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The Hersh Alternative

He's spent a lifetime butting heads with the official version of reality. What does a career like Seymour Hersh's say about Washington—and about journalism itself?

By Bob Thompson

He's roaming around behind the lectern in this small Duke University auditorium, seemingly never able to stay quite still. He's flown down from Washington in the early afternoon, scarfing two slices of airport pizza before the final boarding call. He's done a 90-minute interview for the New Yorker project he's working on, and he's changed out of his worn V-neck sweater and his defiantly unpresentable pants, the ones with the inch-long threads dangling around his ankles. He's been wined and dined in a style befitting a 63-year-old icon invited to deliver the James D. Ewing Lecture on Ethics in Journalism. Now Seymour M. Hersh is telling his audience of 50 or 60 students, professors and younger journalists just how, as an unknown freelance writer 31 years ago, he broke the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

It's an astonishing tale, full of action and suspense and gripping detail, but straight narrative won't do the trick here. He's supposed to be talking about ethics, after all. And "ethics being a very strange word—my ethics, your ethics, our ethics, situational ethics"—he's planning a stunt to get his listeners involved. But first he has to take them back three decades, to a lawyer's office in Salt Lake City, where he, and they, will have an ethical decision to make.

In the fall of '69, he reminds the young folks, Americans were violently polarized over Vietnam. Hersh himself had learned to hate the war a few years earlier, while covering the Pentagon for the Associated Press. "I got to know the guys fighting it, the officers," he says. Pilots told him "what they were bombing, how useless it was." Infantrymen told him how "the war was being quantified by how many people we could kill." By 1968, he'd quit the AP and gone to work for Eugene McCarthy's antiwar presidential campaign.

A year later, Richard Nixon was president and Sy Hersh was holed up in a $70-a-month office in the National Press Building, writing a book "about defense spending and how crappy it was." One day he got a phone call from a public interest lawyer who'd heard something about the murder of 75 Vietnamese civilians by an Army enlisted man. "For a lot of reasons, one of the basic ones being that I'm bored," he dropped everything to check it out.

He's told his My Lai story a thousand times, and he doesn't go into every detail here. He got the name of the man who'd done the killing, who turned out to be a lieutenant, not an enlisted man. Before long he was on his way to Utah to see the lieutenant's lawyer, "a former judge in the court of military appeals." He'd called up the judge and told him that he happened to be going to California—not true, he says, but never mind—and that his plane was stopping in Salt Lake City and that he'd like to come see him. Then he'd hustled down to the court to dig up the judge's last few decisions so he could flatter the guy.

"Now you could call it clever, you could also call it smarmy," Hersh says, but whatever you call it, it worked: "He thought I was the nicest young man he'd ever met." Preliminaries over, the reporter raised the subject he'd come to talk about, "and then I did something that I don't quite explain, but I did it." He doubled the number of people he'd heard the lieutenant had shot. "I said, 'I understand he was accused of killing 150 people.' A word for what I did—an actual word, it has three letters—it's called 'lie.' "

The judge said, "What are you talking about, oh my God." Then he walked over to a file cabinet, "pulled out a piece of paper and gave it to me, and here is what it said: 'Lt. William L. Calley Jr. is hereby accused'—it was a charge sheet, I mean an

official charge sheet—'of killing 111'—I'll never forget the next word—'Oriental human beings.' " But before he'd really had a chance to read much more, he says, the judge got a phone call, excused himself, slipped the paper into a manila folder on his desk, closed the folder and left the room.

Audience participation time.

"So here we go, here's what you have to do with this: What do I do?" He's waving an arm toward the crowd. "C'mon! Everybody has to tell me this! Tell me what you think! What do I do, guys?"

"Do the right thing!" someone shouts. They all laugh, then plunge into a debate about what that would be.

For the next 45 minutes, Hersh eggs them on, switching points of view to challenge their reasoning, redrafting his self-portrait to keep them off balance. One moment, he's a conniving hustler who sees that piece of paper and thinks, "Fame! Fortune! Pulitzer Prize!" The next, he's a selfless do-gooder—"I've got moral rectitude all over me!"—who's burning to put an immoral war on trial.

Can it ever be right to take that document? Does it matter what's in the reporter's heart and mind? These are the ethical issues on the table, and while the answers may not be obvious, at least to this group, the questions themselves seem clear enough. Yet watching Hersh throw himself into the exercise—he's still pacing back and forth, and he's got chalk smears on that nice blue suit now from leaning up against a blackboard—it's hard not to frame a few other questions, too.

What is the meaning of a journalistic phenomenon like Seymour Hersh? How does a whip-smart, preternaturally energetic outsider who, as one close friend puts it, "scored poorly in the category of 'works well with others' " assemble a body of work that helps to radically revise the way Americans see their government—work that appears, for the most part, in the established organs of mainstream journalism—while deliberately keeping the journalistic establishment at arm's length? What does a career like his reveal about the possibilities and limitations of journalism itself?

Not to mention the merciless query by which all living reporters are judged: What has he done for us lately?

"C'mon! Let's go!" he says. "I promise you, there's only wrong answers—so go ahead, what do I do?"

'The Thing I Do is Finish the Pictures'

He works alone now, as he has for years, out of a modest two-room downtown office with no name on the door. Cardboard boxes full of notes and yellowing clips line the wall in the outer room, where an old Royal typewriter has come to rest atop a five-drawer metal file cabinet. Piles of more current documents litter the desk in the inner room, where Hersh now writes his stories on a Dell computer. Stacks of paperback copies of The Dark Side of Camelot, the 1997 bestseller for which he was famously thrashed by a legion of critics ("best read as a sort of journalistic tragedy" was one of the milder judgments), sit on the floor.

Echoes of his earlier work are everywhere. On one wall there's a poster from a 1987 lecture ("Vietnam: Is America Coming to Terms?"). On another, there's an unlovely AP photograph of Henry Kissinger that catches the former secretary of state shoveling food into his mouth. On a third, surrounded by framed prize certificates too numerous to list, hangs a series of black-and-white photographs of A.M. Rosenthal. In them, the former executive editor of the New York Times peruses a manuscript with intensifying interest and finally breaks out in a joyful smile. "To Sy 'Button Lips' Hersh," the inscription reads. "Taken on the occasion of my first reading of his latest investigation."

Facing the desk is a painting called "The Inquisitors," done by a friend, that depicts four figures with unfinished faces in swirls of dark red, green and blue. Is there any

particular meaning to this, Hersh is asked?

"Well you could give it some meaning," he says. "You could say that part of the thing I do is finish the pictures. You could do that."

