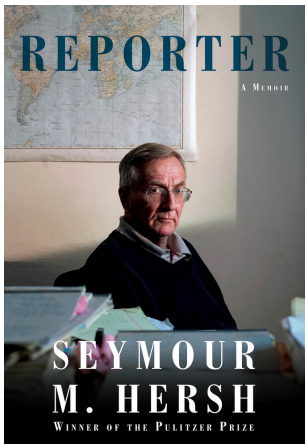
He Got the Story

written by Michael Hirsch | October 23, 2018

Seymour Hersh. *Reporter: A Memoir*. Knopf, 2018. 368 pp.



Writing in 1940, George Orwell opined in a review of a Bertrand Russell book that "we have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men." Much the same can be said about the more than fifty-year career of journalist Seymour Hersh, whose pioneering exposés of the lies of the Great Powers report and affirm facts that follow Orwell's dictum.

His memoir *Reporter* showcases Hersh as nothing less than journalism's energizer bunny, unstoppable in exposing not only the My Lai massacre in Vietnam — for which his accumulated freelance pieces won him a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting in 1970 — but for essential information breaking the Watergate scandal cover-up and the Nixon administration's development of offensive chemical and bacteriological weapons.

Reporter works its way through a conga line of miscreant US presidents, from Kennedy to Bush (though Obama and Trump get scant attention) and the venality of Henry Kissinger, of whom Hersh says, "the man lied the way most people breathed." We're told about the excesses and connections of a major West Coast mob fixer, the domestic spying efforts of the CIA in direct violation of its governing charter, the sexual abuse by soldiers of male Iraqi inmates at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, and the incapacity of the bulk of a credulous US press corps to do more than cozy up to administration sources and miss the big stories.

This laggard media practice isn't new, of course. *Nation* editor Carey McWilliams despaired in the early 1950s over how "large majorities can be manipulated by carefully timed headlines, revelations, and a thoroughly unscrupulous exploitation of the silence and secrecy surrounding many phases of government." For some five decades, Hersh has strived to do better.

Hersh's story then, as he tells it, is among the world's lengthiest curriculum vitae. It's all about the work, and not much about the man. We're told he was born in 1937, one of two sets of twins born to post-World War I Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. In his late teens, he ran his father's micro dry cleaning plant on Chicago's South Side while going to college at the same time. We're told he's married and with two grown children, but the rest of the memoir is all about his work — at Chicago's legendary *City News*, then the *Chicago Tribune*, United Press International in South Dakota, and the Associated Press.

Hustling as a media flack for Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential bid, his revelations about

McCarthy are a tell-all that should disabuse any former “Be Clean for Gene” warrior that McCarthy was in any way an improvement over the run of mainstream Democrats on anything beyond slamming the Vietnam War. His work at the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and freelancing is all there, too.

A stint writing screen plays in Hollywood taught him that “it’s all about character,” though his own character abstracted from his work ethic can’t be easily inferred from the memoir. Beyond a drive to be first with a scoop, there’s no person presented here beyond the quarrelsome, even splenetic, proverbial Peck’s Bad Boy in every reporting job he held. His wrangles with top editors including the *New York Times*’ Abe Rosenthal were legendary, all the while being whipsawed by a mélange of bosses who were either dismissive or supportive of him — sometimes both, as with Rosenthal and the *Washington Post*’s Ben Bradlee. His narrative is at its best a testament to how stories should be investigated and told. Without his having to say so, the recent *New York Times* exposé of the seamy origins of the Trump family fortune aptly follows in that tradition.

The largest single section of the book details his ferreting out the real story of the My Lai massacre. His descriptions of GIs wantonly skewering small Vietnamese children with bayonets bring the horror back viscerally, and his fevered hunt for Lieutenant William Calley is a wonder. Calley was later dubbed the chief perpetrator of the war crimes despite ample evidence that he was the fall guy for more senior officers derelict in self-servingly viewing the slaughter as a firefight.

Not only did he expose the massacre, but he located Calley, then hidden away by the military in senior officer bachelors’ quarters at the military’s sprawling Fort Benning, Georgia, base. “I was stunned,” Hersh writes about the result of his tortuous hunt, “a suspected mass murderer hidden away in quarters for the army’s most elite.”

Such masterly investigative and sleuthing justified his conclusion that Calley was a scapegoat for a hypocritical military rule abjuring torture as policy while permitting it factually and blaming such massacres on lower-ranking “bad apples.” The suspicion that the policy was in fact to tolerate such horrors is inescapable, though Hersh never says as much.

In this bizarro-world war, he noted how “many navy pilots, convinced that their targets in Vietnam were not worth the risks involved, were eager to get out of the service as quickly as possible. It was a story that no one at the top wanted to hear.” The reality, as numerous flyers told him, was that just 10 percent of bombs dropped actually hit their intended targets, a figure that made bombing itself not only a hell for noncombatant Vietnamese but — given flack from the North’s anti-aircraft batteries — organized suicide for pilots.

