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# Sy Hersh's Kissinger Saga

By Richard Lee

Special to The Washington Post

"The zoo's going here, hyena time, barking dogs . . ."

Seymour Hersh is on the phone, talking to two people at once, or is it three? It's hard to keep track. The phone keeps ringing and ringing—friends, reporters, sources, potential sources, his editor, his lawyer, TV people, radio talk-show people, and God knows who else. Hersh is really getting off on it—up to a point. His rapid-fire, tough-reporter responses bounce off the beige walls of his stark, one-room office in the National Press Building.

"It's a big story, isn't it," Hersh says gleefully to his editor, Bill Whitworth, calling from Boston. "It's been sensational, the response has been *overwhelming*—very strong . . . People are calling," Hersh says jokingly, "Larry Eagleburger is calling to recant his lies . . . They're after Kissinger. No answer yet. He's waiting for his lawyer to tell him what to do . . ."

It's the day after publication of the Atlantic's excerpts from the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter's forthcoming book about Nixon and Kissinger and their conduct of foreign policy. The excerpts have, not unexpectedly, created a stir, what with detailed revelations of wiretapping, drunkenness, and intense, often vicious jockeying for power between Kissinger and Alexander M. Haig Jr. in the Nixon White House.

Sy Hersh, media junkie that he is, has been closely monitoring the coverage—some good, some not so good. To one caller he ticks off the big front-page play—Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, The Washington Post, among others.

Some of the wire-service coverage really distresses him, not to mention talk-show hosts who haven't read the article. "They're all looking for the soft-porn stuff, Nixon staggering around drunk in the White House. 'Where's the smoking gun?' they ask.

It's a dense story. I'm inside in a way that only three years can get you. It's good enough to stand on its own merits. I'm not going to produce 350 bodies every time I write a story. I'm not going to play that game. I made no effort to sensationalize anything. I didn't sharpen it up. If somebody says there's no smoking gun, they're not reading it right. I think it's there implicitly, and if the press wants it explicitly, that's *their* problem.

"My problem is, I live in Plato's Republic," Hersh says. "I want everybody to read it carefully, and discuss every nuance."

Has Kissinger read it? "Do I know? He may not have, right? He says he hasn't read it. Time magazine got a copy last week," Hersh says. "We made the not illogical assumption that he would have read it. I certainly did not send him a copy. I would think that would be very provocative, to send him that." It's known, Hersh says, that ABC's Ted Koppel, on friendly terms with Kissinger, slipped him an advance copy. So did NBC's Roger Mudd.

## A Long Slog

Hersh initially said "no" five years ago when Summit Books editor Jim Silberman, a longtime friend, proposed a book about Kissinger. Hersh was the New York Times' ace investigative reporter at the time, virtually a world unto himself at the paper, breaking important stories about the CIA's domestic intelligence activities, the secret bombing of North Vietnam, and Kissinger's wiretapping of his closest aides at the State Department, among others. Hersh is also generally credited with "saving the Times' ass," as one colleague put it, on Watergate. Why should he do a book about someone he thought was "finished . . . would just fade away from public view?"

But Silberman, who edited David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest," among other best sellers, persisted. "My feeling was, two or three years ago, when the air was getting pretty thick with memoirs, we should have a view from an outsider," Silberman recalls.

Hersh finally agreed to take it on, even though it meant moving his family back to Washington (his wife, Elizabeth, is a physician; they have three children, Matthew, 14, Melissa, 12, and Joshua, eight months). It also meant quitting the Times, which does not grant leaves of absence.

At the beginning, the main focus was on Kissinger. Now it may not be. "It started out as the foreign policy of Kissinger," says Hersh. "It became Kissinger and Nixon. It started out, let's get a look at the policy, and gradually developed," he says. He's

written 42 chapters, "two more to go," he says—about a month and a half more of work on the book, which will run close to "a half a million words," Hersh estimates, and is scheduled for publication early next year. There will be one more excerpt in the Atlantic in the fall.

It has been, to put it mildly, a long slog. "I suppose I've been in contact, over three years, with 1,000 people, and that's not hype," Hersh says.

