

# Banishing Truth

By [Chris Hedges](#)

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*The investigative reporter [Seymour Hersh](#), in his memoir "[Reporter](#)," describes a moment when as a young reporter he overheard a Chicago cop admit to murdering an African-American man. The murdered man had been falsely described by police as a robbery suspect who had been shot while trying to avoid arrest. Hersh frantically called his editor to ask what to do.*

*"The editor urged me to do nothing," he writes. "It would be my word versus that of all the cops involved, and all would accuse me of lying. The message was clear: I did not have a story. But of course I did." He describes himself as "full of despair at my weakness and the weakness of a profession that dealt so easily with compromise and self-censorship."*

Hersh, [the greatest investigative reporter of his generation](#), uncovered the U.S. military's chemical weapons program, which used thousands of soldiers and volunteers, including pacifists from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as unwitting human guinea pigs to measure the impact of biological agents including tularemia, yellow fever, Rift Valley fever and the plague. He broke the story of the [My Lai massacre](#). He exposed Henry Kissinger's wiretapping of his closest aides at the National Security Council (NSC) and journalists, the CIA's funding of violent extremist groups to overthrow the Chilean President Salvador Allende, the CIA's spying on domestic dissidents within the United States, the sadistic torture practices at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by American soldiers and contractors and the lies told by the Obama administration about the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Yet he begins his memoir by the candid admission, familiar to any reporter, that there are crimes and events committed by the powerful you never write about, at least if you want to keep your job. One of his laments in the book is his decision not to follow up on a report he received that disgraced President Richard Nixon had hit his wife, Pat, and she had ended up in an emergency room in California.

Reporters embedded with military units in Iraq and Afghanistan routinely witness atrocities and often war crimes committed by the U.S. military, yet they know that access is dependent on keeping quiet. This collusion between the press and the powerful is a fundamental feature of journalism, one that even someone as courageous as Hersh, at least a few times, was forced to accept. And yet, there comes a time when reporters, at least the good ones, decide to sacrifice their careers to tell the truth. Hersh, relentlessly chronicling the crimes of the late empire, including the widespread use of torture, indiscriminate military strikes on civilian targets and targeted assassinations, has for this reason been virtually blacklisted in the American media. And the loss of his voice—he used to work for The New York Times and later The New Yorker—is evidence that the press, always flawed,

has now been neutered by corporate power. Hersh's memoir is as much about his remarkable career as it is about the death of investigative journalism and the transformation of news into a national reality television show that subsists on gossip, invective, officially approved narratives and leaks and entertainment.

Investigative journalism depends not only on reporters such as Hersh, but as importantly on men and women inside the systems of power who have the moral courage to expose lies and make public crimes. Writing off any institution, no matter how nefarious the activity, as filled with the irredeemable is a mistake.

"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," he writes. "They deserve my respect and got it. Want to be a good military reporter? Find those officers."

One of the heroes in Hersh's book is Ron Ridenhour, who served in a combat unit in Vietnam and who initiated the army's investigation into the My Lai massacre and generously helped Hersh track down eyewitnesses and participants.

The government's wholesale surveillance, however, has crippled the ability of those with a conscience, such as Chelsea Manning or Edward Snowden, to expose the crimes of state and remain undetected. The Obama administration charged eight people under the Espionage Act of leaking to the media—Thomas Drake, Shamai Leibowitz, Stephen Kim, Chelsea Manning, Donald Sachtleben, Jeffrey Sterling, John Kiriakou and Edward Snowden—effectively ending the vital connection between investigative reporters and sources inside the government.

This government persecution has, by default, left the exposure of government lies, fraud and crimes to hackers. And this is the reason hackers, and those who publish their material such as [Julian Assange](#) at WikiLeaks, are relentlessly persecuted. The goal of the corporate state is to hermetically seal their activities, especially those that violate the law, from outside oversight or observation. And this goal is very far advanced.

Hersh notes throughout his memoir that, like all good reporters, he constantly battled his editors and fellow reporters as much as he did the government or corporations. There is a species of reporter you can see on most cable news programs and on the floor of the newsrooms at papers such as The New York Times who make their living as courtiers to the powerful. They will, at times, critique the excesses of power but never the virtues of the systems of power, including corporate capitalism or the motivations of the ruling elites. They detest reporters, like Hersh, whose reporting exposes their collusion.

The Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal was held in 1967 in Europe during the Vietnam War. It included the testimony of three American soldiers who spoke of watching soldiers and Marines routinely pump indiscriminate rounds of ammunition into villages with no regard for civilian casualties. Most of the American press dismissed the findings of the tribunal. The Times foreign affairs columnist, C.L. Sulzberger, launched a venomous attack against the Noble Prize-winning philosopher and mathematician, who was then 94 years old. Sulzberger, a member of the family that owned the paper, wrote that Russell had "outlived his own conscious idea and become clay in unscrupulous hands." The tribunal, Sulzberger

went on, “cannot fairly be laid at the door of the wasted peer whose bodily endurance outpaced his brain.”

