

A Year of Lying About Nord Stream. Seymour Hersh

The Biden administration has acknowledged neither its responsibility for the pipeline bombing nor the purpose of the sabotage

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I do not know much about covert CIA operations—no outsider can—but I do understand that the essential component of all successful missions is total deniability. The American men and women who moved, under cover, in and out of Norway in the months it took to plan and carry out the destruction of three of the four Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea a year ago left no traces—not a hint of the team's existence—other than the success of their mission.

Deniability, as an option for President Joe Biden and his foreign policy advisers, was paramount.

No significant information about the mission was put on a computer, but instead typed on a Royal or perhaps a Smith Corona typewriter with a carbon copy or two, as if the Internet and the rest of the online world had yet to be invented. The White House was isolated from the goings-on near Oslo; various reports and updates from the field were directly provided to CIA Director Bill Burns, who was the only link between the planners and the president who authorized the mission to take place on September 26, 2022. Once the mission was completed, the typed papers and carbons were destroyed, thus leaving no physical trace—no evidence to be dug up later by a special prosecutor or a presidential historian. You could call it the perfect crime.

There was a flaw—a gap in understanding between those who carried out the mission and President Biden, as to why he ordered the destruction of the pipelines when he did. My initial 5,200-word [report](#), published in early February, ended cryptically by quoting an official with knowledge of the mission telling me: "It was a beautiful cover story." The official added: "The only flaw was the decision to do it."

This is the first account of that flaw, on the one-year anniversary of the explosions, and it is

one President Biden and his national security team will not like.

Inevitably, my initial story caused a sensation, but the major media emphasized the White House denials and relied on an old canard—my reliance on an unnamed source—to join the administration in debunking the notion that Joe Biden could have had anything to do with such an attack. I must note here that I've won literally scores of prizes in my career for stories in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* that relied on not a single named source. In the past year we've seen a series of contrary newspaper stories, with no named first-hand sources, claiming that a dissident Ukrainian group carried out the technical diving operation attack in the Baltic Sea via a 49-foot rented yacht called the *Andromeda*.

I am now able to write about the unexplained flaw cited by the unnamed official. It goes once again to the classic issue of what the Central Intelligence Agency is all about: an issue raised by Richard Helms, who headed the agency during the tumultuous years of the Vietnam War and the CIA's secret spying on Americans, as ordered by President Lyndon Johnson and sustained by Richard Nixon. I published an [exposé](#) in the *Times* about that spying in December 1974 that led to unprecedented hearings by the Senate into the role of the agency in its unsuccessful attempts, authorized by President John F. Kennedy, to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro. Helms told the senators that the issue was whether he, as CIA director, worked for the Constitution or for the Crown, in the person of presidents Johnson and Nixon. The Church Committee left the issue unresolved, but Helms made it clear he and his agency worked for the top man in the White House.

Back to the Nord Stream pipelines: It is important to understand that no Russian gas was flowing to Germany through the Nord Stream pipelines when Joe Biden ordered them blown up last September 26. Nord Stream 1 had been supplying vast amounts of low-cost natural gas to Germany since 2011 and helped bolster Germany's status as a manufacturing and industrial colossus. But it was shut down by Putin by the end of August 2022, as the Ukraine war was, at best, in a stalemate. Nord Stream 2 was completed in September 2021 but was blocked from delivering gas by the German government headed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz two days prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Given Russia's vast stores of natural gas and oil, American presidents since John F. Kennedy have been alert to the potential weaponization of these natural resources for political purposes. That view remains dominant among Biden and his hawkish foreign policy advisers, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and Victoria Nuland, now the acting deputy to Blinken.

Sullivan convened a series of high-level national security meetings late in 2021, as Russia was building up its forces along the border of Ukraine, with an invasion seen as almost inevitable. The group, which included representatives from the CIA, was urged to come up with a proposal for action that could serve as a deterrent to Putin. The mission to destroy the pipelines was motivated by the White House's determination to support Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky. Sullivan's goal seemed clear. "The White House's policy was to deter Russia from an attack," the official told me. "The challenge it gave to the intelligence community was to come up with a way that was powerful enough to do that, and to make a strong statement of American capability."



