THE TOUGHEST REPORTER IN AMERICA

The Rolling Stone Interview with Seymour Hersh Part II

By JOE ESZTERHAS

Seymour Hersh with wife Elizabeth, a medical student, and children Matthew, 7, and Melissa, 4.

Annie Leibovitz

Seymour M. Hersh, now an investigative reporter for the New York Times' *Washington bureau, is the reporter who broke the stories of the My Lai massacre, the secret bombing of Cambodia and the CIA's involvement in domestic spying. He has won most of this country's journalism awards and is the author of three books.*

In Part I, Hersh described how, on the strength of an American Express card and enough chutzpah for a hundred mortals, he broke the story about the massacre at My Lai.

But the road to becoming "The Toughest Reporter in America" was a long and winding one. Along the way, Sy Hersh flunked out of law school, sold liquor and smashed a lot of golf balls. That, however, is getting ahead of the story. . . .

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago although I was born on the north side, and went to Hyde Park High School. My frame of reference was Chico Carrasquel, Minnie Minoso and Billy Pierce, who all played for the White Sox. I worked in a cleaning store.

I didn't know what I wanted to do when I was in high school. Besides baseball, I was interested in reading. I read Steinbeck, Book of the Month-type stuff. My favorite books were *Catcher in the Rye* and *Appointment in Samarra.* I remember once reading a Thomas Hardy book I didn't have to. I didn't read the Russians till later. I didn't read *War and Peace* until I was 25. I loved Lenny Bruce. I grooved on him at a place called Mister Kelly's. My father made me play the violin. I played it for six years. It ruined me for music. It's sad because my father always used to drag me to concerts.

I went to the University of Chicago. I was never in student government. I didn't work for the school paper. But I wasn't a nebbish, either. I joined a social fraternity. I was a Phi Kappa Psi. Was I manic like I am now? I don't know. I don't think I'm that manic now. I'm an operator at a fast clip. So was my father. My father was always very quick, speedy. Flighty, jumping to conclusions. I was a real troublemaker in college. I learned I had an ability to provoke people. I had the fastest tongue in the West. Always faster than other people. Better barbs. I did terrible things. I'd bird-dog, steal dates at parties. I thought I was a bad dude. Bad bad bad bad.

I played bridge with people who were perhaps the best. One of the fellows later became one of the better physical chemists in the world. Another became one of the better clinical psychologists in the world. Super bright. Another one became a wonderful mathematician. We'd play bridge and the rule was you always bid six on everything. That was a passion for about a year. You'd defeat somebody and he'd get furious and he'd say: "If you knew how to play bridge, you'd have known never to ruff with a seven then . . . because if you had any sense, you know you should have ruffed with a four. That was a better ruff because that would have indicated to your partner you had three to the seven. When you ruffed with the seven, I misread you." You know those kinds of conversations. Very complicated craziness.

Chicago was a very strange place. A lot of parties and grain alcohol, I remember that. Chicago was a terrifying place, sort of a savage place. We were a little profligate. I think the first time I had a "reefer"—that's what we called them—the first time I had a joint was in '55, you know. In some bathroom in somebody's house in southwest Chicago somewhere. I had a girlfriend, I had a couple of girlfriends, but I never was a big—I was the farthest thing from a lover.

I had an older friend, John. He was seven years older than me and a senior in medical school and I idolized him. As I realize it now, he used to torture me. He was sick enough in his own way to want to torture me. He once had me on a double date with a woman who was a stewardess—which was a big thing, a 25-year-old stewardess—and I was going to be fixed up with her roommate. I was 19. So we drove out to the airport and he said: "Now I told her you're a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post.*" I said: "Great, okay, I'll pull it off!" He said: "Do one thing. Do

Dean and his gang played the press like violins two years ago when things first began to break and Dean began his counterattack. I always felt badly. I felt used by him like I did by McNamara. He was out to get the president so it was a righteous crusade, right?

something about that pimple on the edge of your nose. It's going to break any second." So I spent a little while squeezing it, right?

Then we pick up the girls and I'm being cool, a cool stud. There I am, 19 years old, and the girl was—who knows—well on her way to being a hooker. I don't know. This was back in the Fifties. Who knows what the hell she was doing. We went to someone's apartment. I remember the girls walked around in underwear. Rather provocative, right? I remember we were playing "kneesies" and we did some necking but she wouldn't let me come in. We had a long night drinking. And this girl was my date. I dropped her roommate off at John's house. And I took her home. We necked and messed around. And then we made a date. She had a flight that got in at 2:20 the next morning at Midway Airport.

I went down to the airport the next day and waited till six or seven in the morning before I realized I'd been had. I didn't unravel it all until later. I realized: My God, what a joke it must have been. Here I am pretending to be a writer, a 19-year-old writer for the *Saturday Evening Post*. First they give me a peep show. Then we go and everybody's drinking like crazy. John must have had the greatest time of his life. It was kind of cruel. But, you know, so what? It's a tough world.

I graduated with a B.A. in history. I'd been a very mediocre student. A B student, B minus. I had no interest in journalism. I read the *New Republic* off and on. I used to do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle a lot. This was a funny era, the late Fifties. We used to have a charge account at an after-hours bar. We'd literally drink and stagger out. We'd drink with the ballplayers till seven in the morning. Drink martinis and stagger out puking.

I did a lot of crazy things. Like I never had license plates on my car because I couldn't afford them. The cops were so corrupt in Chicago. A cop would stop you for speeding and he would say: "You don't have a city sticker, you don't have a license tag, you don't have a driver's license and maybe you're drunk." And then he'd say: "Well, how much have you got? My partner and I need breakfast." I'm not kidding. Something worse actually happened to my brother once. He was 16 years old. He had six kids in the car all beered up. He was going at least 40 miles over the speed limit in a 25 m.p.h. zone. He got stopped and the cop actually made them all go through their pockets.