Coming from Sy Hersh, this is as close to introspection as an interviewer can reasonably expect. Like any self-respecting investigative reporter, he won't talk about how he gets his stories—he'd be "Loose Lips" Hersh if he ever did that—but he also won't answer a number of seemingly innocent questions because he thinks the answers could be made to come off as self-promotional. He's been married for 36 years and has three grown children, who are clearly very important to him, but he wants his private life kept private: Family members don't get quoted in Hersh profiles, and he scorns the armchair psychologizing that's become the modern feature writer's stock in trade. "Oh my God, this is all so tedious," he snaps when the subject of his formative years is gingerly broached. "What the hell does it have to do with anything I write?"

Just the bare outlines then, for now.

Hersh was born in Chicago on April 8, 1937, and grew up on the city's South Side. His father had emigrated from Lithuania in the early 1920s and gone into the dry-cleaning business. The rest of the family comprised his mother, who had emigrated from Poland; his twin brother, Alan; and his two older sisters, also twins. As a kid, he channeled much of his energy into athletics. He played Chicago-style slow-pitch softball ("big ball, no gloves . . . the girls would come and all that stuff") as well as baseball, golf and tennis, his game of choice as an adult.

He graduated from the University of Chicago in 1958 with a BA in history and wound up going on to law school because he couldn't get a job selling copy machines ("I'd be vice president of Xerox now!"). He turns the story of how he got in—he applied months past the deadline, with the help of a law professor he knew, and was accepted immediately—into the first of many cautionary biographical tales. "So you ask me, what makes Hersh think that rules are made to be bent? Well, look at this."

The moral of these tales is always the same: that there's an alternative reality beneath the surface of things. After he flunked out of law school, which he hated, he stumbled into a job at Chicago's City News Bureau, the journalistic boot camp that inspired "The Front Page." Chicago in 1959 "was a great place to be a reporter," he says. "You could do anything you wanted, the cops never bothered you, just show your press pass. We all knew which were the syndicate joints and which weren't—after-hours places. It was like sort of a tour of the reality that existed versus the reality people think exists."

One classic Hersh story is set in the Pentagon six years later. He had bounced from City News to a stint in the Army Reserve, to a fledgling suburban newspaper in Illinois, to the United Press International bureau in Pierre, S.D., and finally to the Associated Press, which had sent him to Washington. One day in late 1965 he was called in for a briefing on a major ground engagement in Vietnam.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and his deputy, Cyrus Vance, were the briefers, Hersh recalls, though he's thinks Vance did the talking. The story was that "there had been some problems, but it was a great victory and the general in charge had been promoted." He dutifully wrote what he'd been given. The next day a Navy captain he'd gotten to know took him for a walk. "Where'd you get that stuff?" he asked. Hersh told him. "We got wiped out in that battle," the captain said. He'd seen the internal reports. The general was incompetent. The promotion was designed to get him out of there before he could get more soldiers killed.

"It was a great thing to learn—just a great thing for me to learn," Hersh says.

He quit the AP to freelance in 1967. He wrote a book on chemical and biological warfare. He did his stint with McCarthy and started to work on military spending. Then he got the phone call about My Lai.

Few reporters have ever worked a story harder. After he saw the charge sheet about the 109 victims—he was off by two in his Duke speech, and never mind how he got

the rest of the information he needed; we'll get back to that—he flew all night to Fort Benning, Ga., to track down Lt. Calley. A long day of nonstop effort later, he got his man.

The tale of how the first My Lai piece got published has been turned into a journalistic morality play whose theme is: Little Guys Triumph! Truth Wins Out! It tells how Hersh struck out with national magazines like Life and Look, and how finally, in desperation, he turned to a 23-year-old friend and neighbor, David Obst, who sold the piece to 36 newspapers through a tiny, unknown entity called Dispatch News Service at a hundred bucks a pop. Fame! Fortune! Pulitzer! (He won his prize in 1970, after Obst mailed the entry to the Pulitzer committee with literally minutes to spare.)

Hersh didn't stop with the first Dispatch piece. He was on the road for weeks: tracking down Ron Ridenhour, the former GI who had first confronted the Army with what he'd heard about the massacre, then finding and interviewing more than 50 men from the unit that had done the killing. My Lai had a worldwide impact; the story came to symbolize everything that was wrong about the war. The death toll, which is still debated, turned out to be closer to 500 than 109, and the details were so horrifying—unarmed villagers herded to a drainage ditch and shot, women hugging children in vain efforts to protect them from the bullets—that many Americans flatly refused to believe the story until Hersh wrote about a troubled young veteran named Paul Meadlo, who subsequently agreed to go on national television and talk about his role in the murders.

Former Clinton administration drug czar Barry McCaffrey was one of the initial doubters. McCaffrey was in Walter Reed Army Hospital at the time, he recalls—he'd almost lost an arm in Vietnam—and "those of us on the ward were absolutely persuaded it didn't happen. We thought it was a complete fabrication. It was another attack by the press on us." It took Meadlo's televised confession to convince him. "I said, 'My God, they did it.' "

McCaffrey's conduct as a division commander in the Persian Gulf War was the subject of an exhaustive Hersh investigation that was published in the New Yorker last spring. He has aggressively disputed the allegations made against him in the article, which involve his decision to engage retreating Iraqi forces after a cease-fire had been declared, and he has denounced its author as a journalistic assassin who "totally lacks integrity."

Still, he says, he thinks Hersh did "a favor for the Army and for the country" by exposing My Lai.

'Sammy The Fish Man Says You're Okay'

The next stop on the Sy Hersh Tour of Alternative Realities requires that one consider the proper use of adjectives in newspaper journalism, specifically one of the adjectives in the following sentence, which began a Hersh report in the New York Times on December 22, 1974: "The Central Intelligence Agency, directly violating its charter, conducted a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation during the Nixon Administration against the antiwar movement and other dissident groups in the United States, according to well-placed Government sources."

The Times story went on to report that a special CIA unit had maintained "intelligence files on at least 10,000 American citizens" and that an internal review of past agency abuses had "produced evidence of dozens of other illegal activities by members of the CIA inside the United States, beginning in the nineteen-fifties, including break-ins, wiretapping and the surreptitious inspection of mail." These revelations were "explosive," Hersh quoted one source as saying, and "could destroy the agency."

Hersh understood what they could do to him, too, and tried to take precautions. "I knew there was going to be a wild attack on the story," he says, and he went so far as to contact Sen. Edmund Muskie with an offer to share his evidence in advance so the

influential Maine Democrat could be prepared to respond when it came out. (Muskie declined.) He carefully confirmed his reporting with "another high government official," who told him the CIA abuses were even worse than he knew, then watched the same official denounce his story on television the day it ran. He took comfort, though, when his friend David Wise, coauthor of the first significant book on the CIA, called him that night with a cryptic message from his best agency source: "Sammy the Fish Man says you're okay."

