

Reporter: A Memoir

Seymour M. Hersh

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John Newsinger

This is a tremendous book. Hersh is the embodiment of the journalist as public benefactor and we have never had a greater need for his skills. Towards the end of *Reporter* he laments that, because of developments in the Middle East, he has had to put his book on Dick Cheney on hold. I suspect that the American catastrophe that is Lying Donald will necessitate further postponement.

Hersh's first big story revealed the realities of US Chemical and Biological Warfare (CBW) research.¹ This 'listed fifty-two universities and university research centers that were doing work on CBW under military contract [. . . .] The article triggered campus protests and some renewed questions in Congress'. His first book was *Chemical and Biological Warfare* in 1968 and his revelations of fifty years ago still shock. Alongside the 720,000 animals that were being experimented to death every year, were the often unwitting human 'volunteers'. Fourteen hundred such 'volunteers' were supplied by the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the late seventies, some of whom had 'no idea what they volunteered for, and consented to' and would only later learn 'what they had been exposed to [. . . .] The diseases they were exposed to included tularaemia, yellow fever, Rift Valley fever, and the plague'. And who would have thought that James Watson, who 'had earlier won fame for his role in discovering the double-helix structure of DNA', once served 'on a secret Pentagon CBW advisory panel'.

Hersh's discussion of My Lai – he rightly calls it a 'National Disgrace' – is essential reading, although it was merely the tip of the iceberg of Vietnam era atrocities. He discovered that some US helicopter pilots practiced flying low, chasing Vietnamese farmers through their fields, in an effort to decapitate them with their helicopter blades. Such fun!

¹ 'Just a Drop Can Kill', for *The New Republic*, 6 May 1967.

From then on the list of his exposés is long. He reported on the Watergate scandal for the *New York Times* (had Fox News existed at the time would Nixon have got away with it?); he helped destroy the reputation of the international war criminal, Henry Kissinger; he revealed US involvement in the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile; he broke the story of the CIA's domestic spying and helped expose the CIA's so-called 'Family Jewels', the list of CIA actions which were outside the Agency's charter. However, the pressure for reform of the CIA was 'outmuscled by the new Ford administration, managed by Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, his deputy'. So 'the CIA is still doing today what it has done in secret around the world since the end of World War II'.

Exposing US involvement in Israel's covert development of nuclear weapons, he discovered that Robert Maxwell, the then owner of the *Daily Mirror*, and Nick Davies, his foreign affairs editor, had conspired with Mossad 'to ensnare and capture Mordechai Vanunu', the whistleblower who had first revealed Israel's nuclear weapons programme. The Mirror group sued him for libel but in 1995 their suit was dismissed. The libel suit Hersh had filed against *them*, at the urging of Michael Nussbaum, his attorney, was settled the next year 'when the newspaper issued a very abject apology and also paid . . . substantial damages'.

Hersh covered the War on Terror and remains convinced of the key role played by George W Bush's Vice President, Dick Cheney, 'a leader of the neocon pack'. As he sees it, 'eight or nine neoconservatives . . . had essentially overthrown the government of the United States – with ease. It was stunning to realize how fragile our Constitution was'. (What on earth does he make of the Trump presidency?) The War on Terror was an opportunity to reshape the whole Middle East in the US interest, beginning with the decision to invade Iraq.

And then there was the use of torture. He was told

' . . . again and again in those early days by involved officials who insisted on not being named that there was a widespread understanding that those who died in interrogation were not to be buried – lest the bodies be disinterred later – but had to be destroyed by acid and other means'.

He exposed the use of secret prisons around the world – 'operations without any congressional authorisation and funding'. Alongside the use of torture, the US Special Forces were let off the leash to use 'assassination as a standard tactic'. The Blair government, and Jack Straw in particular, claim they knew absolutely nothing about any of this and only a complete cynic could possibly think otherwise. From that angle, its particularly regrettable that Hersh hasn't

(yet) been able to complete his book on Dick Cheney. What might he have to say about British subservience to the United States in those years?

He writes that his 'career has been all about the importance of telling important and unwanted truths and making America a more knowledgeable place'. Well, he certainly exposed plenty of 'unwanted truths'. But with Lying Donald installed as President – with Russian assistance no less – it is difficult to see America as in any way a more knowledgeable country.

The world of news reporting has changed.

'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'.

Does one merely report that the Sudan has been taken off Trump's travel ban list, or does one explore whether this is related to the Sudan government's decision to send troops to fight alongside the Saudis in the Yemen? In Britain does one merely report – and thus amplify – the fake, manufactured allegations of anti-Semitism and racism made against Jeremy Corbyn, or investigate who and what was behind them?

But is it really just lack of time, money and skilled staff? No one can seriously discuss British politics over the past forty odd years without acknowledging the pernicious influence of Rupert Murdoch. His particular brand of journalism has also infected American politics. Think of Lying Donald's own personal propaganda news station, Fox News, which is provided by Murdoch. Unfortunately, there is no discussion of Murdoch and his influence in the USA in Hersh's book. Surely the bigger problem than time and resources is that those Hersh has made his name exposing have actually got more powerful since he first started out, more able to conceal the truth. Indeed, they are now able to actually call into question the whole notion of the truth being a meaningful category. Even when caught in the lie they can try to ride it out.

What his memoir demonstrates is the continued importance of going after the hidden truth, exposing the public lie, stripping away the cover-up and, moreover, the impact that the truth can still have when it is brought into the light. We live in hope.

This account of Hersh's book does not even scratch the surface as far as the gold that is buried away in its pages, not least how he came to research and to write the stories that made his name and the problems he sometimes encountered getting them into print. *Reporter* is certainly one of the best

books that this reviewer has read so far this year and is essential reading for anyone concerned with understanding the world since the 1960s.²

John Newsinger is the author of many books, most recently All Hope Lies in the Proles: Orwell and the Left (Pluto Press). He is currently working on a book about the defence, foreign and colonial policies of past Labour governments.

² And if you haven't already read them, let me recommend two of Hersh's other books, his account of Jack Kennedy, *The Dark Side of Camelot*, and his account of Henry Kissinger's life and crimes, *The Price of Power*.