

## Review by Jackson Lears of Seymour Hersh's 'Reporter: A Memoir'

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Reviewing: *Reporter: A Memoir*, by Seymour M. Hersh, published by Allen Lane (Penguin),  
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The world needs Seymour Hersh. Without his indefatigable reporting, we would know even less than we do about the crimes committed by the US national security state over the last fifty years. While most of his peers in the press have been faithfully transcribing what are effectively official lies, Hersh has repeatedly challenged them, revealing scandalous government conduct that would otherwise have been kept secret: the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the domestic surveillance programme run by the intelligence agencies in the 1960s and 1970s, the torturing of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. In each case what he discovered was an egregious instance of an ongoing wrong systemic to the US military and intelligence establishment: My Lai was merely the most horrific of the counterinsurgency operations that have characterised American wars ever since; the domestic surveillance that began in the 1960s was merely the prototype for the full-scale invasion of privacy that, as revealed by Edward Snowden, has since become standard government procedure; Abu Ghraib was merely the tip of the iceberg of 'enhanced interrogation procedures' still secretly in use in the endless war on terror. At our current moment, amid pervasive public ignorance about foreign policy, Hersh can claim much of the credit for whatever knowledgeable scepticism survives.

The key to his success, as his compelling memoir suggests, is his temperament. He has always been willing to take risks in finding and verifying evidence; he is a shrewd opportunist who knows how to take advantage of lucky breaks. His signature phrase, at a crucial moment in an investigation, is 'I figured what the hell ...' And despite his strong convictions, Hersh resists the lure of ideological purity, recognising that the national security state is not monolithic or uniformly ill-intentioned. Behind the apparent institutional conformity, among actual officers, there are always disagreements over policy: honourable soldiers and intelligence agents, appalled by official practice, have always been willing to provide him with crucial leads and inside information. As he summarises his method, 'there are many officers, including generals and admirals, who understood that the oath of office they took was a commitment to uphold and defend the constitution and not the president, or an immediate superior. Want to be a good military reporter? Find those officers.' The same can be said about the decent operatives within the intelligence agencies – though, given the requirements of their craft, they are harder to find.

Hersh's work is especially important to remember in the contemporary political climate, when the CIA and FBI have acquired extraordinary – perhaps unprecedented – legitimacy among people who think of themselves as liberals or progressives. Fear of Trump seems to have driven them into the arms of the deep state, whose prevaricating representatives – in particular Robert Mueller, who before being appointed as special investigator into alleged Trump-Russia collusion was the longest-serving director of the FBI since J. Edgar Hoover – have been transformed by the mainstream media into paragons of integrity. Why these people should be seen as our only source of salvation from the villainous president, and why so much spurious hope has been placed in the Russia investigation when there are so many more substantive reasons to oppose Trump, remains the chief political puzzle of our time. But one thing is clear: Hersh offers a necessary antidote to suffocating groupthink. Whether we will ever see a reporter like him again, given the parlous state of contemporary journalism, remains an open question.

The son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania and Poland, Hersh grew up in the 1930s and 1940s on the predominantly black South Side of Chicago, where he worked in his parents' dry-cleaning shop and attended community college at night. His big break came – though he didn't know it at the time – when an English professor at the college saw his promise and arranged for his admission to the University of Chicago. He already knew how to write, but the university helped him learn how to think. After graduation he knocked about aimlessly, tried law school without enthusiasm, and sold beer and whiskey at Walgreens until a local acquaintance put him on to the City News Bureau. There he began his apprenticeship in the hard-drinking, hard-boiled world of Chicago journalism – covering fires, break-ins and car crashes, learning that black people were basically invisible unless they committed crimes. After a six-month interlude as an army recruit, he returned to run a suburban weekly and then took a job with the wire service United Press International, which set him up for a brief sojourn as their man in Pierre, South Dakota (the state capital). He soon returned to Chicago to work for the UPI's more established rival, the Associated Press. Eager for more than fires and car crashes, he finally made it to AP's Washington Bureau in the summer of 1965. Lyndon Johnson had just stage-managed the Gulf of Tonkin incident into a congressional carte blanche that would dramatically widen the US war in Vietnam.

Hersh, soon the senior AP man in Washington, was quickly introduced to the mendacity at the heart of the war. In 1966, he watched as Robert McNamara, the secretary of defence, tried to turn a defeat into a rhetorical victory, dressing up a humiliating ambush by the North Vietnamese army as an American triumph. The Washington press corps dutifully reported the official Pentagon version of events. A US navy captain called Mark Hill, who was working on a project for McNamara, eventually let Hersh in on the real, catastrophic story. (Hill was one of the honourable soldiers on whom Hersh came to rely.) 'I remember being angry, of course, but also more than a bit frightened,' Hersh writes. 'I had no idea of the extent to which the men running the war would lie to protect their losing hand.'