Hersh, however, tipped off by the testimony at the tribunal, eventually uncovered the My Lai massacre. But no publication would touch it. Magazines such as *Life* and *Look* turned down the story. “I was devastated, and frightened by the extent of self-censorship I was encountering in my profession,” Hersh writes. He finally published the story with the obscure, anti-war *Dispatch News Service*. Major publications, including *The New York Times*, along with *Newsweek* and *Time*, ignored the report. Hersh kept digging. More lurid facts about the massacre came to light. It became too big to dismiss, as hard as the mainstream media initially tried, and Hersh was awarded the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting. The only officer convicted of the war crime, which left 106 men, women and children dead, was Lt. William Calley, who spent three months and 13 days in prison.

Papers like the *New York Times* pride themselves on their special access to the powerful, even if that access turns them into a public relations arm of the elites. This desire for access—which news organizations feel gives them prestige and an inside seat, although the information they are fed is usually lies or half-truths—pits conscientious reporters like Hersh against most editors and reporters in the newsroom. Hersh, who at the time was working for the *Times*, describes sitting across from another reporter, Bernard Gwertzman, who was covering Henry Kissinger and the NSC.

“There was a near-daily ritual involving Bernie that stunned me,” Hersh writes. “On far too many afternoons around 5:00, Max Frankel’s secretary would approach Bernie and tell him that Max [the *Times*’ bureau chief in Washington] was at that moment on the phone with ‘Henry’ and the call would soon be switched to him. Sure enough, in a few moments Bernie would avidly begin scratching notes as he listened to Kissinger—he listened far more than he talked—and the result was a foreign policy story that invariably led the paper the next morning, with quotes from an unnamed senior government official. After a week or two of observing the process, I asked the always affable and straightforward Bernie if he ever checked what Henry was telling him with Bill Rogers, the secretary of state, or Mel Laird at the Pentagon. “Oh no,” he said. “If I did that, Henry wouldn’t speak to us.””

The *Washington Post* broke the Watergate story, in which operatives for the Nixon White House in June 1972 broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate office complex in Washington while Hersh was at the *Times*. Kissinger’s assurances—Hersh writes that Kissinger “lied the way most people breathed”—that it was not an event of consequence saw the top editors at *The New York Times* initially ignore it. The paper, however, finally embarrassed by the revelations in *The Washington Post*, threw Hersh onto the story, although the paper’s executive editor, Abe Rosenthal, called Hersh with a mixture of affection and wariness “my little commie.”

Hersh left the paper after a massive expose he and Jeff Gerth wrote about the corporation Gulf and Western, which carried out fraud, abuse, tax avoidance and had connections with the mob, was rewritten by cautious and timid editors. Charles Bluhdorn, the CEO of Gulf and Western, socialized with the publisher Arthur “Punch” Sulzberger. Bluhdorn used his connections at the paper to discredit Hersh and Gerth, as well as bombard the paper with accusatory letters and menacing phone calls. When Hersh filed his 15,000-word expose, the business editor, John Lee, and “his ass-kissing coterie of moronic editors,” perhaps fearful of

being sued, neutered it. It was one thing, Hersh found, to go up against a public institution. It was something else to take on a private institution. He would never again work regularly for a newspaper.

“The experience was frustrating and enervating,” he writes. “Writing about corporate America had sapped my energy, disappointed the editors, and unnerved me. There would be no check on corporate America, I feared: Greed had won out. The ugly fight with Gulf and Western had rattled the publisher and the editors to the point that the editors who ran the business pages had been allowed to vitiate and undercut the good work Jeff and I had done. ... The courage the Times had shown in confronting the wrath of a president and an attorney general in the crisis over the Pentagon Papers in 1971 was nowhere to be seen when confronted by a gaggle of corporate con men. ...”

His reporting, however, continued to relentlessly expose the falsifications in official narratives. The Navy intelligence official, Jonathan Pollard, for example, had been caught spying for Israel in 1985 and given a life sentence. Hersh found that Pollard primarily stole documents on how the United States spied on the Soviet Union. The Israeli government, Hersh suspected, “was trading Pollard’s information to Moscow in exchange for the emigration of Soviet Jews with skills and expertise needed by Israel.” Pollard was released, after heavy Israeli pressure, in 2015 and now lives in Israel.

The later part of Hersh’s career is the most distressing. He was writing for The New Yorker when Barack Obama was elected president. David Remnick, the magazine’s editor, socialized with Obama and was apparently wary of offending the president. When Hersh exposed the fictitious narrative spun out by the Obama administration about the killing of Bin Laden, the magazine killed the story, running instead a report about the raid, provided by the administration, from the point of view of one of the SEALs who was on the mission. Hersh resigned. He published the account of the raid in the London Review of Books, the beginning of his current exile to foreign publications. When we most urgently need Hersh and good investigative reporters like him, they have largely disappeared. A democracy, at best, tolerates them. A failed democracy, like ours, banishes them, and when it does, it kills its press.

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