The major gas pipelines from Russia to Europe. / Map by Samuel Bailey / Wikimedia Commons.

I now know what I did not know then: the real reason why the Biden administration “brought up taking out the Nord Stream pipeline.” The official recently explained to me that at the time Russia was supplying gas and oil throughout the world via more than a dozen pipelines, but Nord Stream 1 and 2 ran directly from Russia through the Baltic Sea to Germany. “The administration put Nord Stream on the table because it was the only one we could access and it would be totally deniable,” the official said. “We solved the problem within a few weeks—by early January—and told the White House. Our assumption was that the president would use the threat against Nord Stream as a deterrent to avoid the war.”

It was no surprise to the agency’s secret planning group when on January 27, 2022, the assured and confident Nuland, then undersecretary of state for political affairs, stridently warned Putin that if he invaded Ukraine, as he clearly was planning to, that “one way or another Nord Stream 2 will not move forward.” The line attracted enormous attention, but the words preceding the threat did not. The official State Department transcript shows that

she preceded her threat by saying that with regard to the pipeline: “We continue to have very strong and clear conversations with our German allies.”

Asked by a reporter how she could say with certainty that the Germans would go along “because what the Germans have said publicly doesn’t match what you’re saying,” Nuland responded with an astonishing bit of doubletalk: “I would say go back and read the document that we signed in July [of 2021] that made very clear about the consequences for the pipeline if there is further aggression on Ukraine by Russia.” But that agreement, which was briefed to journalists, did not specify threats or consequences, according to reports in the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and Reuters. At the time of the agreement, on July 21, 2021, Biden told the press corps that since the pipeline was 99 percent finished, “the idea that anything was going to be said or done was going to stop it was not possible.” At the time, Republicans, led by Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, depicted Biden’s decision to permit the Russian gas to flow as a “generational geopolitical win” for Putin and “a catastrophe” for the United States and its allies.

But two weeks after Nuland’s statement, on February 7, 2022, at a joint White House press conference with the visiting Scholz, Biden signaled that he had changed his mind and was joining Nuland and other equally hawkish foreign policy aides in talking about stopping the pipeline. “If Russia invades—that means tanks and troops crossing . . . the border of Ukraine again,” he said, “there will no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it.” Asked how he could do so since the pipeline was under Germany’s control, he said: “We will, I promise you, we’ll be able to do it.”

Scholz, asked the same question, said: “We are acting together. We are absolutely united, and we will not be taking different steps. We will do the same steps, and they will be very very hard to Russia, and they should understand.” The German leader was considered then—and now—by some members of the CIA team to be fully aware of the secret planning underway to destroy the pipelines.

By this point, the CIA team had made the necessary contacts in Norway, whose navy and special forces commands have a long history of sharing covert-operation duties with the agency. Norwegian sailors and Nasty-class patrol boats helped smuggle American sabotage operatives into North Vietnam in the early 1960s when America, in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, was running an undeclared American war there. With Norway’s help, the CIA did its job and found a way to do what the Biden White House wanted done to the pipelines.

At the time, the challenge to the intelligence community was to come up with a plan that would be forceful enough to deter Putin from the attack on Ukraine. The official told me: “We did it. We found an extraordinary deterrent because of its economic impact on Russia. And Putin did it despite the threat.” It took months of research and practice in the churning waters of the Baltic Sea by the two expert US Navy deep sea divers recruited for the mission before it was deemed a go. Norway’s superb seamen found the right spot for planting the bombs that would blow up the pipelines. Senior officials in Sweden and Denmark, who still insist they had no idea what was going on in their shared territorial waters, turned a blind eye to the activities of the American and Norwegian operatives. The American team of divers and support staff on the mission’s mother ship—a Norwegian minesweeper—would be hard to hide while the divers were doing their work. The team would not learn until after the bombing that Nord Stream 2 had been shut down with 750 miles of natural gas in it.