There's been a lot of travel, eating up the \$200,000 advance from his publisher, recently necessitating a second advance. "I went around the world," Hersh says. "I went to Europe, I saw some people in Paris, some Germans. I went to Asia: Singapore, Hong Kong. I went to Vietnam to see the foreign minister, Nguyen Co Thach, who was the senior aide to Le Duc Tho at the peace talks, and others involved in the peace talks process. I've seen South Vietnamese officials, Chinese government officials, the Pakistanis, the Indians, Egyptians, Israelis, you name 'em. I've also seen Cubans and Chileans. Chile is a major part of my book, not in length, but in terms of research. Chile is sensational," Hersh says.

"The methodology was this: The first year I flew all over, to see everybody who had documents, it was absolutely obsessive, but I had to cut back, otherwise I would have gone broke. And I would interview somebody in Europe or Asia and the next day I would see them on the street in Washington. By and large, everybody I wanted to see comes to Washington, anyway."

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States, of course. "East Coast up and down, West Coast . . . in the first year, I did nothing but interviews, and I tried to do 10 a week, sometimes two a day. I must have collected 300 or 400 of them. I interviewed people in strange sequences. Some people I've seen 25 times, a number of people five and 10 times." Long interviews, Hersh says. A 10-hour interview starting with drinks and progressing through dinner and finishing well after midnight was not unusual.

Hersh takes from a file drawer the National Security Council home address list of July 19, 1969.

"It's like 'All the President's Men'— you start with [the list]. There's no magic to it."

In any number of NSC cases, Hersh says, there was an eagerness to cooperate—and curiosity as to why he waited so long to call. "There's a certain cachet about it in the minds of some of these people," Hersh says. "I tell them, 'I saved you for last because I think you have the most information.'"

But there were other reasons. "The way some people will help me, they think this is the Seymour Hersh trek through ancient history," he says. "But other people who have been victimized by Henry, who had their phones bugged by Henry, they feel betrayed. It's all left a very bad taste, and they see me as a savior, a mouthpiece. You know, one person, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, told me of a high-level meeting where he warned Kissinger that one action he was going to try would be illegal. Kissinger said as far as he was concerned an ill eagle was a sick bird. They all laughed. Maybe it was witty, but it wasn't very funny. People remember that moment; they remember the humiliation they felt."

"The important thing to remember," Hersh emphasizes, "is, I'm not getting this from Abbie Hoffman. I'm getting this *inside the government*, totally and completely inside the government. I'm talking to people who worked in Henry's office; in Mel Laird's office; in Bill Rogers' office."

"The people who are the most helpful to me, somehow, the Ehrlichmans, the Colsons, have gone to jail. I found those people, by and large, to be much more honest, less self-serving. Maybe it's because they have nothing to lose. Maybe we've created a whole new way of truth-telling," he suggests.

Hersh has had his detractors, some of them other reporters, but

"He radiates this enormous enthusiasm and excitement about his work. He's not laid back about it at all. I think he takes editing very well. He understands the need for it, and values it, and he's pleasant to work with."

Hersh was paid \$70,000 for the two Atlantic excerpts. He is not a rich man. What can he expect to get from the book? "You mean, besides gratification?" he asks. "People say I'm going to get rich. I don't think so. I'll end up very well paid for my work. I'm not going to lose money, don't be silly." (His editor, Silberman, who says he has read the manuscript but has not begun editing, confidently expects it to be a best seller.) "People think I got rich on My Lai [the My Lai Massacre stories won Hersh the Pulitzer and other prizes in 1970 and established his reporting reputation]. The book sold very poorly—25 or 30,000 copies." He gets hate mail. People meeting him for the first time often find him pushy, abrasive and obnoxious, a hyperkinetic wild man.

He continues to give lectures. "My fast ball is gone," he says. "I only speak to colleges. It isn't as if the boys at Mobil are interested in me."

He also continues to write sporadically for The New York Times. Hersh's relationship with The Times is a complex one, he readily acknowledges. Despite entreaties from senior editors in Washington and New York, Hersh did not give The Times an advance copy of his Atlantic story. The Times put the story on page B5. Hersh was appalled. "A major-league lack of class," he calls it. "They're acting like a rejected suitor."