If Hersh learned one golden operating rule, it’s this: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” After a series of his was, as is still the custom, scrupulously fact-checked by the *New Yorker*, resulting in damaging but exacting exposes that mooted any libel threats, “I’ve been an avid supporter of fact-checking ever since.” He likewise adopted the savvy credo, “Read before you write.”

Culling sources also became a key piece of his *modus operandi*. “I learned early in my career,” he writes, “that the way to get someone to open up was to know what I was talking about and ask questions that showed it. Humor and persistence often would work, … but being threatening or aggressive never would.”

One of his trade secrets was tracking retired senior generals and admirals, a class of people beyond the military’s’ reach to punish for telling tales. Insider sources “quickly became more than sources; they were friends and stayed friends after they left government.” Often criticized for his voluminous

use of unnamed sources, he made it a practice of revealing source names to every editor he's worked with, with the consent of the sources.

One such source had been a Middle East CIA station chief. Asked why other CIA operatives had such apparent contempt for the FBI that sharing information was a non-practice, even after 9/11, "[h]is answer stunned me," Hersh writes. ""Don't you get it, Sy?" he's told. "The FBI catches bank robbers. We rob banks."

In writing 1983's *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, his tell-all book on the rest of the press's sanctified warlord Henry Kissinger, he added "Find people who know the truth, or a truth, and let the facts tell the story." While the book was shunned by the mainstream press whether or not it was read at all, it got accolades from Noam Chomsky, who called it "really fabulous, apart from the feeling that one is crawling through a sewer. " That and reporting on Kissinger for the *Times*, Hersh claims, kept Kissinger out of any Reagan White House appointment in 1984.

Even after 9/11, when arch-neocon Vice President Dick Cheney was orchestrating the undermining of constitutionally required congressional oversight of foreign affairs, Hersh had sources willing to talk about "operations, planned and ongoing — and only those operations — that were contrary to American values, or what was left of them." Still, Hersh had to be selective about what he used, lest he risk Cheney's unearthing critics. Much as today with a leaking Trump administration, sources used Hersh "as a conduit to have their say without any risk" to their careers.

In his work there's no thick description beyond what he is told or dug up, the kind of color and texture so richly done by Orwell or Clancy Segal, whose in-depth depictions of working-class life are classics. Hersh's strengths are elsewhere: they lay in what he's heard, read, gotten sources to tell him and confirmed. While much of the information had to be on background so as not to expose sources, it was so well-grounded that it made its own mark, particularly in a field in which mainstream reporting consisted in large measure of aping administration spokespersons and retouching press releases.

In these ventures Hersh was a pre-eminent outlier. Among his influences was the independent journalist I.F. Stone, saying he "was wowed by Stone's ability to take on, and debunk, the official accounts of events annunciated by the Johnson administration. There was no mystery to how Stone did it. He overworked every journalist in Washington." (It was Stone who said, "All governments lie, but disaster lies in wait for countries whose officials smoke the same hashish they give out.'') Hersh describes the Pentagon press room as "stunningly sedate," with "the earmarks of a high-end social club" and a press claque too ready to repeat whatever pap the administration handed out that day. Its line was always the Pentagon's.

Keynoting a conference of the American Civil Liberties Union, Hersh told the crowd, "There is a corporate mentality out there, but there is also a tremendous amount of self-censorship among the press. It's like a disease."

His research is indefatigable. Even in My Lai, where he is justly revered for relentlessly hunting facts, working sources and breaking the story, he also makes clear that he built his case on earlier work, especially that of *Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury's dispatches from North Vietnam. While widely assumed by the growing anti-war movement that US war policy was not only unjust and unnecessary but murderous, he turned that subtext into text — even before the release of the Pentagon Papers that blew the lid off of every government war lie.

Piggybacking on Elinor Langer's research in *Science* magazine on the Pentagon's chemical and

bacterial warfare (CBW) program, Hersh was also instrumental in targeting the Defense Department's CBW programs, which were aimed not as defensive measures as claimed, but for offensive forays. He also broke the story that Arkansas's Pine Bluff Arsenal in the late 1960s was storing bombs filled with anthrax and other poisons as well as anti-crop agents "especially tailored for crops grown in Cuba."

As his reputation for exposing government perfidies grew, so did his battery of sources. While his bosses at the *Times* and *Washington Post* were queasy about his against-the-grain reporting, "more and more officials on the inside were talking to me and knew I would deal honestly with the information they shared and protect their identity."

It's never clear whether this self-described "fast-talking, hot-headed operator" thinks that bad policy leads to monstrous results, or that the policies have intrinsic value and can be separated from the odious outcomes by a more righteous adhesion to stated rules of war. Were the massacres of peasants in Vietnam the logical outcome of imperialist penetration, or could closer government oversight of troop actions have made for a less barbarous outcome? Marxists would say the latter is nonsense, and that the slaughter of populations is implicit in how a counter-guerilla offensive by imperial forces is waged. But humane rules of war seem to be Hersh's lodestar.