I was going through all the things everybody goes through. Profound doubt, navel staring, insecurity about everything from your manhood to your brains. Nobody can escape that stuff. It's all part of growing up. I couldn't get a job after graduating and I was working at Walgreen's Drug Store, a buck fifty an hour. A friend told me about this place called City News Bureau where you could learn to be a reporter and they paid you. I hadn't really considered journalism. It was just a job so I wouldn't have to work in the drugstore the rest of my life.

So I went down and applied for a job and they said: "We've got nothin'. We'll call you, kid." I said okay. In August I applied to law school at Chicago and I got in. It was a disaster. I just hated law. I used to sit in the library reading Kafka and other novels hidden inside my law books. I used to sit around reading novels inside the law books. I literally remember reading "The Mole" in the law library. I really didn't like law. I wasn't interested. And you could say I was afraid. That I might not succeed. Because I fast-talked my way through college getting Bs knowing nothing. By the end of my first year, I already had probably the lowest average in the history of the law school. So I got bounced out of law school.

I spent the next summer back at Walgreen's. I was drifting along working more and more as a clerk. One day an old English professor of mine, Richard Stern, came in to buy liquor. He placed me as a student. He demanded to know what the hell a former student of his was doing selling him his fifth of Scotch. And then one day the phone rang. I answered it and a guy named Walter Ryburger from the City News Bureau said: "Hersh, we got a job for you now." It had been 15 months since I applied there. And I said: "I'll take it." I went right down there. That's how my newspaper career began.

They had some sort of multilithograph machine. They used to type their stories on wax paper—on a piece of paper over wax and they'd get an impression on the wax. They'd put the wax on a roller with a lot of blue ink and they'd run 200 copies off the wax. That's what my job was. I worked eight hours a day doing that and getting coffee and stuff for the boys.

This was the famous Ben Hecht place: where we covered all the crimes and all the fires for the four Chicago newspapers and radio stations. They had a little news service like an AP ticker and we relayed on it. A lot of drinking used to go on. I remember the first story I covered came because everybody was in their cups. There was a manhole fire down the street. An editor said: "Hey, kid, go down there and cover it." An electrical fire in a manhole. My first story.

One of the things I had to take care of was the "Scoop Sheet." I'd have to take the papers and every time our guy on that beat got scooped, I'd have to write it up on the Scoop Sheet. That's how they kept tabs. I remember one night I took every story on the sports page and I put it on the Scoop Sheet. I did it to a neurotic sportswriter. He had it in for me after that. Ooooooooo! He didn't like that at all. At seven o'clock in the morning, I also had to clean the desks. There was this editor straight out of *Front Page*—literally. I'd scrub his desk down each morning and he'd come in and the first thing he did—he took his hands and wiped them along the desk to check. Then he'd go wash his hands.

I'd get to work in the morning at twilight, just when the light was changing. I used to have a cheap place to park my car a couple of blocks from the Chicago River. I parked it at that time of the day when you'd turn your lights on but you'd forget you'd put them on. At least three times a week I'd leave my lights on. I had an old goddamned Studebaker. I was always begging people to give me pushes. I had no money. I was making $35 a week with those guys. No money whatsoever and most of it went for rent. I was sharing an apartment with four guys.

I have a classic story. One day I was covering the black district on the South Side. Some guy went crazy and shot himself and his wife and four kids. Five murders and a suicide. I couldn't believe it. I went to look at the bodies and they were all lying there and I went and grabbed the phone. I said: "Bulletin!" I gave it to a rewrite guy and started dictating the details. In the middle of my dictation, an editor got on the phone. He was an old old meany—I mean "meany" in the best *Yellow Submarine* Beatles sense. A blue meany. He said: "Ah, my good dear energetic Mr. Hersh. Pardon me for interrupting but these, alas, poor unfortunate victims, do they happen to be of the American Negro persuasion?" And I said yes. "Will you please then cheap it out?" Which meant one paragraph. You learn a lot about the newspaper business that way. It wasn't a story because they were black.

Then the Army came up. Somebody in the City News got me into a reserve unit. I went into the Army for six months. I never had a problem in the Army. I figured out how to handle it right away in basic training. I'd be standing there and some sergeant would say: "You! You last ten guys! Get over to that truck and unload it!" I'd say: "Yes sir!" I'd run right to the truck and I'd be the first one there and I'd go to the sergeant in the truck and I'd say: "Sergeant, Private Hersh reporting, sir! The men are coming to unload the truck." Then I'd walk around and I'd go behind the truck. It was easy. I also played on the camp baseball team. I was a great "practice" ballplayer but in the games I'd tighten up. But I'd go dress up for the games and play a couple of innings of outfield here and there. I had trouble with some of the guys because of my baseball playing. I would take off in the afternoon to play a game and my colleagues did not like that too much. I think "Candy-ass" was the word they used.

When I was through with the Army I wanted to go back to City News but they didn't have a job for me. It turned out they'd fired me. I didn't even know that. It wasn't until later that I figured it out. They didn't want me back. I was a wise guy, yeah, but I was never that much of a wise guy. I say that defensively. I wasn't in awe. But what the hell—a reporter isn't supposed to be in awe. I think I rubbed somebody very much the wrong way. To this day I don't know what I did.

I answered a want ad for a suburban newspaper. I went to a place called Oak Lawn, Illinois, where some guy had a weekly with a staff of one. I was it. He hired me for $110 a week and I put out his paper. I had a great time. I had to report it, edit it, get it in type, send it to the typesetter, proofread it when it came back. I worked eight to 12 hours every day. I had no money, I was living at my sister's in Highland Park, which is 25 miles north of Chicago. So I used to drive 50 miles a day, back and forth. I think I got a $5 bonus for Christmas.

Back at the City News Service, I'd met a guy named Bob Billings. He was 6'2" or 6'3", tough, tough. A helluva nice guy but he'd scared the hell out of me. "Hey kid," he'd say, "get up here! Two sandwiches fast and hurry up!" Billings, it turned out, was a golfer and I was a good golfer so he and I would go out and hit the hell out of the ball and have a great time. We became friends. Billings kept getting after me now to start a suburban newspaper together. He was still at City News. I finally said: "Let's go." It was a southwest suburb of Chicago—very heavily Catholic, decent people, some upper, mostly middle class. We started a suburban paper, the *Dispatch*, in January. In February we were to publish.