By late 1966, the gap between official accounts and facts on the ground became impossible to ignore. In the *New York Times* Harrison Salisbury published a series of reports that revealed significant civilian casualties from the US bombing of North Vietnam, refuting the technocratic myth of the 'surgical strike'. Hersh began an effort to extend and reinforce Salisbury's reports by tracking down officers who were sick of official lying. He found two generals who confirmed military records revealing that most bombs missed their intended target and landed in civilian

areas. Hersh's first (pseudonymous) defence of Salisbury appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter*, and included an anecdote of a general joking with reporters at a cocktail party about the inaccuracy of bombs as nervous laughter rippled through the room – a scene that underscored the cosy familiarity between the Pentagon and the press. Eventually, with the help of the *New York Times* reporter Neil Sheehan, Hersh succeeded in getting two AP dispatches published on the *Times* front page, vindicating Salisbury by confirming government concealment of civilian casualties.

Hersh quickly realised the futility of the American war effort, and spent the next several years uncovering high-level deceit. Following up on the investigative work Elinor Langer had done on chemical warfare for *Science*, he explored the Pentagon's aggressive programme of chemical and biological warfare (CBW), which had tripled its budget between 1961 and 1964 as the Kennedy and Johnson administrations began the systematic use of defoliants and herbicides in Vietnam. Hersh found a colonel who had recently retired from the US Army Chemical Corps with grave doubts about the morality of the work he had been doing. The colonel confirmed that despite the Pentagon's official claim that the CBW programme was for defensive purposes only, the main aim was to develop weapons of mass destruction. Like nuclear weapons, CBW posed the possibility of unimaginable civilian casualties as well as war by accident or mistake. Hersh published a series of reports detailing the dangers of the CBW programme in increasingly respectable venues: *Ramparts*, the *New Republic* and the *New York Times Magazine*. Public worry intensified until November 1969, when Nixon finally responded by renouncing first use of CBW. Despite the prevalence of systematically faked news and media subservience to the government line, the 32-year-old Hersh felt that he had discovered enough honest and courageous people in government to enable investigative reporting to affect policy. He saw some cause for hope.

But he had only just begun to explore the mass murder central to the army's counterinsurgency strategy. On 22 October 1969, a friend of a friend tipped him off that the army was about to court-martial a soldier for killing 75 Vietnamese civilians. Reports of American war crimes had been appearing in various newspaper accounts since 1967, circulated by groups such as Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, and collected by the economist Seymour Melman in a book called *In the Name of America*. From such sources, Hersh knew that 'the senseless killing of hundreds was commonplace in American attacks on rural villages in South Vietnam.' Now, suddenly, he had an opportunity to give this vile strategy a local, palpable reality. To begin with, all he had was word of a trial, without even the accused man's name. Then he hit 'a one-in-a-million bank shot'. He asked a general whom he 'knew to be a truth teller' about the murder case, and in fulminating against the 'madman' who was going to trial the general let slip the name 'Calley'. 'There was never more of a disconnect between an honourable military officer and a reporter on the hunt,' Hersh writes. His interlocutor 'saw Calley as an aberration: I thought he was part of a hell of a story that needed to be told.'

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The hunt for Lieutenant William Calley led Hersh to some wild dashing about the vast, sparsely settled acreage that constitutes Fort Benning, Georgia. When he finally met Calley, he confronted the banality of evil: 'I had wanted to hate him, to see him as a child-killing monster, but instead I found a rattled, frightened young man, short, slight, and so pale that the bluish veins

on his neck and shoulders were visible.’ After a long bourbon-soaked conversation, Calley interrupted Hersh’s questioning to phone the man who had been his immediate superior in Vietnam, Captain Ernest Medina, who, Calley believed, would confirm that everything took place under the captain’s direct order. When Medina said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ and hung up, Calley was stricken. ‘He knew ... he was going to be the fall guy for the murders at My Lai,’ Hersh writes.

Hersh’s first dispatch on My Lai focused on the army’s charge that Calley had killed 109 civilians. *Life* and *Look* magazines turned the piece down; Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books* offered to publish it, but only if Hersh added an explicit critique of the Vietnam War. Hersh wanted the story to speak for itself. He finally gave it to the independent journalist David Obst’s Dispatch News Service. Thirty-six newspapers picked up the story, but the *New York Times* wasn’t among them; *Time*, *Newsweek* and the television networks ignored it. Self-censorship was pervasive. The *Washington Post* was an exception: the *Post*’s editors rewrote it, adding Pentagon denials, and put it on the front page.