What I did not know then, but was told recently, was that after Biden's extraordinary public threat to blow up Nord Stream 2, with Scholz standing next to him, the CIA planning group was told by the White House that there would be no immediate attack on the two pipelines, but the group should arrange to plant the necessary bombs and be ready to trigger them "on demand"—after the war began. "It was then that we"—the small planning group that was working in Oslo with the Royal Norwegian Navy and special services on the project—"understood that the attack on the pipelines was not a deterrent because as the war went on we never got the command."

After Biden's order to trigger the explosives planted on the pipelines, it took only a short flight with a Norwegian fighter and the dropping of an altered off-the-shelf sonar device at the right spot in the Baltic Sea to get it done. By then the CIA group had long disbanded. By then, too, the official told me: "We realized that the destruction of the two Russian pipelines was not related to the Ukrainian war"—Putin was in the process of annexing the four Ukrainian oblasts he wanted—"but was part of a neocon political agenda to keep Scholz and Germany, with winter coming up and the pipelines shut down, from getting cold feet and opening up" the shuttered Nord Stream 2. "The White House fear was that Putin would get Germany under his thumb and then he was going to get Poland."

The White House said nothing as the world wondered who committed the sabotage. "So the president struck a blow against the economy of Germany and Western Europe," the official told me. "He could have done it in June and told Putin: We told you what we would do." The White House's silence and denials were, he said, "a betrayal of what we were doing. If you are going to do it, do it when it would have made a difference."

The leadership of the CIA team viewed Biden's misleading guidance for its order to destroy the pipelines, the official told me, "as taking a strategic step toward World War III. What if Russia had responded by saying: You blew up our pipelines and I'm going to blow up your pipelines and your communication cables. Nord Stream was not a strategic issue for Putin—it was an economic issue. He wanted to sell gas. He'd already lost his pipelines" when the Nord Stream 1 and 2 were shut down before the Ukraine war began.

Within days of the bombing, officials in Denmark and Sweden announced they would conduct an investigation. They reported two months later that there had indeed been an explosion and said there would be further inquiries. None has emerged. The German government conducted an inquiry but announced that major parts of its findings would be classified. Last winter German authorities allocated \$286 billion in subsidies to major corporations and homeowners who faced higher energy bills to run their business and warm their homes. The impact is still being felt today, with a colder winter expected in Europe.

President Biden waited four days before calling the pipeline bombing "a deliberate act of sabotage." He said: "now the Russians are pumping out disinformation about it." Sullivan, who chaired the meetings that led to the proposal to covertly destroy the pipelines, was asked at a later press conference whether the Biden administration "now believes that Russia was likely responsible for the act of sabotage?"

Sullivan's answer, undoubtedly practiced, was: "Well, first, Russia has done what it frequently does when it is responsible for something, which is make accusations that it was really someone else who did it. We've seen this repeatedly over time.

"But the president was also clear today that there is more work to do on the investigation

before the United States government is prepared to make an attribution in this case.” He continued: “We will continue to work with our allies and partners to gather all of the facts, and then we will make a determination about where we go from there.”

I could find no instances when Sullivan was subsequently asked by someone in the American press about the results of his “determination.” Nor could I find any evidence that Sullivan, or the president, has been queried since then about the results of the “determination” about where to go.

There is also no evidence that President Biden has required the American intelligence community to conduct a major all-source inquiry into the pipeline bombing. Such requests are known as “Taskings” and are taken seriously inside the government.

All of this explains why a routine question I posed a month or so after the bombings to someone with many years in the American intelligence community led me to a truth that no one in America or Germany seems to want to pursue. My question was simple: “Who did it?”

The Biden administration blew up the pipelines but the action had little to do with winning or stopping the war in Ukraine. It resulted from fears in the White House that Germany would waver and turn on the flow of Russia gas—and that Germany and then NATO, for economic reasons, would fall under the sway of Russia and its extensive and inexpensive natural resources. And thus followed the ultimate fear: that America would lose its long-standing primacy in Western Europe.

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Featured image: Half a million tons of methane rise from the sabotaged Nord Stream pipeline. Photo: Swedish Coast Guard

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