I think I went to five or six banks and got them all to buy ads before we even published. Full-page ads for a month or two, money in advance. Billings and I rented a little office. One day we printed 25,000 copies. We got the newsboys lined up. And all of a sudden we just papered this small town. We tried to get one to everybody free. After three months we went to every country club in the South Side of Chicago and got them to buy ads for a special 36-page spring golf edition. I never worked so hard in my life.

We began on Friday. The paper was delivered on Thursday. I'd sell Friday, I'd sell Saturday, I'd sell Sunday. On Monday, we'd sit down and edit the paper. Get it set and proofed. It was usually 24 pages. We put together the whole thing on Tuesday. It went to the printer by Wednesday noon. We picked up the paper on Wednesday night around ten o'clock and guess who'd

drive the truck. Me or Bob. And we'd drop off the paper to the newsboys Wednesday night all night and we'd get home at five or six in the morning.

I was the editor and my day off was Thursday. On Thursday I'd go out and play 45 holes of golf. I knew a wonderful golf course about 40 miles outside of Chicago, a beautiful golf course. It only cost three or four bucks to play all day. I'd play a morning round, go have lunch. Play an early afternoon round, go have another hamburger. Then go play until it got dark. Those were the days when I was breaking 80. Sometimes I'd play for money. If I played with somebody, I tried to hustle them. I'd take the nine toughest holes in the golf course and bet somebody I couldn't do it in 38 or 39 and then do it. I used to think I was pretty good at it. It was sort of fun to swing at a little thing as hard as you could and drive it a mile. Everybody would "ooh" and "aah."

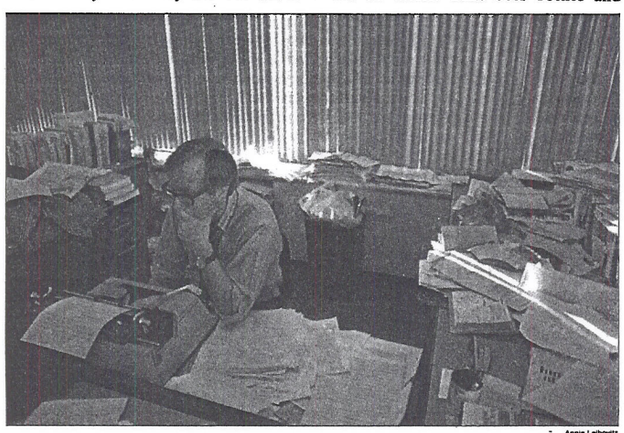
Then the next day back to the paper and work work work work work. We were making it. The paper was a success. I had no other world, no other life. After about four months, in May of '62, I'm driving along at two o'clock in the morning delivering papers to kids in Oak Lawn and I say to myself: This is crazy. This is going to work, I know it's going to work but it's crazy. I don't want to become a suburban magnate. So I told Bob Billings, my partner. He didn't want me to sell—with justification I think. We started it together and here I was jacking him. We ended it. Bob wouldn't buy it from me. One day he just split. And I split. Paid the income tax people. Just folded it. I think we sold the name to somebody. I haven't seen Billings since.

I knew I didn't want to be a suburban magnate, but now I also knew what I did want to do. I wanted to go to Washington and be a reporter. By then I was beginning to read a lot. And my focus had changed. Kennedy was in. I honestly think that if somebody had offered me a job in the CIA I would have jumped at it, too. The CIA! Wow! Super! I hope you know what I'm saying?

I drove out to California. My mother was living in Los Angeles. I went down to L.A. and I did something weird. I used to carry around my golf clubs. I played golf in California for two weeks. I went to the El Rancho Country Club, a public golf course. I had some money left over from the paper and I didn't have to go to work right away. It was a weird interlude in my life. I was playing foursomes with local guys or retired butchers from Brooklyn. And I was playing alone a lot. I liked playing by myself a lot. I'll tell you something funny. For all my manicness, for example, I've always liked to eat alone. It's sort of a treat. I like to make it a point, once a week or so, just to go down to a hamburger joint for lunch with my paper and read it. So I enjoyed playing golf alone. What ended it was this: One day while I was playing somebody stole every goddamned piece of clothing I had in my car. So it was time to look for a job.

I went to the *L.A. Times* and all they offered me was a job in their suburban section. Well, I'd had my fill of suburban sections. Maybe they didn't even offer me a job. They said I was "eligible" for a job—out in Orange County. I didn't want that. I drove cross-country toward Chicago—some old friends of mine from college and my mother. We drove straight through without sleeping. In a car that would only go 50 miles an hour, we must have looked like a bunch of Okies. It was an old Dodge station wagon that had a motor filled up with 60-grade motorcycle oil and STP. We drove to my sister's house and I went job hunting.

It was the fall of '62. I went to a couple of places and United Press International offered me a job—in Pierre, South Dakota. I took the old Dodge and put it on the road again. I remember in Minneapolis a bearing went out. A guy said he could fix it for 40 bucks. I didn't have 40 bucks. UPI had to wire the money. That was a sort of low point of my UPI career. I hadn't even gotten to the job and already they were in debt because of me. They didn't like that too much. They were very nervous about



Annie Leibovitz

that. It came out of my first check. The week I got to UPI was the week of the missile crisis—October.

I did have a helluva lot of fun in Pierre, South Dakota. Social life was really interesting there. The second night I was there I had a heavy date with a girl who was an office worker in the capitol. The next morning I was in my little office in the state capitol. The girl came in and she said: "What time are we going to lunch?" I said: "Wait a second, what are you talking about?" She said: "Well, let's go to lunch!" I realized that all the other girls who worked in the capitol knew everything, you know. It was just hopeless.