The question for Hersh was: how to expand the investigation beyond Calley? An answer came when he spotted an AP item in the *Post*, identifying the soldier who had brought My Lai to senior officers’ attention. This was Ronald Ridenhour, a member of a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol Unit who had learned about the massacre from someone in Calley’s platoon. Through Ridenhour, by then a college student in California, Hersh found the rest of Charlie Company, and multiple accounts of the massacre. One soldier described it as ‘a Nazi-type thing’: American GIs machine-gunning men, women and children huddled in a ditch. Dozens of newspapers (including the *Post*) paid their \$100 to Obst to publish the new story, but again, not the *New York Times*.

Hersh’s next instalment focused on Paul Meadlo, who under Calley’s orders had fired clip after clip of rifle bullets at women and children. He tracked Meadlo to his family’s farm in Indiana, ‘a run-down mess’, as Hersh writes, where Meadlo’s mother told him: ‘I sent them a good boy, and they made him a murderer.’ Meadlo had lost his foot to a mine and believed it was God’s punishment for what he had done. He gave Hersh his most gruesome details yet, including the murder of two and three-year-olds. This time the major media finally paid attention: Meadlo appeared on the CBS news programme *60 Minutes* and A.M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* phoned Hersh twice to ask if he could get him an interview with Meadlo. Hersh hung up twice.

Starting a book on My Lai, with Meadlo in mind, Hersh started from the assumption that both the killers and the killed were victims. He also placed the massacre in the frame of American counterinsurgency strategy. As an Episcopal chaplain who had resigned his commission in disgust told Hersh, ‘as far as the United States army is concerned, there was no such thing as the murder of a Vietnamese civilian.’ From the beleaguered combat soldier’s point of view, any Vietnamese was potentially the enemy. The My Lai massacre was not an isolated incident but a particularly horrific example of common practice. Hersh’s reporting played a major role in drawing major media into a more critical perspective on the war.

Eventually even the cautious *Times* came around and in May 1972 put Hersh on their payroll. This was the beginning of a pattern that would be repeated over several decades: powerful editors – first Rosenthal, later David Remnick of the *New Yorker* – supported Hersh, for a time,

even while they did not always share his political views. It was ‘bliss’ to have the legitimacy and the millions of readers that the *Times* provided him, Hersh writes, but he remained frustrated by the paper’s ambivalence towards established power. By the summer of 1972, Hersh had uncovered three controversial projects inside the CIA: the ‘frantic’ manoeuvres to undermine the Allende government in Chile; an expensive project to recover a downed Soviet submarine; and Operation Chaos, the domestic surveillance programme aimed since 1967 at gathering intelligence on ‘Vietnam War protesters and other suspected dissidents’. All these stories, especially the last one, were potentially huge. Yet the head of the *Times*’s Washington bureau, Max Frankel, though he had urged Rosenthal to hire Hersh, turned down his proposal to write on any of them. As Hersh observes, Frankel, like many of his colleagues, ‘wanted and didn’t want to publish scoops that would challenge the people in power’.

Part of this reluctance stemmed from what everyone in the Washington press corps (except Hersh’s older pal, maverick journalist I.F. Stone) deemed a necessity: the need to maintain access to inside information. Henry Kissinger, then Nixon’s national security adviser, was a particularly prized source when Hersh began work at the *Times*. Hersh asked his colleague Bernie Gwertzman ‘if he ever checked what Henry was telling him’ with William Rogers, the secretary of state, or Melvin Laird, the secretary of defence. ““Oh no,” he said, “if I did that, Henry wouldn’t speak to us.”” Hersh had a very different relationship with Kissinger. He discovered that ‘Kissinger was wiretapping friend and foe – especially his foes – in the bureaucracy,’ and he began preparing a major report on what would be a front-page story. As Hersh tells it, the *Times*’s vice president, James ‘Scotty’ Reston, walked up to Hersh’s desk in slippers and asked if it was true that he was going to target Kissinger in his next story. ‘His message was very direct: do you understand that if you do this story, Henry will resign?’ Resignation was never on Kissinger’s agenda, but Hersh phoned him and tried to soften the story’s impact by telling him that while the *Times* thought he was a ‘national asset’, the truth must be served. This ‘doubletalk’, Hersh writes, was nothing compared to Kissinger’s ‘practised cant’: ‘the man lied the way most people breathed.’ This recognition ended the first stage in Hersh’s sustained investigation of Kissinger, which appeared in full as *Kissinger: The Price of Power*, a book that detailed Kissinger’s disdain for truth and provoked the ire of his acolytes.

