnam; the peasant who is shot down for no reason and the G.I. who is taught, or comes to believe, that a Vietnamese life somehow has less meaning than his wife’s, or his sister’s, or his mother’s.

In one of the rare occasions when Hersh opens up about his own feelings, he writes:

One GI who shot himself in the foot to get the hell out of My Lai told me of the special savagery some of his colleagues—or was it himself?—had shown toward two- and three-year-olds. One GI used his bayonet repeatedly on a little boy, at one point tossing the child, perhaps still alive, in the air and spearing it as if it were a papier-mâché piñata. I had a two-year-old son at home, and there were times, after talking to my wife and then my child on the telephone—I was often gone for many days at a time—I would suddenly burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably. For them? For their victims? For me, because of what I was learning?

Hersh’s investigation revealed that the US government had massacred between 347 and 504 unarmed people, who were referred to as “Orientals” in the official indictment. Only one person, Calley, was sentenced for the crimes. He ended up serving only three and a half years under house arrest.

The massacre was, as one of the soldiers who witnessed it told Hersh, a “Nazi-type thing.” The event showed showed, in other words, that “Americans do not fight war more honorably or more sanely than the Japanese and Germans did in World War II.”

Hersh was subsequently hired by the *New York Times* and went on to carry out extensive reporting on the Watergate scandal, including his revelation of widespread domestic wiretapping and massive government infiltration of anti-war groups by the Nixon White House, as well as the role of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the CIA in the September 11, 1973 coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende.

Hersh left the *New York Times* in 1978, following repeated efforts by its management to undercut his reporting. Notably, in 1975, he learned that the editorial board had secretly met with Gerald Ford and agreed to keep secret US government involvement in assassinations, and then conspired to keep Hersh from learning about it.

He went on to investigate corporate corruption, the downing of Korean Air Flight 007 and Israel’s development of nuclear weapons.

Following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, Hersh devoted all of

his efforts to investigating Middle East policy. His reporting quickly led him to the secret military plans to invade Iraq, which were later sold to the public based on false claims about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction.”

Hersh writes:

I knew, for example, that a decision had been made in late 2001—driven by neoconservative Republicans in and out of the government—to pull many special operations troops from Afghanistan, and from the hunt for bin Laden, in order to begin building up toward an all-out invasion of Iraq. The argument for doing so was that Saddam Hussein posed a more immediate threat because he had the capability to make the bomb. That was total nonsense. I knew from my earlier reporting on UNSCOM, the United Nations team whose mission had been to root out any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, that the 1991 American bombing in the First Gulf War had demolished the Iraqi nuclear weapons infrastructure, which had not been rebuilt. For the next fifteen months—until America began the Second Gulf War in March 2003—I wrote again and again about the distortion of intelligence and official lying about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq that paved the way for the war.

Hersh then goes on to quote from a secret US policy document whose existence, up to the publication of his book, had only been hinted at:

The document declared that the war to reshape the Middle East had to begin “with the assault on Iraq. The fundamental reason for this ... is that the war will start making the U.S. the hegemon of the Middle East. The correlative reason is to make the region feel in its bones, as it were, the seriousness of American intent and determination.” Victory in Iraq would lead to an ultimatum to Damascus, the “defanging” of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization, and other anti-Israeli groups. America’s enemies must understand that “they are fighting for their life: Pax Americana is on its way, which implies their annihilation.”

It was this megalomaniacal policy, Hersh explains, which manifested itself in the criminal methods used by Washington in waging the war in Iraq. Among the horrific products of this war of aggression was the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which Hersh helped expose in April 2004.

As with My Lai, Hersh picked up and exposed a story that leading news agencies had sought to bury. After learning that CBS’s “60 Minutes” program was in possession of the infamous photos of torture at Abu Ghraib but was refusing to publish them, Hersh threatened to publish the photos in the *New Yorker* and expose CBS’s self-censorship. The network, grudgingly, published the photos, dealing a devastating blow to US pretensions of “liberating” the Middle East with the invasion of Iraq.

But while Hersh was still viewed as within the journalistic mainstream in 2004, what turned him into a pariah was the shift in American foreign policy reflected in his March 5, 2007 essay “The Redirection,” in which he argued that the Bush Administration, setting its sights on a conflict in Iran and Syria, had set about the “bolstering of Sunni extremist groups ... sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”

This policy was masterminded by Vice President Dick Cheney, but it came into its own under Obama, who, seizing upon political upheavals throughout the Middle East in 2011, worked with Saudi Arabia and Turkey to funnel money to Syrian “rebel” groups with close ties to Al

Qaeda. Hersh documented the mechanism of this “ratline,” and the consternation it caused within sections of the American military, in his 2015 essay, “Military to Military.”

But the tide turned against the US and Saudi-backed insurgency with the intervention of Russia in 2015, which, together with Iran, helped bolster the Syrian government, which is now on the verge of retaking all of Syria.

To make the case for greater US intervention in the face of these reversals, the US government seized upon a series of alleged chemical weapons attacks, including incidents in Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Shaykhun in 2017. Hersh thoroughly debunked the American claims in both attacks. His 2013 essay was published in the London *Review of Books*, which subsequently rejected his 2017 essay, forcing him to publish it in the German *Welt am Sonntag*.

Reviews of Hersh’s memoir in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have created an artificial wall between his “early” and “later” periods. His early work is inevitably praised as the acme of journalism. His later work is calumniated as enemy propaganda and “fake news.”

But the fact is that Seymour Hersh has not changed: American politics and the media have. Under the Bush years, it was still permissible within the corporate media to criticize American foreign policy, however few and far between were such voices.

But after Obama’s 2008 victory, the entire American political establishment, including its middle-class “left” wing, embraced military escalation in the Middle East, and the media followed suit.

The criminality, along with the flagrant and filthy lying that tarred the Nixon and Bush administrations, have not only been adopted as standard practice by the whole political establishment, but have been embraced by the media.

Hersh has continued to expose these crimes and lies and because of it has been treated as a pariah in official American politics.

We do not share many of Seymour Hersh’s views, including his appeals to what he calls the reasonable sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus for a change in US foreign policy. But, as the book’s title implies, he is a genuine reporter; he knows the difference between the truth and a lie and works to expose it before the world public.

We urge our readers to read his book.



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