"Working at The New York Times was a form of bondage, but I always enjoyed it," Hersh says. "You notice I keep on writing for them. I'm basically loyal, in a peculiar way. It's a very, very good place to write stories. It's credible, the editing is very good. It's a love-hate relationship. This week it actually went to hate. Next week . . ."

Hersh is an avid tennis player, but hasn't been on the courts since last November, due to his work schedule. The Hershes live in Cleveland Park, "with a dog, a cat, and a gerbil," he says. Mention of Henry Kissinger's name is forbidden at the dinner table. Hersh, who grew up in Chicago, just turned 45. On his office floor next to a pile of interview notes and documents is a crayon drawing from his daughter, Melissa. "You're sar-

Happy 55th (Ho Ho) Birthday." Hersh is a family man, enjoys telling anecdotes about his children, avoids the social circuit.

A Time magazine photographer appears to get the latest update of the classic Sy Hersh picture—working the phone, exuding scruffy integrity in an ink-stained Brooks Brothers oxford cloth shirt, tie askew. Hersh is delighted by the irony in this. The magazine, with great sense of occasion, recently ran long excerpts from Kissinger's just-published second volume of memoirs, "Years of Upheaval," which Hersh found "laughable."

### Personalities and Prejudices

"It's not a coffee-table book," Hersh says. "I'm really going to try to write diplomatic history, but that sounds too fancy. The ultimate goal of the book—this is a book about how people and personalities shape policy incredibly more than you think. Personalities, prejudices and people . . . It says some very, very important decisions are made for reasons that stagger the imagination. We don't know how profound it is."

"I don't think we've ever had a White House like that," he goes on. "I think we really bottomed out there in terms of personal integrity."

A man of Hersh's reporting reputation feels obliged to go after the big stories, the big targets, and Henry Kissinger certainly qualifies. Hersh has been described as Kissinger's "nemesis," his book an ideological vendetta against the man. (On the "Phil Donahue" show commenting on the Hersh article, Kissinger said he found it full of "sly innuendoes" and "fairly contemptible gossip.")

Hersh insists he has no personal animus toward Kissinger. "I don't know the guy," Hersh says. "I've talked to him five times in my life. I went to see Henry in the White House once. He asked me to brief him after I'd been to Hanoi. He seemed distracted and bored."

"He does fascinate me," Hersh admits. "It's the policies that fascinate me. There's not much about Henry Kissinger we don't know. I've been around such people all my life. We all have an uncle like that, a mixed bag of a person . . ."

"Henry's most enduring diplomacy was with the press corps," Hersh says.

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The book, Hersh says, "is not personally directed at Henry. It's directed at his policies. I'm not trying to write about his personal life at all, except when it enters into relations at the White House. The atmosphere of that White House is very significant—the bad vibes, the murky, clubhouse atmosphere, the back-stabbing, the insecurities, the paranoia, although I hate that word. What we got for it was a lot of bad foreign policy. Haig is still playing by the rules of the Nixon White House—you can see the effect now, the buildup in Central America . . ."

A few days later, asked on National Public Radio if one couldn't make the case that Kissinger, and Haig, were just doing their jobs very well, were there to serve their master and carry out orders, and what was wrong with that, Hersh answered:

"You have a question of truth, a question of justice, a question of why some people went to jail and others didn't, a question of people who had in their hands the right to commit other people to life and death . . . To give that much power to those people and not hold them to a reasonable standard of conduct and to say that they can behave any damn way they want to and then *forever* perpetuate the lie—write memoirs . . . I get outraged. That's what I'm operating out of. I don't even know Henry Kissinger. I've only had a few conversations with him and a few questions with Al Haig. I know their policy.

"And nowhere do I find anywhere—looking at these guys hard over a four-year period, including the Vietnam war, the Bangladesh war—nowhere did anybody ever say to himself, 'How many lives is this going to cost? What is the human toll of this particular policy?' Nobody ever talked that way. You don't want me to hold that guy to a reasonable standard? I'm going to hold him to a reasonable standard . . . no mercy."

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