

An Awkward Silence - Burying The Hersh Revelations Of Obama's Syrian Deceit

By David Cromwell Last Updated on 17 December 2013

'All governments lie', the US journalist [I.F. Stone](#) once noted, with Iraq the most blatant example in modern times. But Syria is another recent criminal example of Stone's dictum.

An [article](#) in the current edition of *London Review of Books* by Seymour Hersh makes a strong case that US President Obama misled the world over the infamous chemical weapons attack near Damascus on August 21 this year. [Hersh](#) is the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who exposed the [My Lai atrocity](#) committed by American troops in Vietnam and the subsequent cover-up. He also helped bring to public attention the [systematic brutality](#) of US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

After the nerve gas attack at Ghouta, Obama had unequivocally pinned the blame on Syrian President Assad, a propaganda claim that was [fervently disseminated](#) around the world by a compliant corporate news media. Following Obama's earlier warnings that any use of chemical weapons would cross a 'red line', he then declared on US television on September 10, 2013:

'Assad's government gassed to death over a thousand people ... We know the Assad regime was responsible ... And that is why, after careful deliberation, I determined that it is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike.'

There was global public opposition to any attack on Syria. But war was only averted when the Americans agreed to a Russian proposal at the UN to dismantle Syria's capability for making chemical weapons.

Based on interviews with US intelligence and military insiders, Hersh now charges that Obama deceived the world in making a cynical case for war. The US president 'did not tell the whole story', says the journalist:

'In some instances, he omitted important intelligence, and in others he presented assumptions as facts. Most significant, he failed to acknowledge something known to the US intelligence community: that the Syrian army is not the only party in the country's civil war with access to sarin, the nerve agent that a UN study concluded – without assessing responsibility – had been used in the rocket attack.'

Obama did not reveal that American intelligence agencies knew that the al-Nusra Front, a jihadi group affiliated with al-Qaida, had the capability to manufacture considerable quantities of sarin. When the attack on Ghouta took place, 'al-Nusra should have been a suspect, but the administration cherry-picked intelligence to justify a strike against Assad.' Indeed, the 'cherry-picking was similar to the process used to justify the Iraq war.'

Hersh notes that when he interviewed intelligence and military personnel:

'I found intense concern, and on occasion anger, over what was repeatedly seen as the deliberate manipulation of intelligence. One high-level intelligence officer, in an email to a colleague, called the administration's assurances of Assad's responsibility a "ruse".'

Hersh continues:

'A former senior intelligence official told me that the Obama administration had altered the available information – in terms of its timing and sequence – to enable the president and his advisers to make intelligence retrieved days after the attack look as if it had been picked up and analysed in real time, as the attack was happening.'

The former official said that this 'distortion' of the facts by the Obama administration 'reminded him of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, when the Johnson administration reversed the sequence of National Security Agency intercepts to justify one of the early bombings of North Vietnam.'

Hersh adds:

'The same official said there was immense frustration inside the military and intelligence bureaucracy: "The guys are throwing their hands in the air and saying, 'How can we help this guy' – Obama – 'when he and his cronies in the White House make up the intelligence as they go along?' "'

Hersh does not actually use the word 'lie' or 'deceive' in his article. But, given the above account, he might as well have done.

In an [interview](#) with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!*, Hersh notes that:

'there are an awful lot of people in the government who just were really very, very upset with the way the information about the gas attack took place.'

He makes clear that he is not making any claims for who conducted the sarin attack at Ghouta; he does not know who did it. 'But there's no question my government does not' know either. The essence of the revelations, Hersh emphasises, is that Obama 'was willing to go to war, wanted to throw missiles at Syria, without really having a case and knowing he didn't have much of a case.'

'Our Media Lie Entirely In Sync With Our Governments'

The independent journalist Jonathan Cook [spells out](#) an important conclusion from Hersh's vital reporting:

'not only do our governments lie as a matter of course, but our media lie entirely in sync with our governments. Hersh exposes a catalogue of journalistic failures in his piece, just as occurred in Iraq. He even points out that at one vital White House press conference, where the main, false narrative was set out, officials refused to invite a critical national security correspondent, presumably fearing that he might expose the charade.'

It is noteworthy that Hersh's article did not appear in *The New Yorker*, his usual outlet in recent years. Hersh [said](#) 'there was little interest' for the story at the magazine, and *New Yorker* editor David Remnick did not respond to the news website BuzzFeed asking for an explanation for a [piece](#) it published discussing Hersh's revelations.