There was just no way you could make out there. I later learned there were a bunch of guys in the attorney general's office, young lawyers, who'd discovered the same thing. So every weekend we'd go bowl. From Friday night to Sunday morning that's what we did. I got to be a helluva bowler. Golf disappeared. You'd bowl and you'd drink. You'd bowl for money and drink.

I lived in a little one-room shack with an oil heater. I paid 35 bucks a month. There I was in South Dakota. I used to have to walk to work because the snow came in and I never saw my car again. It was snowed in. It was always cold. I used to have to do a seven-in-the-morning radio spread. I had 15 minutes to assemble the news for UPI's radio clients. This was the way to do it: You get to the office about two minutes before seven, sometimes one minute before seven. You get the snow off your shoes, stomp around, get your fingers a little bit warm. Then you'd punch the tape and reach around and desperately grab the morning paper. And you'd just start rewriting the morning paper. Crazy, just crazy. When the legislature ended, in April, I did too. They wanted me to stay. I said no way. I said: "I want out." They said: "We'll put you in Omaha." I said no way.

In Pierre I got heavily into reading about politics. I read Sandburg's *Lincoln*. I read all of Schlesinger's stuff about FDR. I began to read American history, political history. I was reading every night in Pierre when I wasn't romping, stomping, shit-kicking, snot-flying drunk. I saw some terrible fights in Pierre.

I learned something about fighting when I was a kid. I was in a street fight when I was just beginning high school. I learned this: I was just about ready to cry when the other guy did. I didn't feel very victorious. I lost my urge to get into fights. As people get older, they get meaner and tougher. In Pierre, South Dakota, they used to break bottles on tables. Take beer bottles and slam them down. And, you know, I was not a Wild West frontier type.

I left Pierre in the spring and went back to my sister's house in Highland Park. I got my shit-brown 1956 six-cylinder Dodge station wagon going again. I had no money and I started job hunting again. I went to the *Chicago Daily News* and nothing. Finally I went to the Associated Press. Apparently what happened, I gather, is that about 12 minutes before I walked in, some guy who'd been working there for years suddenly threw his hands up and screamed: "Eureka! No more! I am not gonna funnel this crap any more!" and stormed out. And then I walked in. I went to work. It was very curious because I used to watch kid after kid come in and fill out an application. I always wondered what made them hire me. Why me? They all had recommendations.

The first day at the AP I just sat there and the second day somebody called in with a story and I wrote about 500 words on a car wreck. And the city editor took a word from the first paragraph, a word from the second paragraph, a word from the third, and strung them all together to make one sentence. "Two persons were killed in a car crash yesterday near Champaign, Illinois, etc." That's all they put on the wire. I'll never forget that. I thought I had a long way to go.

They kept you busy, you were really humping. You know, pounding on the typewriter all the time. Finally, after about eight or ten months, I got to night rewrite. And I just started to write stuff. It was very clear that I could. After about a year my job was to find some feature story to write on the wire every night. I'll tell you how it started. I was on night rewrite and some funny story happened about a car and somebody said: "Give me a little rewrite on that," and I wrote a little 400-word story that was very funny. And we sent it to New York and offered it as maybe a little feature for later in the morning. They said: "We'll put it on the wire now." About an hour later they called up and asked who wrote it. And they wrote a little note on the wire: "The feature on so and so was written by a new reporter in Chicago, Seymour Hersh." It was one of those stories that led every paper.

It was just a good story, the kind everybody reads and laughs at. I imagine people at the AP said: "Let him write." I did a couple like that. Dog bites dog, lady pushes car, some wonderfully inane stories. I wrote with a good catchy lead. There was an ambitious guy in New York who was an overnight editor and he used to ask me to write stuff. "Tell Hersh I want more of this." Everybody was getting along famously because I was writing features. I was a feature writer. Lord knows, I wrote every crazy story I could write. I did a St. Patrick's Day story about Mayor Daley dyeing the river green.

The Kennedy assassination was a traumatic event for me. I was working for the AP that night. I kept the wire copy for 24 hours. I kept it for years in my house, the whole story as it broke. I worked 24 hours that day, writing Illinois's reaction. I wanted badly to go to Washington. I was religiously reading the *New York Times*. I admired Halberstam's reporting from Vietnam and Malcolm Browne's reporting from there. I was reading the *Washington Post*. I was reading the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* and those magazines. I used to read *Commentary* a lot—I used to get very furious, but I read it. Whatever out-of-town papers we got I used to read every day. Mostly for my byline.

I was into it then. I was obviously a guy who was talented. I told the AP I wanted to go to Washington and they said they'd send me the first chance they had. I got married in 1964 and my wife started working in Chicago. In '65 they said: "Still want to go to Washington?" I said: "Yup." They said: "In two months, is that okay?" I said: "Yup." They said: "Fine."

The AP was pretty good to me. They moved me right up. They didn't sit on me. I wrote a lot of stuff for the AP in Washington. I wrote dozens of Pentagon stories and I was sent around the country to cover stuff. Then, in early 1967, they set up a special investigative reporting team. I didn't want to do it. I wanted to stay at the Pentagon. They said: "No, you gotta do it," and I was very unhappy about it.

I'd read a couple of marvelous articles in *Science* magazine on chemical and biological warfare. And I thought: Somebody on the inside must be willing to tell me some things in relation to that. I knew that if I stuck around I could probably go to the bases involved and get some more things. The AP said go ahead and I spent a couple weeks flying around the country looking into chemical and biological warfare. I came back and wrote a 10,000-word piece.

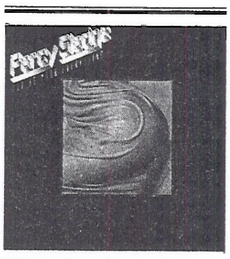
I gave my editor the story. The lead was: "The United States is spending $230 million a year for chemical and biological warfare." It was a helluva good story with some terrific stuff in it. The editor looked at it, put it in a stack, squared it, put it down. And I sat there. I watched him that day and he didn't look at it. The next day he came in and I sat there and watched him. He didn't look at it. The third day he called me over and he gave it back to me and he said: "Cut it, it's too long." And I said: "Why? Why don't [*Cont. on 62*]

dence's 1969-71 singles' brilliance, I find this LP at least as enjoyable as any CCR album. *Pre-Creedence*, which will dazzle dedicated Fogerty fans, is a godsend for collectors who previously paid $10 a shot for the rare singles.