During Nixon’s decline and fall, in 1973 and 1974, Hersh mainly worked on what he calls ‘The Big One’, detailing illegal CIA spying at home. The *Times* ran the first of Hersh’s stories on the subject on 22 December 1974. It was, he says, ‘the most explosive of my years at the *New York Times*’. It provoked congressional investigations and public outrage, marking the high point in the brief history of public scepticism toward the national security state. Mike Mansfield, a Democratic senator for Montana, had been trying to establish effective congressional oversight over the CIA since the 1950s. His efforts ‘went nowhere’, Hersh reports, ‘as did subsequent attempts to derail the quiet chats and whispering between a few Senate seniors and the CIA director that passed for congressional oversight since the agency was created after WWII’. In 1975, Mansfield backed the creation of a committee to investigate the CIA’s domestic spying, headed by Senator Frank Church. But the committee also came across evidence of the CIA coup in Chile, as well as the Kennedy brothers’ efforts to have Fidel Castro assassinated. Church, an aspiring presidential candidate and devotee of Camelot, chose not to look too closely into the Kennedy story. Still, the investigation had raised the question of whether CIA agents were above the law – ‘the king’s personal staff’, as the CIA director Richard Helms called them – or, like all other Americans, subject to the constitution. In the end the Church committee found no smoking

assassins' guns but, as Hersh says, the powers that be employed 'lots of euphemisms – "who will rid me of this troublesome priest?" kind of stuff'.

Ultimately the Church investigation did not have the impact on public policy Hersh had hoped for. 'The CIA,' he writes, 'is still doing today what it has done in secret around the world since the end of WWII.' Tolerance for official crimes was embedded in the culture of the nation's capital. In Washington, Hersh finally realises, 'there seemingly was a love, or an admiration, for the CIA that I did not share.' The *Washington Post* attacked Hersh's story, claiming that intelligence on Americans was being gathered not by the CIA but by the FBI, the domestic intelligence agency, which meant it was legal. Hersh kept up his reporting in the hope that Congress would continue to investigate, even as his employer agreed with the Ford administration to keep government-sponsored assassinations secret. 1975 was a hinge moment in Washington: 'With Nixon gone, the pendulum had swung back to a place where a president's argument that national security trumps the people's right to know was once again carrying weight with editors and publishers.'

By the late 1970s, the rightward turn in Washington was unmistakable. As Hersh recalls, 'the city had changed: the Vietnam War was over and so was Watergate. No one in the CIA had been prosecuted for the crimes that had been committed against the American people and the Constitution.' Helms, who had lied to Congress about his role in the overthrow of Allende, copped a plea and paid a \$2000 fine for perjuring himself; he emerged from the controversy as a hero and patriot. The *Times* praised Helms's plea, citing the conflict between 'the need to enforce the laws against lying and the continuing need to keep secrets'. The paper's ambivalence towards power was reasserting itself. The consequences of Helms's plea deal, Hersh writes, were calamitous: 'every CIA officer who took the oath of secrecy was now exempt from testifying truthfully to Congress.' The CIA had returned to the area 'where it thrived – the grey area between right and wrong, legal and illegal, honour and dishonour'. And there it remains today, while its leaders (Michael Hayden, James Clapper – to mention just two) perjure themselves and pose alongside the FBI as guardians of public truth. Despite the show of unity, Hersh says, he had always noticed that the CIA sustained a contempt for the FBI; he wondered why until an agent told him: 'Don't you get it, Sy? The FBI catches bank robbers. We rob banks.' These are the people who have become paragons of truth-telling in the looking-glass world of contemporary politics.

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The 9/11 attacks and the war on terror provided Hersh with abundant new opportunities for exposing government deceit. Unlike most of his fellow journalists, Hersh understands what was actually at stake in George W. Bush's administration: 'eight or nine neoconservatives who were political outsiders in the Clinton years had essentially overthrown the government of the US – with ease.' Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and company all argued that, in wartime, the president can do whatever he wants without congressional authorisation. And this was nothing if not wartime: Republican neoconservatives had cooked up a plan for reshaping the entire Middle East; America's enemies, they claimed, 'are fighting for their life. Pax Americana is on its way, which implies their annihilation.'