Given the lessons about illegal government activities and official lies that had been so painfully learned from Watergate and Vietnam, one might assume that the Washington press corps would have leaped to follow up Hersh's scoop. But what happened was exactly the opposite. The story was widely derided as overblown and its author slammed for relying too heavily on anonymous sources—by The Washington Post, among others, whose editorialist seemed to have forgotten the paper's own anonymously sourced Watergate stories. Columnists and CIA officials attacked Hersh personally. Little follow-up reporting was done, except by the Times. And a great fuss was made over a single adjectival choice that Hersh and his editors had made.

Yeah, sure, the CIA had spied on American citizens, wiretapped them and opened their mail, the skeptics seemed to be saying—but never mind all that. The most important question is: Wasn't Sy Hersh wrong to use the word "massive"?

Even Hersh supporters are still divided on this momentous issue. Bill Kovach, who was in the Times's Washington bureau at the time and helped edit the piece, regrets that he let "massive" slip by. "Not that it was necessarily wrong," says Kovach, who's now chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, but it provided "a hook to discredit the story." The Post's Bob Woodward emphatically disagrees. "I remember all of the throat-clearing and the 'Oh, well, it's overstated,' " he says, recalling similar criticism of some of his and Carl Bernstein's reporting. "It wasn't a mistake. It was a necessary ingredient."

"What Sy is, he's one of the shock troops," Woodward explains, making a point not just about the domestic spying story, but about Hersh's whole career. "He's the one who goes in first." And as such, "he is going to get bloodied."

But Hersh knew what he knew, and he didn't need the throat-clearers to confirm it. Three weeks later, CIA Director William Colby did the job himself in Senate testimony, while still disputing Hersh's choice of adjectives ("CIA Admits Domestic Acts, Denies 'Massive' Illegality," read the headline in the next day's Times). Investigations by the presidentially appointed Rockefeller Commission, the Senate's Church committee and the House's Pike committee—all of which were a direct result of Hersh's story—would soon make public so much even dirtier CIA laundry as to render semantic quibbling moot.

By the spring of 1975, with the congressional investigations gearing up, the Ford administration was deeply worried about the damage—to America's national security or simply to its image, depending on your point of view—that further revelations might produce. Ford himself had let slip to a group of Times editors at a private luncheon that he was concerned about word of CIA assassination plots leaking out. The startled editors chose not to inform their star reporter, much to

Hersh's subsequent annoyance, but Daniel Schorr of CBS News got wind of Ford's remark and eventually broke the story.

So in late May, when the Times published a Hersh piece headlined "Submarines of U.S. Stage Spy Missions Inside Soviet Waters," citing sources who thought the missions dangerously provocative and accident-prone, some in the administration tried to figure out how to muzzle the reporter who was causing them so much grief. Among them was Dick Cheney, then Ford's deputy chief of staff.

"In two secret meetings in the White House," writes historian Kathryn S. Olmsted in Challenging the Secret Government: The Post-Watergate Investigations of the

CIA and FBI, "Ford's top aides considered several alternatives." Cheney's notes from a May 28 meeting show that the alternatives considered were: "1.) FBI investigation of NYT, Hersh +/or possible gov't sources. 2.) Grand Jury—seek immediate indictments of NYT + Hersh 3.) Search Warrant—to go after Hersh papers in his apt. 4.) Discuss informally w/ N.Y.T. 5.) Do nothing." The notes also contain a section labeled "Broader ramifications" that asks, "Can we take advantage of it to bolster our position on the Church committee investigation? To point out the need for limits on the scope of the investigations?" Fortunately for Hersh, option five was chosen.

Meanwhile, the historical implications of Hersh's intelligence reporting were becoming increasingly clear. True, neither his work nor the subsequent congressional investigations would end the CIA's covert action programs. And true, the committees would fail, in his view, even to assign the responsibility for agency abuses where it properly belonged. The catch phrase popularized by the Church committee was that the intelligence community was a "rogue elephant," the implication being that it had run around compiling files on American citizens and trying to knock off foreign leaders without any input from the occupants of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Still, when it came to the CIA, "the reality people think exists" was gone forever.

"It's very, very, very rare for a reporter or journalist to have an actual effect on the course of events," says Thomas Powers, who worked much of this same territory while reporting The Man Who Kept the Secrets, his book on former CIA director Richard Helms. But by starting "a process of confrontation with the hidden history of the CIA," that is precisely what Hersh did.

"You can't draw up a pantheon of American reporters that doesn't include Hersh. If it's a pantheon of two, he's one."

'Boy Wake Up, Boy Hear Story, Boy Get Story'

"It was as though Sy Hersh had been born for this moment," wrote his colleague Harrison Salisbury, and for once the cliché is not an overstatement. To look through the bulging clip files from Hersh's first three years at the Times, replete with headlines like, "Kissinger Said to Have Asked FBI to Wiretap a Number of His Aides," "Cambodian Raids Reported Hidden Before '70 Foray" and "CIA Is Linked to Strikes in Chile That Beset Allende," is to revisit some of the most dramatic stories of the '70s.

Hersh himself can get positively nostalgic about those years. "There'll never be a period like that in our business again," he says. "Nobody can understand what it was like. Boy wake up. Boy hear story. Boy get story. Boy put story in paper. No trauma."

Well . . . maybe from his point of view.

The story of Seymour Hersh at the New York Times is the story of an extraordinary marriage of convenience between a congenital outsider and the ultimate establishment newspaper. Mutually suspicious as well as mutually respectful, never fully comfortable with each other's way of doing things, the parties found that their needs temporarily converged—and the result was some of the highest-impact journalism ever published.

Hersh wasn't alone, of course. "The whole news business was in a period of good skeptical reporting," says former Times reporter David Burnham, whose own work for the paper included investigations of police corruption in New York City and nuclear power. The origins of the trend are complex, Burnham says, though he thinks it largely grew from coverage of the civil rights movement. In any case, by the late '60s, Abe Rosenthal, who was then the Times's managing editor, had begun pushing a more aggressive style of journalism in New York. The message had not yet reached the Washington bureau, however. The attitude there, as one New York-based editor recalls, was too often: "Don't bother me, it's time for me to go to lunch with the ambassador."

In 1972, two things happened to change this: Rosenthal hired Hersh, and shortly thereafter, burglars broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the

Watergate.

Hersh wanted no part of the Watergate story at first. The Washington Post owned it, and no reporter likes to be designated to play catch-up. Besides, he was immersed in a promising investigation of the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam by Gen. John Lavelle, the trail of which, he hoped, might lead him high into the Nixon administration. So it was six months before he finally joined the hunt.