Goodnight Vienna
Ringo Starr
Apple SW-3417

by Tom Nolan

This pleasant collection follows in the winning tradition of Ringo's breakthrough album, *Ringo*, with producer Richard Perry seeing little need to alter that disc's formula. These are crisp, infectious cover versions of originals and oldies by the likes of John Lennon, Allen Toussaint, Elton John, the Platters, Harry Nilsson and one Richard Starkey. Perry keeps the brass and backing voices busy, the top-flight session people and guest stars perform with easy excellence and Ringo supplies that unalloyed sincerity which is his trademark and trump card. While there is nothing startling here — the previous LP absorbed all the surprise of Ringo in a genuinely commercial solo setting — neither is there much that isn't good for a smile.



I'll Be Your Everything
Percy Sledge
Capricorn CP 0147

by Mark Vining

Percy Sledge revives on this finely crafted album the same solid country feeling that barely hid below the surface of "When a Man Loves a Woman," his astonishing hit of nine years ago. The most important difference since then has been his move to Macon's Capricorn label, which has let a good deal more of the singer's rural ties show through. Most of the cuts are deliberately paced, classical country-soul of the old school. Sledge's unstrained delivery and the record's simple but ample production strike a responsive chord. The album is old-fashioned in the best sense.

HERSH

[*Continued from 47*]

you read it first?" He said: "It's too long, it just won't go."

I cut the story in half and we sent it to New York. New York cut it another two-thirds, leaving me 1700 words, and they changed the lead. The lead on the story now read: "The United States is spending $230 million a year on a chemical and biological warfare program it describes as essential to national security and a deterrent against Russian attack." So I took the story to the *New Republic*, where they made it a big 7000-word piece called "Only a Drop Can Kill." I got some book offers as a result and I accepted one. The advance was hardly anything. Screw it, I quit the AP anyway. I didn't quit just because they cut my story. That was only one of the factors.

I worked very hard on my book. I researched and wrote my ass off. I wrote 12 hours a day. I used to write all night, go out at five o'clock in the morning to read the *Washington Post*, then come back and go to sleep. My goal was to write ten pages a day. I used to work in the HEW press office. HEW had a press room on the fifth floor that nobody ever used. Nobody would be in there for months. I had a friend who worked for HEW and he said: "Why don't you just stay in the press office?" So the HEW office was my office until I got the book done, which was in October of 1967.

Mary McGrory, the columnist, lived across the street from us. She's a wonderful lady. I'd go across the street and have a drink and we'd talk. She liked my wife and my wife liked her. Mary said Gene McCarthy was starting his campaign for the presidency. She got me together with McCarthy and I joined him in late December as his press secretary.

I worked incredibly hard. I was dumb, I only slept three or four hours. I should have allowed myself more sleep. I got a cold in February and it got worse and worse. I quit on the 27th of March in 1968 and I slept for about a week after that. I quit for a lot of complicated reasons. I've never really talked about them. I turned down offers then to write the "kiss and tell" book, so I'm not going to talk about the reasons I quit now. It had nothing to do with Gene. In a way, something—but not really. I don't want to mislead you. But nothing that's of great importance. I'm still a great admirer of his.

What else did you go on to? Besides fame, fortune, prizes and glory?

I wrote my book about My Lai, *My Lai Four: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*. *Harper's* ran a big chunk of it. By then the Army

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had done its investigation and I walked into a guy who was involved in it peripherally. He was disgusted with the way the investigation had failed to produce anything and the way the Army had washed everything off. He began leaking me the Peers stuff.

And I went to the *New Yorker*. Mr. Shawn, the editor there, realized the significance of the material I was talking about. They agreed to commission me to write about it and I spent about a year and a half and wrote two pieces for him that also turned out to be a book called *Cover-Up*, which took me to 1972.

After that I did a lot of stuff on prisoners of war. That didn't work, though I really looked into it very hard. I wasn't able to grab enough. I was unhappy with the Nixon administration's handling of the POW situation. I knew it was very much politicized by the Nixon administration. On the other hand I had some people I really trusted tell me there were some serious signs of trouble there. So Hanoi finally said I could come and see some prisoners. They gave me the standard tour.

Did they speak to you about your My Lai stories?

Yeah. They introduced me to a woman who survived and she told me her version. There were other My Lais they introduced me to. They wanted to put me on the air, on the radio, but I didn't want to go. They were pretty hard minded, tough minded.

Why didn't you want to go on the air?

I just didn't think it was my business to go on the air. I happened to be there on the fourth anniversary of My Lai, in '72, and they wanted me to say something on the radio about My Lai and I just wouldn't do it. You have to understand, they were very nice. If I have a weird sense about it, it's because they were planning an offensive. And I felt like I'd had my pants pulled off. I'd gone down there and I'd never smelled it.

How do you mean they were "tough minded"?

They knew all of the abuses of the war and they saw how long it took us to catch up with them. They were very cynical about our society. That's why they thought My Lai was so important because it was a watershed for them in terms of truth.

Did they treat you in a more friendly manner because of your My Lai stories?

Yes. I had dinners with them quite often. I saw a lot of important people there. I had an awful lot of interviews. Everybody knew who I was. I was a sort of culture hero there. The workers would come up and cluster around me. They were "very honored to meet me, the gentleman who told the truth about the war." It was a funny position to be in, though, because I wanted to be there just as a journalist. You see, I was there writing stories freelance for the *New York Times*. I kept on saying: "Look, I'm not somebody here who's going to make a statement for you. I'm a journalist." But by the end it worked out. They realized I wasn't going to come back and make a lot of speeches at antiwar rallies.