By this time Hersh had left the *Times* and established a relationship with David Remnick at the *New Yorker*. Like many liberals, Remnick was seduced by the idea of democratising the Middle East, but during the run-up to the war he nonetheless published Hersh's articles questioning the central justification for invading Iraq – what Hersh calls the 'total nonsense' that Saddam Hussein had the capacity to make nuclear weapons – though Remnick required Hersh to acknowledge that such weapons might still be found. In 2004, speaking with an Iraqi air force general in Damascus, Hersh learned about the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib – the sexual shaming of both men and women, not to mention the whole gamut of 'enhanced interrogation procedures'. It became a *New Yorker* story with international reach. There was more to come from Hersh on the subject and he turned it into a book, *Chain of Command*, which developed his insight that 'the contempt GIs had for prisoners, and the notion that they could do what they wished, flowed from the top.' Like My Lai, Abu Ghraib was not an isolated event but a systemic expression of imperial strategy.

As Hersh continued to visit the Middle East, coming up with more background on the war on terror in the region as a whole, he drifted further away from Remnick's views. The *New Yorker* published Hersh's interviews with Bashar al-Assad, though Remnick was more sceptical of Assad's integrity than Hersh was. According to Hersh, Assad's factual assertions – including his off-the-record statements about sharing intelligence with the CIA – all checked out.

Under the Obama administration, few journalists were inclined to question government pronouncements. Despite his inspiring campaign, Hersh observes, 'once in office Obama was unwilling to take the risks he needed to take to change American foreign policy.' Remnick remained close to Obama and largely uncritical of him, which – with good reason – troubled Hersh. Like other mainstream media, the *New Yorker* was becoming less hospitable to independent investigative reporting. In 2013, departing from a solid phalanx of conventional US media wisdom, Hersh produced a story exposing the Obama administration's secret alliance with jihadists against Assad, and questioning claims that Assad had used sarin gas by noting that jihadists also had (secret) access to nerve gas. The US intelligence community, he learned, had two suspects for the use of sarin – Assad or the jihadists – but the American public were told only of one. This time, Remnick refused to publish the story, and the *LRB* picked it up, following it with three further reports by Hersh – including his alternative account of the killing of Osama bin Laden, which described an extended US collaboration with the Pakistani intelligence service, which had watched over bin Laden for years.

As clouds of Russophobia have gathered on both sides of the Atlantic, and Assad has become widely viewed as Putin's proxy (not to mention a 'monster' in his own right), Hersh's idiosyncratic perspective made him more and more of an outlier. It is a sad commentary on the groupthink that has led liberals to reassemble in support of the intelligence agencies and the national security state. Hersh's memoir is a reminder that independent investigative journalists remain essential to the survival of democracy. But where will they come from, and how will they survive, given the collapse of contemporary journalism? The rise of social media has trivialised and distorted public discourse, but longer-term developments have had an even bigger effect. In the US, the concentration of corporate control over news media continues to accelerate, thanks in part to the Telecommunications Act of 1996: in 1983 there were fifty multinational corporations controlling US media; now there are five. Would-be investigative reporters have almost nowhere left to publish their findings. It is also harder than ever to find reliable information: the

financialisation of the news means the papers that survive have cut back their foreign bureaus and geared their operations to maximising shareholder value. And another new development: under Obama the federal government began prosecuting whistleblowers, including John Kiriakou, the CIA counterterrorism officer who spent two years in jail for exposing the Bush administration's torture programme. Kiriakou is the sort of honourable public servant who could have become a source for Hersh. Many still exist, but in the current climate how many of them will risk personal and professional ruin by speaking of wrongdoing to reporters? The period of the early and mid-1970s, when Hersh's work had its greatest impact, is beginning to look like a lost golden age of public scepticism. We will need more than nostalgia to bring it back.

Related readings:

**The Red Line and the Rat Line: Obama, Erdoğan and the Syrian rebels**, [essay by Seymour Hersh, published in \*London Review of Books\*, print issue of April 17, 2014](#)

**Whose sarin?**, [essay by Seymour Hersh, published in \*London Review of Books\*, print issue of Dec 19, 2013](#)

**Looking for Calley**, by Seymour Hersh, *Harper's Magazine*, print issue of June 2018 *How the young journalist Seymour Hersh untangled the riddle of the U.S. massacre of Vietnamese peasants in the village of My Lai on March 16, 2018* Subscriber only article; read it here in pdf format: [Looking for Calley, Seymour Hersh, Harper's Magazine, June 2018](#).

**My Lai Massacre**, [Wikipedia](#)