Similarly, his coverage of Israel's developing nuclear weapons made him a host of enemies, but his own defense is problematic, as when he writes, "My point was not that Israel should not have the bomb but that the sub-rosa American support for it was known throughout the Middle East and made a mockery of American efforts to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and other nations with undeclared nuclear ambitions."

Would imperialism in Hersh's view be defensible if the neocons surrounding George W. Bush or the neoliberals in the Obama brain trust were amenable to giving the wise men in the CIA more say in policy? Or if a more inquisitive, less subservient press corps dominated news cycles? We don't know his thinking, though his comment that he was "only interested in CIA operations or any intelligence activities that were stupid or criminal" leaves the door open for great power abuses that are neither. By that yardstick, Russian support for Assad or US backing of the Saudis can be justified as rational and excusable, no matter the body count.

Hersh admits he was whipsawed between reporting the truth as he knew it and protecting the careers of his sources — a problem plaguing him throughout his career, forcing him like Bob Woodward to rely on unnamed sources. On the administration's venality, Hersh admits to being

> "more than a little frightened. I had no idea of the extent to which the men running the war would lie to protect a losing hand. I was dealing with a dilemma that reporters who care and work hard constantly face; America needed to know the truth about the Vietnam War, but I had made a commitment to an officer [his source, then a Navy captain] of integrity."

Hersh stayed in touch with that source for decades, who retired as a three-star admiral, and only revealed his name after the man's death. Adding to the difficulty was a Defense Department edict requiring officers to inform the department of all requests for information by reporters, a sure way to freeze out dissenting views, such as there were, from the public.

Hersh also prides himself on staying best buds with his informers for decades, something his mentor Stone refused to do, short- or long-term. As Stone put it about a *New York Times* Washington bureau chief who played medicine ball with Herbert Hoover regularly at the White House, "That's enough to

kill off a good reporter. … You can't get intimate with officials and maintain your independence." Even good guys, Stone believed, "will use you."

Does Hersh get everything right? Who does? Even as astute a chronicler as Stone could get it wrong, as in his early insistence that it was South Korean provocations that sparked the Korean peninsular war and not dirty dealings from all sides — including, as he would later suggest, dueling intrigues from Truman and Stalin. Despite Hersh's remorseless heresy hunting of every administration since Kennedy's, there's no hint that the needs of US-based businesses shape and often determine domestic and foreign policy.

Despite his interest in Gulf and Western's perfidies as performed by then-head Charles Bluhdorn, "the dirtiest mogul in town," Hersh has more to say about a culture of greed and malpractice than about the logic of capital. With his eyes on Washington's misdeeds and on occasion — when editors permit — Wall Street's avarice but not its systemic prerogatives, he's more of a humorless court jester than a rebel. In whose interest does the governing elite serve? Hersh won't tell us. Where is his curiosity about diagnosing and exposing a system that requires victims? He doesn't do that.

His division of labor makes him look — penetratingly but partially — elsewhere. His exposures of Bluhdorn's sharp practices are characterological, not systemic. Gulf and Western had bad, self-serving leadership: end of discussion. Taking in Hersh's work practice is like watching a *Punch and Judy* show; you catch a miscreant performance but never see the puppeteer.

Even on the stage on which he performs so well, Hersh can stumble. He holds that Syria's minority Alewite government did not use nerve gas against rebels — this despite claims from the United Nations and other credible sources to the contrary that chemical bombs were used. In a late June 2018 interview with the BBC on the destruction by chemical explosion of the town of Kan Sheikhoun, Hersh insisted that stored chlorine, and not a sarin or chlorine bomb, was responsible for the devastation:

> "All I can tell you," he says in the interview, "is that the American intelligence community report — I wish I could flash it here — but the American intelligence community has been very clear that there's no evidence that the Russians, that the Syrians, the regime used a chlorine weapon because there is no such thing. Chlorine exists. You bomb. Chlorine gets out there.

Stephen Shalom's in-depth reconstruction of the controversy over the use or non-use of Sarin gas as an offensive weapon effectively demolishes Hersh's claims.

Hersh also praises dictator Bashar al-Assad as someone with "integrity" because he never lied to Sy. As yet, Hersh has written nothing on Kurdish independence efforts, popular civilian and secular democratic resistance to both jihadist terrorists in the north and the Assadist regime now in control of most of Syria, and intent on seizing the land of many of the more than one million Syrians displaced by the fighting. The operative word "all" in I.F. Stone's dictum that "all governments lie" means the US can't be disparaged as the world's lone malefactor.

Still, we internationalists who count Assad among the more despicable tyrants of the present age shouldn't be too hard on Hersh. He can get it wrong, too. Yet throughout his career he's shouldered a broad and brave consistency, adopting in effect what Orwell said so well in *Homage to Catalonia*: "Every war suffers a kind of progressive degradation with every month that it continues, because such things as individual liberty and a truthful press are simply not compatible with military efficiency." Hersh's career is nothing if not a life lived working to take the media out of that grim

equation.

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Originally posted at Jacobin.