At times it got very lonely. The Vietnamese would show me what they wanted to show me and then after dinner at 6:30, poof! they'd be done. So at 6:30 I'd be in the middle of some resort with nobody else there. Some huge resort and I'd be the only one there. Not even pinball machines to play. And just a few books. I remember I talked to a bunch of monkeys one night.

Let me tell you a story which illustrates what it was like: We were driving on the road to Haiphong one day. I had my own little Exacta. I am a terrible photographer but I was taking my own pictures. We stopped to take leaks by the side of the road and I took out my camera. I scrunched around and took pictures — big broad plains, mountains in the background.

I was traveling with a driver who didn't speak English, a Vietnamese interpreter who spoke beautiful English and Major Bo—a very very solid, tough Army major who didn't speak English or French. I liked him — he had a good sense of humor. By tough I mean that Major Bo had gone and killed a lot of Americans in his life. And he knew the American units well. It was a funny feeling. I didn't feel like a traitor, I just felt eerie. Here was this guy with me whose units had killed young GIs in combat. Major Bo didn't say much.

Anyway, I was taking pictures and I heard Major Bo say something and the other two laughed. I turned to my interpreter and I said: "What was that?" And he said: "Nothing." I said: "Come on, what did he say?" The interpreter said: "Naw, it was nothing." I said: "Look, goddamnit, you and I have been together, we've interviewed all sorts of people. You translated everything I wanted. I want to know everything. We have to have trust or else I can't trust anything I get out of here." He said: "It was just something personal, nothing important." I said: "I want it translated." I was being very tough. He said: "All right, Major Bo says thou are a very very shitty photographer."

The night before I'd gone for a walk with the interpreter. I was all full of piss and vinegar. And every time I saw somebody limping, I'd stop and say: "I want to hear your story." It was interesting because these were guys who'd been shot up by GIs. Normally you'd expect to hear a lot of stuff like "cowardly jackals of the American Army." But not these guys. They'd say things like: "Oh, yes. We fought a Marine unit and they were very good fighters. Oh, yes, they trapped us. They were very tough fighters." One group of guys particularly praised a Marine unit. They even knew the colonel who ran it. They said: "He was a good fighter. He knew how to use his men." I wrote those things in my story for the *Times* and the Vietnamese didn't like the fact that I wrote that kind of thing. It caused a hassle.

What was your impression of the North Vietnamese people?

They were an organized society. They were in terrific shape, friendly and smiling and I was after all an American. The first day I got there, in the late morning, they insisted I take a nap and of course I didn't. I went out and took a walk. The kids were coming out of school. I was in a place called the Reunification Hotel right across from a lovely park in downtown Hanoi near the Red River. A park with a little laguna in it. There were people lounging around, paddling in canoes. I went walking in the park. It was March and warm and sunny. A group of schoolchildren came by on bicycles. The first kid, as he came near me, said: "Good afternoon, sir." In impeccably accented English. All the other kids started laughing. They all said: "Good afternoon, sir, good afternoon, sir" as they went by. We all suddenly laughed and thought that was very charming. They were a diverse people. I bought stuff in a private shop and I had meals in private restaurants.

Did they ever let you talk to POWs?

Yeah, I talked to a couple but under very sad conditions. I was very disappointed about that. I wanted to go into a camp. I wanted to see what was going on. I didn't like the fact they didn't let me.

Did they tell you why they wouldn't let you go into a camp?

No, they just didn't do it.

Did they talk to you of crossovers?

No. But I heard of two guys while I was in Hanoi who crossed over. One of the Pathet Lao people told me there was a white man fighting with the Cambodians. I also heard of a black man fighting with the Viet Cong. That's never been established, though. It's one of the great myth stories going on about the Vietnam war.

[Continued on 67]

[Continued from 65]

What did you do when you came back from Vietnam?

I went to the *Times*. I had a lot of respect for the *Times* after the Pentagon Papers. I have to be perfectly honest, the *Times* is obviously the best paper in the country. No question about it. Every budding journalist wants to work for the *New York Times*. And after the Pentagon Papers, I did too.

My friends all told me: "You'll last six months. You'll go crazy. They'll cut you up." But I never worried about it, I never thought so. I always thought it would work fine. Because I know what kind of reporter I am. I know I am careful. I have good instincts. So I never worried about it. And I was right. It's been terrific. I've had no trouble. I've had a great time.

A lot of people write something that isn't true. Nothing malicious, they just don't want to check something out. I mean, in a way the *Village Voice* and *More* magazine make a living by criticizing the *New York Times*. It's a great big bureaucracy. But I've had nothing but glory. Now maybe I'm an aberration. Other people in the business tell me that other guys in my bureau describe me as special—in the sense that I can get away with things nobody else can. I don't necessarily believe that.

Do you pick your own stories?

Sure.

You can pick any story you want and follow it?

I pass over a lot of stuff, too. If you pick the right story, you won't have any trouble.

You went to the Times *specifically to do things out of Washington.*

Yeah. I wanted to be an investigative reporter. They hired me to be an investigative reporter. I've gone months without writing stories. Months when nobody says boo to me. The assumption is that I'm working when I'm not writing. So it's worked out fine.

What does the state of the nation look like to you these days? What shape are we in after Vietnam and Watergate?

My perceptions here probably aren't any more important than anybody else's. I see a terrific skepticism, of course. On the other hand, I see something positive, too. One of the problems with Watergate is that there was no great moral lesson in it — except that you can say the Constitution worked. But what great moral lessons did we learn? That we shouldn't elect psychopaths? That we should keep people who are criminals out of public office? But while there is no great lesson to be learned from Watergate, there is a certain reaffirmation simply in the fact that, try as they might, with the FBI and the CIA and who knows what else, the fascist state didn't happen. You know, the instinct towards freedom in this goddamn country is so strong. It's very reassuring. We may have dabbled at the edge of the fascist state but it really didn't happen. So I'm sort of sanguine about the country. I think the new Congress is a different Congress. I think Washington's going to be an exciting place to be.

Were we demoralized by everything that happened?