There's a visual image that a number of Times people summon to evoke the adrenaline boost that ensued. It consists of courtly, silver-haired Washington bureau chief Clifton Daniel standing in the bureau in white tie and tails, en route to some evening function, vainly trying to have a word with an unkempt dervish of a man emitting rapid bursts of strongly worded questions into a telephone "with his raggedy shirt and his hair flopping and his arms going nine different directions at once." In some versions, Hersh is said to be wearing a T-shirt, in others, an ancient sweater, but whatever the garment, it is invariably described as having a hole eaten out of one armpit.

Hersh's entry was good news for The Post, at least at first. Woodward and Bernstein had been alone in their reporting for so long that doubts about the paper's credibility abounded. So when Hersh broke his first big story in January 1973, Woodward says, "I wanted to call him up and, you know"—he claps his hands into an imaginary telephone receiver—"and hang up."

Hersh got hot that spring, as Salisbury wrote in Without Fear or Favor, "and broke the story of the White House wiretaps, the Dwight Chapin resignation, John Mitchell's trip to the grand jury, the secret Cambodian bombing, and the very basic fact that the coverup was not so much triggered by Watergate as by fear that other 'White House horrors' would be exposed." He had Woodward and Bernstein looking over their shoulders. And while Hersh never did quite catch up, this in itself was an amazing feat.

Even more amazing, as Bill Kovach sees it, was the impact Hersh was having on his own paper.

"The biggest trouble I had managing Sy at the New York Times," Kovach says, "was managing Sy at a newspaper that hated to be beaten, but didn't really want to be first. It was scared to death of being first on a controversial story that challenged the credibility of the government." This attitude, he says, was "part of the culture of the institution that Sy was breaking down."

Think about that last sentence for a minute, and you'll see what an incredible notion it contains: that a single reporter, however brilliant and aggressive, could by himself break down the culture of an institution like the Times. And of course, Kovach doesn't mean that quite literally. Rosenthal was still pushing hard for change, which was why he'd hired Hersh in the first place, and many others were as well.

Still . . .

"Journalistically, Abe Rosenthal and the others wanted to be there. They wanted to be there. But historically, culturally, viscerally, they hated it," Kovach says. Which was why "the arguments and the debates and the rassling back and forth on every Sy Hersh story were almost endless. It wasn't because Sy was sloppy. It was because it was material they didn't want to be out there with."

They wanted it and they didn't want it. In hindsight, it seems clear that the competitive instincts fired in Rosenthal and his editors by the successes of Ben Bradlee's upstart Washington Post served to tip the scales at the New York Times—for a while, at least—toward the risk-taking side. And this triumph of journalistic desire over newspaper-of-record caution is what allowed the Times to stand by Hersh during his nerve-racking run of provocative, anonymously sourced stories on the CIA.

But it was an unlikely marriage to begin with, and it couldn't last. Starting in 1975, Hersh spent three professionally miserable years in New York, where he'd moved because his wife was going to medical school there. He wrote a couple of big stories, including one describing questionable financial practices by the management at Gulf

& Western Industries Inc. that got him and his coauthor, Jeff Gerth, a mash note from economist John Kenneth Galbraith—"something to the effect that it was the best anatomy of a corporation he had ever seen," Gerth recalls—but caused them nothing but grief in the editing process. Part of the problem was that it was about the abuse of private power, a much dicier subject for many editors even than the CIA. "He had a story that were it about a public institution would have been in the paper the first time he wrote it, the first way he wrote it," Kovach says.

Instead it was, to return to Hersh's own career summary: "Boy get story. Boy write story. Boy fight editors. Boy wrestle. Boy throw typewriter. Boy scream. Boy have tantrum."

The moment he had been born for was over. So why should he hang around?

'He Might As Well Have Been Dracula'

The immediate victim of the breakup was the exalted public image of Henry Kissinger. But there was collateral damage to Hersh's reputation as well. Hersh had long held views on the Nixon national security adviser turned secretary of state. He thought that the man widely portrayed as the one bright light in an otherwise corrupt administration was in fact "the prime liar of Washington," as David Halberstam put it in The Powers That Be, "very skilled at talking one way at Washington journalistic dinner parties after dark, and acting another way in the high councils of government the next day." More important, he blamed Kissinger for expanding and prolonging the war in Southeast Asia. Over the years, he has repeatedly suggested that while other sleepless individuals can count sheep at night, "Kissinger has to count burned and maimed Cambodian and Vietnamese babies."

He had made something of a specialty of Kissinger at the Times, breaking stories about his wiretapping of subordinates and his involvement in the illegal Cambodian bombing and the CIA's destabilization of Chile. But in 1976, Hersh had rejected an offer to do a Kissinger book. Three years later, he changed his mind, left the Times and signed up to write what became The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House.

Former Times diplomatic correspondent Leslie Gelb, now president of the Council on Foreign Relations, tells a story that evokes the threat this prospect represented to the high-flying Kissinger. A few years earlier, Gelb says, he'd needed to go down to the State Department to look over the text of a Kissinger background briefing, and he'd persuaded Hersh—who had rarely, if ever, been in the building—to tag along.

"Can I bring my friend in, too?" Gelb asked the press spokesman, who said sure. Then he introduced them. "I said, 'This is Sy Hersh,' " Gelb recalls, and the spokesman "begins to tremble, physically tremble. Sy is reading a newspaper. [The spokesman] can't keep his eyes off him. He might as well have been Dracula."

With Hersh's book underway, Halberstam says, "I know for a fact that Kissinger would call all his friends and say"—the punch line comes in a faux German accent—"Seymour Hersh is after me. Vat am I going to do? This mad dog is after me. Vat am I going to do?"

One thing he did, according to Hersh's longtime attorney and friend Michael Nussbaum, was to retain a law firm, Arnold & Porter, which tracked Hersh's reporting and requested the same documents he had requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Kissinger's lawyers also wrote threatening letters to the Atlantic, which was to excerpt Hersh's work. These said, in Nussbaum's loose translation from the legalese: "Don't you dare publish this or we'll sue you forever."

Arnold & Porter's diligence precipitated what Nussbaum calls the Famous Rug Store Incident. One day the reporter bumped into an Arnold & Porter lawyer while both were shopping for Oriental carpets on Wisconsin Avenue. Introductions complete, "the lawyer says, 'Oh you're writing the book about Kissinger, aren't you?' And Sy says, 'I

know Kissinger doesn't like it, but I'll tell you one thing: If Kissinger wants malice, I'll give him malice.' "

Libel lawyer's nightmare! Years later, Nussbaum had to work hard to keep that statement out of evidence during an unsuccessful action by an Indian politician whom The Price of Power reported to have been taking money from the CIA.