The *Washington Post* also turned down Hersh's article, even though it was originally going to run there. Hersh was [told](#) by Executive Editor Marty Baron 'that the sourcing in the article did not meet the Post's standards.' The journalist finally turned to the *London Review of Books* which, ironically, published his piece after it had been 'thoroughly [fact checked](#) by a former New Yorker fact checker who had worked with Hersh in the past.'

Given the resistance from both *The New Yorker* and the *Washington Post*, Cook is right to say that there should be no 'false complacency' that Hersh's exceptional role in exposing state deceptions demonstrates that our media is anywhere close to being 'free and pluralistic.' Cook makes the astute [observation](#) that:

'There will always be the odd investigative reporter like Hersh at the margins of the mainstream media. And one can understand why by reading Hersh closely. His sources of information are those in the security complex who lost the argument, or came close to losing the argument, and want it on record that they opposed the government line. Hersh is useful to them because he allows them to settle scores within the establishment or to act as a warning bell against future efforts to manipulate intelligence in the same manner. He is useful to us as readers because he reveals disputes that show us much more clearly what has taken place.'

'Several Hours Of Googling' Trumps Hersh

Some commentators have attempted to dismiss Hersh's article by misrepresenting it as pinning the blame on Syrian rebels for the Ghouta chemical weapons attack. Brian Whitaker, a former Middle East editor of the Guardian, has a [blog piece](#) based on this skewed reading. Whitaker asks his readers to treat Seymour Hersh, a veteran journalist with an impressive track record, with more scepticism than Eliot Higgins 'who sits at home in an English provincial town [Leicester] trawling the internet and tweets and blogs about his findings under the screen name Brown Moses.' Whitaker argues with a straight face that Hersh's in-depth journalism has been trumped by a blogger who has performed 'several hours of Googling'.

Whitaker wrote a follow-up [blog piece](#) prompted by [criticism](#) he'd received from Media Lens via Twitter. Again, he seemingly failed to grasp the point of Hersh's article - that Obama had no solid case and knew it - and Whitaker instead blew some diversionary smoke about 'a conflict between two different approaches [i.e. those of internet-researcher Higgins and 'traditional' Hersh] to investigative journalism and the sources that they use'. There followed an excellent [rebuttal](#) from the ever-insightful Interventions Watch. First, citing Whitaker:

'he [Hersh] has often been criticised for his use of shadowy sources. In the words of one Pentagon spokesman, he has "a solid and well-earned reputation for making dramatic assertions based on thinly sourced, unverifiable anonymous sources".'

Interventions Watch then noted that:

'Hersh has spent decades shining lights into places "Pentagon spokesmen" types don't want him to look. So it's not surprising that they'd try and discredit his work. Would Whitaker, for example, quote an Iranian military spokesman to try and rubbish the work of an Iranian dissident journalist? I doubt it. And the fact he does it here perhaps says much about his unexamined assumptions and biases.'

It is hardly surprising that Higgins, a blogger who presents a view conforming to the 'mainstream' narrative, should be given special attention by Whitaker, an establishment journalist. As Interventions Watch observes:

'At this point in his career, it's not like Higgins is some obscure, insurgent outsider. He has had his work published in The New York Times and Foreign Policy, has had a lengthy profile written about him in The New Yorker, has worked with Human Rights Watch, and has been interviewed more than once on T.V. News. Does this make him wrong? Of course not. But the line between him and "old media" isn't quite as defined as Whitaker would like to make out.'

[Phil Greaves](#), a writer on US-UK foreign policy, likewise [questions](#) the role of Higgins who has recently:

'jump[ed] to the fore with his YouTube analysis in order to bolster mainstream discourse whilst offering the air of impartiality and the crucial "open source" faux-legitimacy. It has become blatantly evident that the "rebels" in both Syria and Libya have made a concerted effort in fabricating YouTube videos in order to incriminate and demonize their opponents while glorifying themselves in a sanitized image. Western media invariably lapped-up such fabrications without question and subsequently built narratives around them – regardless of contradictory evidence or opinion.'

The same spotlight of [corporate media approval](#) shines on the grandly-named Syrian Observatory for Human Rights – [a man who owns a clothes shop](#), operating from his Coventry home – and the volunteer-run Iraq Body Count, whose numbers are [routinely cited by journalists](#) in preference to the much higher death-toll estimates from the [Lancet epidemiological studies](#).