Yeah, but not just by Vietnam and Watergate. By a bad Congress and bad presidents.

Were we amoralized, do you think?

No, certainly not amoralized. One of the things about the kids at My Lai, for all of their braggadocio, they knew what they did. We all feel slightly seedy about what happened, slightly guilty. That's not the sign of an amoral society. But, you know, I avoid waxing philosophical. That's not my bag. I'll leave the metaphysics for those who feel more comfortable with it. I think there are some areas where what I say should be listened to. You know, I can tell a good story and I know a lot about the newspaper business. But I think in other areas my opinion is no better than anybody else's. Now who in the hell am I to tell what's moral and what isn't. I'm no philosopher.

Why do you say that Washington is going to be an exciting place?

Well, the Congress is really different. One thing that's always annoyed me about this city is that I think the congressmen and senators underestimate how much power they could have. And I think that now they're going to be using their power. Guys like Les Aspin and Proxmire. They're attacking things. And they're going to be much more important.

This, of course, is to a great extent a result of Watergate.

Well, yes.

The renewal of strength in Congress because of—

Of Vietnam.

Yeah. Because of the weakening of the presidency.

Yeah.

A lack of faith in the presidency? How about Ford in these terms?

Well—

The presidency is weakened and Ford fits perfectly?

Oh, I think you have to give Ford a lot of pluses for being

[Continued on 68]

[*Continued from 67*]

a basically honest guy. A good decent guy. He's not a strong president. I don't think he has any pretensions to be. He seems to accept the new status quo in terms of power. He's going to have to broker with Congress more and he's aware of it. And I think that part of it is good. His policies are something else. I have my personal opinions about his policies, but so what? So do you.

Are the "psychopaths" you mentioned before all out of the White House?

I probably should have said "sociopaths." No, they're probably not.

Who's left?

Oh, I don't know. I would guess it's a safe thing to say there are always people who are irrational.

But is the attitude of the sociopath gone from our government?

I think people are much more careful about what they do and they certainly feel a strong limit on their powers.

How about Kissinger in that sense?

Oh, I'm very skeptical about Kissinger. I mean he's not a—he's not a sociopath in that sense. He's certainly not a Nixon criminal. I wouldn't begin to suggest that. His problems are different. You know, the ends justify the means.

Isn't that exactly what they were doing?

Yeah, except they didn't, you know—look, you're going to push me into a corner on this.

Would you rather not talk about it?

I just want to tell you this. I'm not going to back off anything. That isn't my style. All right, let me tell you about my perception of Kissinger. He's obviously a fantastic negotiator. I think he could probably pull off a Mideast peace. And that's probably very important. You know, the guy is complicated. The guy has more charm and more brights than 98% of the guys in town. He really is witty. And he knows newspapermen. But he's also a user. And a distorter. He's also a very major power broker and the best politician in the White House. And he's also outsurvived all these other guys.

I guess I'm one of those people who doesn't believe that there's anybody who could have been as close as he was to as much as he was who doesn't have some explaining to do. And I don't think we begin to know what happened with Kissinger and Nixon and Haig and now maybe Rockefeller. I don't think we begin to know and I think that's the reporter's proper function—to try and find out.

I'm looking at him very hard, to be perfectly honest. I wonder why the CIA suddenly began to start following newspapermen in 1971. The easiest thing for me to think is that they did it for Kissinger. I have no evidence of it, but it's something I'm thinking about.

One of the problems I have in town is that everybody talks about me as Kissinger's special nemesis. And that stems from the fact that I happen to write a lot of stories that make Kissinger look bad. I'd rather that the stories weren't true, but they all happen to be true. I've tried to explain to some people occasionally that Kissinger's successes are covered by other reporters. And they certainly are successes. I'm not denigrating that.

But he also has been up to his ears in wiretapping. He's been very unconvincing to me and to many other reasonable people in his explanation that he didn't initiate wiretaps and therefore he wasn't responsible. I think he's up to his ears much more than we know publicly in the plumbers. I've never been satisfied by his explanation that he didn't know anything about it. I think what happened is that he probably took an unreasonable position and he couldn't back off of it. You know, in terms of categorically denying knowing anything. I think if he just said he knew something everybody would have let him go, but he took an unreasonable position. Maybe he's even worse than that, maybe he knew more. I think Kissinger as an architect of the Vietnam policy is very closely tied in with Nixon's Vietnam policy and I think that's been a tragic mistake. I think anybody who would say that peace is at hand and then keep on talking about the war being over when thousands of people were being killed is heinous.

How has he outsurvived everyone else?

Because he's good. Because he's genuinely good as a diplomat. Because he's manipulative. His latest SALT agreement in Vladivostok is a joke. We couldn't afford to build as many missiles as we've been entitled to if we tried. It wasn't an agreement to eliminate anything. It was just codifying what everybody wanted, everybody's wet dream. So he's good, he's got a better grasp of the facts, he's got some terrific staff people. Most of them leave him but while they're there they do a lot. And when it comes to smarts he does circles around Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, Nixon even. He knew how far to go, when to disengage.

Have you met Kissinger? Do you get along with him personally?

I've just talked casually with him a couple of times.

[*Continued on 71*]

[*Continued from 68*]

Has Kissinger said anything to you about any of your stories?

He's said an awful lot to a lot of people about me. Not to me. I have a way of communicating. He and I both use the same person to express views.

What kinds of things does he say about you?

Oh, I don't know. He thinks I'm out to get him. He thinks I'm unfair and he thinks I've distorted stuff. He also respects me, I think, as a very bright, tenacious sort of opponent.

What do you say to him through your middleman?

I make jokes.

Such as?

I'll just say that I'm insouciant.

Did you have any favorites among Nixon's curious crew?