Episodes like this greatly amuse his friends, but Hersh tends to wince when they're recounted. Not because they're untrue, but because he knows they may contribute to a caricature of himself and his reporting style that can be used—and often is—to discredit his work.

"Mad Dog Hersh," as we might call this character, gets all his best scoops by calling up terrified news sources and browbeating them, or worse. Robert Sam Anson, who did the definitive Mad Dog profile for Vanity Fair in 1997, writes of Hersh being overheard "barking at a source, 'You know who I am? Talk to me!' " When the magazine's editors blew this tidbit up in large type, they changed the verb to "screamed."

Mad Dog, in his prosecutorial zeal, is said to be utterly without scruples, and words like "threaten" and "blackmail" get tossed around with a casualness that can be startling. Classic Hershian hyperbole ("You think I wouldn't sell my mother for My Lai? Gimme a break") is played as evidence that he would literally stop at nothing for a scoop. On the occasions when such charges are made specific, Hersh invariably denies them, but the Mad Dog persona is so firmly established that denials are in vain.

As with all good caricatures, the Mad Dog portrait contains enough recognizably accurate features to make it difficult—for those who don't really know Hersh, at least—to ascertain where truth ends and fantasy begins. The real Sy Hersh is impatient well past the point of rudeness, for example, charging past flustered maitre d's to select his own tables in restaurants and ending phone conversations with a sudden, unilateral "G'by" that eschews both vowels and social niceties in favor of getting on with his next call. "There's nothing silky about Sy," says the writer Gloria Emerson, a close friend who recalls that Hersh insulted her work within minutes of their first meeting, in 1972. "No hoping that you'll like him—Oh, forget it."

He can't—and doesn't—deny that he has an explosive temper. Nussbaum tells of one occasion when Hersh came back from a particularly harrowing My Lai reporting trip and dropped by his law firm's offices to consult on something. "Sy came in, unshaven, he clearly hadn't slept for a couple of nights, and he had with him these little liquor bottles that they give you on airplanes." A disagreement arose, and "he started to scream and threw a bottle against the wall in the office and the bottle went smash and glass was everywhere, and I said, 'Sy!' " He screamed for maybe five minutes "and said, 'Okay, I'm better now, let's get down to business.' "

Over the years, during such outbursts, Hersh has said and done other things he now regrets. But what bothers him much more is the notion—which he rejects as beyond ridiculous—that anyone could build the kind of career he has had by threatening people.

Knowledgeable friends and colleagues support him on this, at least when they're not too busy supplying Mad Dog anecdotes themselves. "I've listened to him do a hundred interviews with important sources," says former Time national security reporter Jay Peterzell, who, as a research assistant on the Kissinger book, spent countless hours in a small office with Hersh. "And I've never heard anything like that."

The standard Hersh caricature, Peterzell says, displays a fundamental ignorance of his actual reporting technique. Which starts, prosaically enough, with reading: "He reads with intensity and a conviction that there's a lot there that people have missed." A typical payoff shows up in the first chapter of The Price of Power—Hersh read for a year before he started reporting the book—in which he shows how Kissinger secretly worked both sides of the political street during the 1968 election, using his Democratic foreign policy contacts to channel important information about the Vietnam peace talks to the Nixon camp. "The story comes from Nixon's memoirs, initially."

Hersh's interview style is a projection of his personality, including his characteristic, manic speediness, and as such, it appears consistent with the Mad Dog legend. Watching him work the phones "was an extraordinary experience," Kovach says. "He talked so fast, and his mind works so quickly, he would present two or three scenarios to the person on the other end of the phone and say, 'Right? Right?'—and embedded in the two or three options was the one he was after." The point Kovach is making, however, is how effective—not how crazed—Hersh's phone work is.

His congenital competitiveness is not in dispute. Hersh positively radiates competitive vibes, and he uses this to his advantage. He'll start telling sources about his story, Peterzell says, and before long "they start competing with him: 'Oh yeah, you think that's something, well let me tell you this.' "

None of which is to deny that the intensity with which he pursues information is, well—unusual. Perhaps the most vivid of all the Mad Dog images was supplied by Hersh admirer Thomas Powers, who once wrote that he has "a professional style notoriously similar to the single-minded ferocity of the wolverine, a meat-eater of the north woods known among fur trappers of yesteryear for its ability to tear its way through the log wall of a cabin for a strip of bacon."

It's not clear precisely what Powers meant by that, but careful reading is not the first thing that leaps to mind.

Four years after he began tearing his way through the wall of myth that sheltered Henry Kissinger, The Price of Power landed in bookstores. It would go on to be denounced by its subject on "Nightline," though he would have to admit he hadn't read it first; to make the bestseller list despite its heavily footnoted 698 pages; to win the National Book Critics Circle award for nonfiction; and to draw a wide range of critical response.

"Did Seymour Hersh 'get' Henry Kissinger or not?" The Post's Robert G. Kaiser asked rhetorically, then delivered a detailed brief for the majority view: yes and no. Hersh's "gigantic debunking operation," Kaiser wrote, is flawed by his apparent desire to believe the absolute worst about everything Kissinger did, which causes him to push some of his evidence way too far. But "if Hersh's attempt to destroy Kissinger fails," his "Herculean" reporting effort has nevertheless established "a formidable barrier to Kissinger's historical reputation. No future historian will be able to jump over or skirt around Hersh's barrier—it is too imposing."

Hersh doesn't think he got Kissinger, either—the man still shows up on "Nightline," does he not? But The Price of Power, he believes, "is the book they're going to judge me by."

He may be right about that.

Or half-right, at least.

"In this business, you get judged by your best story and your worst story," Woodward says. And if there's one thing on which Hersh's friends and enemies agree, it is this: His worst was still to come.

'I Knew I Was Going To Be Mocked To Death'

Cut to the U.S. District Court in Manhattan on April 22, 1999. It is 2 o'clock in the afternoon and a jury trial is in session in the case of *United States of America vs. Lawrence X. Cusack Jr.* Government witness Seymour M. Hersh has taken the stand:

Q. What do you do for a living, sir?

A. I'm a journalist.

Q. How are you employed?

A. I write books, magazine articles, etc. . . .

Q. Directing your attention to 1992, what project were you beginning at that time?

The project from hell, is what Hersh might have called The Dark Side of Camelot. But he would never do that. That would imply that he was backing down.