To emphasise once again, culpability for the Ghouta chemical attack is not the key thrust of Hersh's article at all. It is that significant elements of the US intelligence community were angered and dismayed by the Obama administration's manipulation of the facts, and that the White House falsely claimed certainty in its bid to make a self-interested case for war. It takes considerable skill in mental and verbal contortions to avoid these simple truths.

No Need For A Memory Hole

To date, searches of the Lexis newspaper database reveal that not a single print article has appeared about Hersh's revelations in the entire UK national press. Notably, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, the two flagship daily newspapers of British liberal journalism, have steered well clear of embarrassing Obama. For the entire British press not to even discuss, far less mention, Hersh's claims is Orwellian – or worse. Why worse? Because there is not even the need for a [memory hole](#) if the story never surfaced in the first place. This represents an astonishing level of media conformity to the government narrative of events. In fact, the silence indicates complicity in the cynical distortion of the truth for war aims.

To its credit, the *Daily Mail* did publish a [web-only article](#) which was a fair summary of Hersh's article, and Peter Osborne had a [short blog piece](#) on the Telegraph website: all of five brief paragraphs. Osborne's piece then prompted his colleague Richard Spencer, a Telegraph foreign correspondent, to write his own [web-only article](#) denouncing Hersh's careful journalism as 'conspiracy theory'. Spencer did so based in large part on his reliance on the googling work of Eliot 'Brown Moses' Higgins, mentioned above, and a second blog 'of admittedly variable quality'. That appears to have been the sum total of press attention devoted to genuinely shocking revelations about the Nobel Peace Prize-winning US president.

As far as we can tell, there has been no coverage by BBC News, ITV News or Channel 4 News. (Certainly google searches of their websites yield not a single hit.) In the US, the media has likewise [blacked out](#) coverage of Hersh's strong claims.

Imagine if a respected and experienced journalist published an in-depth piece reporting that an official enemy had deceived the world over chemical weapon claims in order to agitate for war. It would be plastered over every front page and given headline coverage on every major news programme.

As the days rolled on following the publication of Hersh's article, several Media Lens readers emailed journalists asking why they hadn't covered the revelations and urging them now to do so. Justin Webb of the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme was a rare voice in responding:

'Thanks for this note - the answer is that we will and should [be covering the Hersh revelations] but we need to work out how much weight to give them. But yes it's obviously important.'
(Posted on the Media Lens message board by Robert, December 12, 2013; temporary [link](#).)

But, so far, nothing has been broadcast.

Another reader challenged Michael White, a Guardian assistant editor, who also had the decency to respond. White said:

'thanks for the note, was not aware of the piece, but he's a man to take seriously is Sey [sic] Hersh, so I will ask around among colleagues concerned with these matters' (Email, December 12, 2013)

Within an hour, White had replied again:

'a well informed friend says:

' "short answer: it was widely attacked and discredited by people who are genuinely expert on the subject and use open sources rather than anonymous spooks.

""http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/09/sy_hersh_chemical_misfire#sthash.UKt3cjE9.dpbs

' "the article was rejected by wash post and new yorker apparently".'

Who is the 'well informed friend' - a Guardian colleague perhaps? - and who are these unnamed 'people who are genuinely expert on the subject'? White didn't say. The *Foreign Policy* link was, inevitably, to an article by one Eliot Higgins. So in less than 60 minutes, White had gone from saying Hersh 'is a man to take seriously' to dismissing him on the basis of being 'discredited' by a blogger whose output conforms to Western governments' propaganda.

Finally, in his *Democracy Now!* [interview](#), Hersh notes how easy it is for powerful leaders like Obama to go unchallenged:

'you can create a narrative, which he did, and you know the mainstream press is going to carry out that narrative.'

He continued:

'I mean, it's almost impossible for some of the mainstream newspapers, who have consistently supported the administration. This is after we had the WMD scandal, when everybody wanted to be on the team. It turns out our job, as newspaper people, is not to be on the team. [...] It's just not so hard to hold the people in office to the highest standard. And the press should be doing it more and more.'

The fact that Hersh's revelations have been met by an almost total silence in the corporate media is stunning but sadly unsurprising. After all, this is simply the standard performance by 'mainstream' news media that have demonstrated decades of adherence to state-corporate power. That this is still

happening after the horrendous war crime of Iraq, which was facilitated by intense media boosting of Western propaganda claims, is utterly shameful.

<http://www.medialens.org/index.php/alerts/alert-archive/alerts-2013/751-an-awkward-silence-burying-the-hersh-revelations-of-obama-s-syrian-deceit.html>