A full discussion of the numerous "books, magazine articles, etc." Hersh wrote in the decade before he started in on John F. Kennedy would fill a lengthy magazine article by itself. One highlight would be The Target Is Destroyed, an investigation of the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by the Soviet Union that turned up no sexy conspiracies but detailed instead the Reagan administration's abuse of communications intelligence for political purposes. The book earned Hersh a threatening pre-publication phone call from CIA Director William Casey that set him to hastily rummaging through his files, excising any references to sources. He also wrote The Samson Option, a provocative exploration of Israel's nuclear weapons program; did some television reporting; and returned to the Times for a couple of stints of contract work. In sum, he did plenty of notable work that drew its fair share of praise and criticism. But there was nothing that had the impact of the Kissinger book, or My Lai, or the CIA stories.

It's worth noting, in this context, what Hersh did not do during this period. When the Iran-contra story broke in 1986, Max Frankel had recently become executive editor of the Times. "I was hearing daily warnings, inside and outside the paper," Frankel reports in his autobiography, "that I risked another Watergate embarrassment if I did not immediately hire Seymour Hersh and other investigative hotshots and fervently devote myself to the pursuit of this one story." Not bad advice, on the face of it: No reporter would appear better suited to unraveling the tangled skein of covert operations and coverups that lay behind what was arguably a more serious subversion of the Constitution than Watergate. But there would be no marriage of convenience this time. File under "opportunities lost"—for both sides.

Meanwhile, Hersh was making a semi-serious foray into screenwriting, in partnership with old friend David Obst. There's great Mad Dog material here: Obst says the duo used to send producers into hysterics with their insufficiently rehearsed pitches ("That's not how it's going to happen! What are you talking about!") and mentions in passing that Hersh once told Oliver Stone, for whom he was working on a script, that the director would be a "historical war criminal" if he made his fictionalized film version of the Kennedy assassination. None of the screenplays got made into movies, including the White House thriller that was to be called "Adviser." (Was this based on anyone in particular? "Heh. You can guess," Hersh says. "But it was definitely not with a German accent.") Still, they were fun to do and they paid some bills.

Paying bills is never a given for a freelance investigative reporter. So while the idea of writing about the most intensely mythologized American president of the 20th century was attractive to Hersh for many reasons, among them his career-long preoccupation with Vietnam and his visceral dislike of myths, the fact that he might actually sell some books—as he'd failed to do with his two previous efforts—could hardly have escaped his notice.

Q. During the course of researching this book, did there come a time when you heard that somebody had an archive of explosive documents purportedly relating to President Kennedy?

A. Yes.

Hersh's JFK book, published in 1997, did put him back on the bestseller list. It did have a chapter on Vietnam, pushing the view that Kennedy bore more responsibility for the war than has been generally believed. But few people seem to remember that. What people remember are three things: that Hersh served up lurid new details about the president's reckless and obsessive sexual behavior; that he was savagely attacked by reviewers and

Kennedy loyalists; and that in the process of reporting the book, he severely damaged his credibility while chasing that "archive of explosive documents," the most dramatic of which concerned alleged secret payments by JFK to Marilyn Monroe.

Q. How interested were you in getting access to these documents . . . ?

A. Gaga. Of course.

Q. Why is that?

A. Are you kidding? I'm a newspaper man. That's a story. You go after stories. That's a great story.

The documents originated with a man named Lawrence X. "Lex" Cusack Jr., and it was at Cusack's trial on charges of defrauding their purchasers that Hersh had been subpoenaed to testify. (Cusack was convicted and lost on appeal; he is still challenging the conviction.) The transcript of his testimony is 247 pages long, suggesting that the true story of Seymour Hersh and the Cusack documents might not be easily summarized. But never mind that. Once it became public, the headline was inevitable:

Hersh Screws Up Big-Time! Legendary Investigative Reporter Taken for a Ride!

In those 247 pages of testimony, Hersh goes on to relate how he began "romancing" Lex Cusack until he had persuaded him to let him use the documents; how he went into partnership with independent producer Mark Obenhaus to do a television special that was to include the Cusack papers as well as other material reported for the book; how they sold the idea first to NBC's entertainment division and then, after NBC canceled the project, to ABC News; and how they eventually came to believe that the documents had been forged.

Q. Was there thereafter a meeting with Lex Cusack where an issue of Zip codes was discussed?

A. Yes.

Hersh and Obenhaus had been trying to verify the Cusack papers all along—Hersh by adding questions about them to interviews he was doing for the book, Obenhaus through forensic examination of the documents themselves. But for what, in hindsight, seems a very long time they could neither prove nor disprove their authenticity. It wasn't until early in 1997 that one of the people in Obenhaus's production company noticed that there was a Zip code on a document that was dated a couple of years before Zip codes came into use.

Uh-oh.

Hersh's first impulse, after the rest of the forensic testing was complete, was to write a story for the New York Times; others advised him just to forget the whole thing. Instead, feeling an obligation both to ABC, which had funded their documentary, and to potential future purchasers of the documents, he and Obenhaus took their findings to anchorman Peter Jennings. The result—several months later, after ABC News had secured a second opinion with a forensic examination of its own—was a "20/20" segment in which Jennings confronted Lex Cusack with evidence that the documents were fakes.

"I knew I was going to be mocked to death," Hersh says.

And he was. The Cusack fiasco became the unavoidable frame through which the book was seen, and the papers—though not a scrap of them appeared in The Dark Side of Camelot—cast doubt on the whole enterprise.

An equally damaging frame was "Camelot" itself. This myth had already been thoroughly demolished, many reviewers argued, and they slammed Hersh for piling on. The fact that nobody had demolished it quite as thoroughly as he had—by getting Secret Service agents to talk on the record about the stream of prostitutes ushered past them

into the president's hotel rooms and by linking Jack and Bobby Kennedy more directly than ever to CIA assassination attempts—didn't help him any. When it comes to the American public and the Kennedys, we know, but we don't want to know.

But the book got plenty of substantive criticism, too. Over and over, Hersh was charged with pushing weak evidence—on why Lyndon Johnson got his vice presidential nomination, on how the 1960 election was won, on the Kennedys' relationships with organized crime—toward unproved conclusions.

"I think we all have to watch something," longtime Newsday investigative reporter Bob Greene told the audience for a panel discussion at an Investigative Reporters and Editors conference in 1998. "We get an investigative hypothesis and we follow it. And there are times when we want it to be so true that things slide by."

Greene went on to list a number of Hershian hypotheses that he didn't buy. One involves an intriguing episode Hersh dug up concerning Judith Campbell Exner, the JFK lover who was also involved with Chicago mobster Sam Giancana. It seems that one August day in 1962, the FBI was watching Exner's Los Angeles apartment when an agent observed a couple of young men breaking in. The men turned out to be the twin sons of the chief of security of General Dynamics Corp. Hersh tried hard to track them down, but couldn't. So he wrote that General Dynamics "apparently" found out about Kennedy's relationship with Exner and that the financially troubled defense contractor "may" have used its knowledge to obtain the $6.5 billion TFX jet fighter contract, for which Boeing had appeared a prohibitive favorite.

"The greatest reach in the world," Greene scoffed. Then he offered a more prosaic explanation. General Dynamics was based in Texas. Kennedy was preparing to run for reelection. "He had to have that contract—he had to have those electoral votes!"

"I think you have to read it for yourself," Hersh told the IRE audience in his brief rebuttal, speaking of the book as a whole. Earlier he'd said, "I could give you a 30-minute, very close argument saying, if you buy into what I'm saying here, here, here—it's like a chess game, it's very complicated."

But he didn't. He'd been taking body blows for months, and nothing he said or did seemed likely to overturn the decision that had already been rendered, most cuttingly by Garry Wills in the New York Review of Books:

"It is an astonishing spectacle, this book," Wills wrote. "In his mad zeal to destroy Camelot, to raze it down, dance on the rubble, and sow salt on the ground where it stood, Hersh has with precision and method disassembled and obliterated his own career and reputation."

'There's A Sense Of Right and Wrong

It doesn't matter! Not to me. It doesn't matter at all to me! It's an afternoon in early December three years after Wills filed his journalistic obit, and Hersh, who's in the final stages of reporting his current New Yorker piece, has been pried away from his office for lunch at Sam & Harry's. With unconcealed reluctance, he's fielding questions about his brother's theories on the psychodynamics of the Hersh family. Strictly private matters have been ruled out of bounds, but the idea is to shed some light on his professional choices—to try to answer the question: Why does Sy Hersh do what he does? And why does he keep on doing it, despite the battering he's taken, at an age when most of his peers are happy to start easing off?

"It absolutely is none of your business. It's absolutely none of your business," he says. Third time's the charm. "It's just none of your business, that's my answer."

It isn't as if Alan Hersh has spilled dark secrets. An acoustical engineer who lives on the West Coast—the brothers like and respect each other, and play some serious tennis when they get together—Al is physically slighter than his fraternal twin and considerably more soft-spoken. He talks about his mother and father, who were preoccupied with

their own difficult lives and thus not the kind of parents "who gave a lot of love to their children . . . so whatever affection you could get, we would compete ferociously for it." He describes his father, who died when Al and Sy were still in high school, as a man given to sudden flashes of temper, and says, "I think my father did that to get what he wanted." He says he and Sy "both identified with our father, and I think anger is something that we were taught."

Al talks about Sy as a true moralist, someone who's driven by a "sense of justice and fairness" to try to "make a difference in a very ugly world." At the same time, he points out that his brother's work brings him "the world's approval and validation," which is something that "none of us in the family got as children."

Pretty standard stuff, if you're the armchair psychologizing type, but not something Seymour Hersh wants to talk about. "He's driven without feedback as to what drives him," Al says. "He doesn't want to know."

Back to you, Sy.

"You want to do a story about Al, go right ahead," he says. "Let's move on."

But . . . but . . .

"Oh, excuse me—there's a reason why I felt I had to do the My Lai story? . . . It's so loony! It's right there what the answer is. There's a sense of right and wrong, there clearly is. That's very powerful. And that's all it is!"

Well, maybe not quite all.

"I see things. I see things," Hersh says quietly a few minutes later.

The reality that exists as opposed to the reality people think exists.

"And so it's fun."

This is perhaps not how most reporters would describe the prospect of a frontal assault on Gen. Barry McCaffrey and the official history of the Persian Gulf War. But whatever forces drive Sy Hersh—and however he will ultimately be judged—no one will ever be able to say that he's like most reporters.

More than a year ago, when he began what became a 25,000-word epic in the New Yorker's May 22 issue, he thought he was going to write about the Clinton administration's military-assisted $1.3 billion anti-drug effort in Colombia, of which McCaffrey was the architect. He had barely started poking around, however, when a military friend, "a high-ranking officer," told him he was missing the real story on McCaffrey: the questionable engagement near Iraq's Rumaila oil field that he had fought after the cease-fire in the Gulf War.

McCaffrey was the commander who led the Army's famous "left hook" maneuver in late February 1991, pushing the 24th Infantry Division more than 200 miles into Iraq in just four days. On February 28, with Kuwait liberated and American leaders concerned that world opinion might turn against them if they kept pounding the outgunned Iraqis, President Bush declared what many have since argued was a premature cessation of hostilities. On March 2, two days after the cease-fire was declared and a day before formal peace talks were to begin, the 24th Division encountered a retreating division of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard, which engaged in a brief skirmish with McCaffrey's men—and which McCaffrey then decided to destroy.

The all-out attack that followed was something no reporter witnessed firsthand. McCaffrey says he declined a request by one journalist to ride with him when he helicoptered up to join the attack on the grounds that "we may get shot down." The following day, he sent a helicopter to fetch a small press contingent so he could fill them in. The Iraqis had "bumped into us" and initiated the engagement, he told CNN correspondent Bob Franken, and "once under fire," he had counterattacked.

Alternative realities: Hersh's relentlessly reported story portrays the situation quite differently, citing soldiers who question McCaffrey's description of the beginning of the fight and point out that most of the Iraqi tanks were on trucks "with their cannons reversed and secured in a position known as travel-lock." Some of the crew members

were said to have been "sitting on the outside of their vehicles, catching rays." The Army's own postwar investigation, Hersh reports, concluded that two Iraqi weapons were fired in the initial encounter but that no injuries or damage were recorded.

Other points of conflict between the two versions are too numerous to dissect here. Hersh's story is available on the Web (at www.polyconomics.com/sy.html and other locations), as is an interview in which National Journal correspondent James Kitfield invites McCaffrey to respond to some of Hersh's allegations (www.nationaljournal.com). McCaffrey had refused to be interviewed for the New Yorker story, though he eventually answered some questions in writing.

One characteristic dispute involves the interpretation of film footage shot at Rumaila by the missile-firing Apache helicopters that led the 24th Infantry Division's attack. McCaffrey tells Kitfield, in response to a question about Hersh's description of the Iraqi tanks as being in a nonthreatening posture, that the Apache footage "clearly shows Iraqi tanks in battle formation and firing at our helicopters, albeit ineffectively." Hersh's story, however, cites a military analyst who saw something quite different in the Apache footage. He said it showed "that the Iraqi tanks were in full retreat when the attack began, and in no way posed a threat to the American forces," though some did try to fire back once they were attacked. Hersh also notes that Col. Burt Tackaberry, the division's chief aviation officer, declined McCaffrey's request for "a list of pilots who deserved the Distinguished Flying Cross." The pilots had faced no serious opposition, Tackaberry informed him, so they deserved no medals.

A point not in contention, though McCaffrey did not make it clear in his initial interview with CNN, is that the engagement at Rumaila came in two distinct parts, separated by somewhere between half an hour and two hours. Whatever happened in that initial encounter, the Americans sustained no more Iraqi fire before their commander launched his all-out assault. "It's a meaningless question," McCaffrey says when asked about this lack of enemy fire in the interval. "I elected to take out the remaining forces."

He acted just as aggressively when he heard that a Seymour Hersh piece was in the works. After complaining to the New Yorker directly, as well as through his Office of National Drug Control Policy staff, McCaffrey retained Thomas Yannucci of Kirkland & Ellis, who is "one of the defamation lawyers news organizations take very seriously," as an article in the Columbia Journalism Review put it last fall.

There ensued a blitzkrieg of further pre-publication contacts with the New Yorker, both from people Hersh had called while reporting on McCaffrey and from Yannucci himself, who contributed a four-page effort dated April 26 that Michael Nussbaum admiringly describes as "a $20,000 letter." In it, Yannucci points out that, given "his career history and reputation, General McCaffrey holds immense potential for future career service in both the public and private sectors," warns that the "potential for damage to his reputation and future opportunities through the publication of defamatory falsehoods is therefore accordingly immense" and requests that "all documents and records" related to Hersh's story be retained.

And that wasn't all. Adopting what Post media reporter Howard Kurtz described as "the increasingly popular tactic of a news subject trying to make the journalist the issue before he delivers his findings," McCaffrey contacted a number of news organizations to allege that Hersh "has been conducting 'defamatory' interviews filled with 'false allegations' and is doing so out of 'personal malice.' " Kurtz's story on all this, which appeared weeks before Hersh had finished his piece, had the inevitable effect of furthering McCaffrey's purpose at the same time it reported on it.

Yannucci did not return phone calls for this article, and McCaffrey would not discuss the nature of his lawyer's advice, though he does say that retaining him was "the best move I ever made." But whoever was running the general's private war, it continued after the story came out. A number of high-ranking officers quoted by Hersh immediately sent letters to New Yorker editor David Remnick questioning the context in which

their words had been used. Remnick, whose fact checkers had reviewed Hersh's notes before the story ran, reaffirmed his faith that his reporter knew what the officers had been talking about.

In the meantime, Hersh and McCaffrey were hurling sound bites at each other on national television. The good news, for Hersh, was that this generated attention for his story. But it also had a negative effect. The larger point he had been trying to make was that the history of the whole Gulf War had been skewed by propaganda and uncritical reporting. It was the mythic narrative of the war—we came, we conquered, we buried the Vietnam Syndrome and we went home—that Hersh was really trying to challenge, not just McCaffrey's conduct at Rumaila.

Good luck.

It was more than 30 years after My Lai. As was not the case with Vietnam, Americans were widely united in their view of this war, and there was no built-in constituency for a challenge to the official version. Hersh's years under fire as a journalistic shock trooper, his continued outsider status and the flaws in his journalism—both imagined and real—had taken their toll on his reputation. All of which made Mad Dog Hersh Attacks Drug Czar a much easier story to sell.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart, among others, pushed it hard. Hersh's New Yorker piece amounted to nothing more than "an attempt to gratuitously go after public officials," Lockhart said, "to try to revive a journalist's career."

Remnick, who spent a fair amount of time last spring asking people to please just read the McCaffrey story, is particularly exasperated by the fading-career line. "Talent at the highest level is rare in anything," he says, and to compare the ambition and intelligence of Hersh's work to that of the average reporter is "like comparing Philip Roth to the average well-meaning writer's-workshop novel." And so what if every Roth novel isn't Goodbye, Columbus?

"These are not ballplayers, all right? They're not going to dry up and go away when they're 34."

'I Could Tell The Story in a Million Ways'

"Let's go! Let's have some ideas! Put yourself in my shoes—what do you do? Back at the James D. Ewing Lecture, time has been frozen. It's still the fall of 1969. That tempting document still lies on the desk of William Calley's lawyer, waiting for the 32-year-old Seymour Hersh to make up his mind. What's running through his head is: Fame! Fortune! Pulitzer! Or maybe: This could stop the war! Or maybe both. "I could tell the story in a million ways," he tells the Duke audience. "Look how much power we have in the media. I could tell you that story—I could make you sing, laugh, dance or cry depending on how I tell the story."

It would make no difference, however.

"You want to know what the answer is? All of this? You can't touch it," he says finally. "It's a criminal offense to take the document." Worse, it's a betrayal of the First Amendment, no matter how pure the motivations of the journalist may be.

His listeners are surprised by this—a majority was sure he should grab it and run—and a question arises: How did he get the story, then? In his answer, he confesses that he's lied to them about a crucial part of the scenario. In real life, Calley's lawyer never actually got a phone call, and he never left the room. He merely showed Hersh the line about the 109 Oriental human beings, then said, "I can't let you see this, of course"—and put the document down on his desk. The two men talked for another 25 minutes, Hersh says, during which time, "instead of writing notes, I copied it down upside-down, word for word in my notebook." An adrenaline-fueled effort that still amazes him. "I couldn't do that now if I stood on my head."

But that's not the point he wants them to take away.

What would he have done if his man had left the room? That's a tough question. He admits that he doesn't know for sure. What would he do in the same situation now? That's an easier one. "Today I'd probably say, 'Judge, let me have the damn paper. Just let me copy it.' I'd probably say that; he'd probably say okay. I was afraid to ask."

That's not the point either, though.

Twelve hours later, Hersh is back in the air, winging home to that crowded two-room office and a day of phone calls and e-mails and faxes for his upcoming New Yorker story (it's about the oil industry, is all he'll say for now). He's on a propeller plane, and he has a hard time making himself heard over the noise. But there's something he really wants to make clear.

He brought the war home from Vietnam. He turned the CIA inside out for everyone to see. He altered history's verdict on Henry Kissinger, and he thinks he changed it some on John F. Kennedy, too, and he's done his best to revise the image of the Gulf War. For all of his professional life, on these topics and many more, Seymour Hersh has worked like a half-starved wolverine to break through to "the reality that existed as opposed to the reality people think exists," and he has done it his own way, on his own terms. But if you're inclined to see some kind of motivational pattern to all this—well, that's your problem, not his.

"The point I was making is that it really doesn't matter what's in the mind of the reporter writing the story," says the man who has spent a lifetime digging beneath the surface of things.

All that matters are the stories themselves.