Well, I never met Nixon, so my perception of him would be just like anyone else's. I knew Ehrlichman pretty well though. Ehrlichman interests me because I think him a rather attractive guy who didn't lie about a lot of subjects at an interesting time. There's a certain inborn arrogance in Ehrlichman. With Mitchell, for example, you get a sense that he really did understand what happened at the end and that he was ashamed of himself. And he was shuffled off to oblivion. Now Ehrlichman, he's going to go along pretending it didn't happen. Pretending he wasn't involved. That it was all a big mistake. And what makes that complicated for me is that in other areas Ehrlichman was very accurate with me on a number of things.

Which Watergate figure did you find the most pathetic?

I guess the saddest of all was Mitchell. It's hard to have sympathy for him but he was about the worst case. Just hopeless. At least Ehrlichman and Haldeman are going to have their own inner belief that they did nothing wrong to sustain them. That's their perception and how can you fight that? I mean, you can stand on your ear and you still won't convince those guys they did something wrong. It's the same with Nixon. "We made a few slight mistakes in judgment, but people have to understand how busy we were." They're a tough bunch of guys. Very tough.

I think the most manipulating in a way was Colson. Colson was even hustling Dean in jail. He just can't stop it. He's just always got to be playing people. He used to play me and play other people. He'd leak stuff. He'd talk about you behind your back. Not in a negative way. He's a funny guy, you know. I like Chuck, you know, sort of, he's a wheeler-dealer. "Here, I got a piece of paper for you." He was passing out papers like crazy.

Which did you find the most reprehensible, the sleaziest of the crew?

Haldeman.

Why?

Oh, I guess I didn't like his crew cut. Ehrlichman was sort of human. Colson was whatever he had to be—sort of clumsy. Haldeman just bothered me the most. He was the one who really wanted to make it a police state. Obviously, I guess, you have to say Nixon was the sleaziest too.

You haven't mentioned Liddy.

Liddy fascinates me in a way. I think Liddy thinks this is 1944 and he is in the OSS behind enemy lines. He's quite a character. I remember meeting a lady at a party once who told me a great story about Liddy. It seems that about five years back her family bought a house from Liddy. When they moved in they noticed a lot of funny plaster. They were putting up a picture or something and they noticed a couple of things behind the plaster. They looked and they were bullets. They started looking around and they found 2000 bullets in that wall. Liddy used to sit there, I guess, and get off. Bang bang! Shooting up the wall. Like Hersey's *War Lover*.

I think Hunt's much more interesting than people think. I spoke to Hunt the other week and he was marvelous. "Well," he said, "now you know why I used to get so mad when they called me an aberration. Helms and those other CIA guys are playing me as an aberration. That really offended me. I wasn't an aberration. We all did that kind of stuff." Hunt didn't do anything worse than Helms might have done. That's the thing about the agency that's so interesting.

What about Dean?

Dean and his gang played the press like violins two years ago when things first began to break and Dean began his counterattack. I always felt badly. I felt used by him like I did by McNamara. He was out to get the president so it was a righteous crusade, right?

How do you feel about the millions of dollars being made by guys like Dean thanks to their involvement in Watergate?

It doesn't worry me. They've got nowhere to go. They're six-month freaks. They don't have that much to say. They don't know that much. They're not going anywhere. They're played out. They've got nothing.

I'll tell you what's in these people. Not a helluva lot. They had very little ideology. They were very selfless. If they thought the boss wanted this, they all went that way. If they thought the boss wanted that,

[*Continued on 72*]

[Continued from 71]

they all went the other way. They had no integrity. They had no sense of individuality. These guys don't know who or what they are.

Isn't that carrying the American ideal about loyalty to the company to its ultimate?

Sure. Did you read *Something Happened*? Heller's book?

Yeah.

I think it's really interesting that that book came out now. He didn't mean it as a Watergate book, but in a way it is. These guys, Slocum and his friends, they're all over. And all over the White House. But these guys don't interest me. They're cretinous people, decent in a crazy way. They don't beat their wives or commit crimes of passion. Civilized.

The other kind of guy interests me more—like the GI the other week who wouldn't carry General Al Haig's dog. Sometimes you find that you can protest and get away with it. Goddamnit, that guy wasn't going to take that shit. And maybe now we'll also find some guys in the White House who will stop carrying the boss's dog.

You're the most respected investigative reporter in the country—it's interesting to me that you've gotten involved neither in any of the assassinations nor in Chappaquiddick. Why not?

I've scrupulously avoided the assassination stories. I think it's probably saved me about 350,000 years. I've read a lot of stuff on Jack Kennedy's assassination, less on Bobby's. Mark Raskin's written quite a bit of stuff on it. My feeling about the conspiracy theory is this: that if after the statute of limitations is up, somebody doesn't write a book for a million dollars, then there was no conspiracy.

I'll tell you what I've found —that the people who believe in conspiracy theories are the quickest to become extremely vituperative. One of these people calls you with a conspiracy theory and you say: "I don't buy it." And they say: "Sure you don't buy it, because you're part of the conspiracy." It's a gestalt I don't like. So I really have avoided the conspiracy theories. I've also avoided flying saucers. Let's see, what else do I avoid? I'll tell you, one of the funniest calls I've gotten recently was from a guy who called me up and said: "Do you remember that plane that crashed in Virginia near the secret CIA installations?" I said sure. He said: "I worked in it." That got me interested. I said: "Oh yeah? What'd you do?" He said: "I was a technician there but I got involved with the CIA there." I told him to tell me about it. And he said: "Well, the CIA began reading my brain waves." The guy blew my mind.

You've never done anything on Chappaquiddick either?

No. I thought about it once, but frankly I like to report on stories that nobody else wants to report on. That's probably one of the reasons I never did it. That's a story everybody wants to do. Guys are writing books, there are all sorts of theories. I've heard some things about Chappaquiddick that make me think the story isn't correct but I don't have the evidence. The CIA has some information.

What do you mean the CIA has some information?

I've talked to CIA people who've heard stories.

Did the CIA look into Chappaquiddick?

I don't know. They just heard stories. Whether they got it secondhand from the cops, I don't know. I talked to a domestic CIA agent who heard about Chappaquiddick. He was interested in it.

Why?

That's all I'm going to say about that particular subject.

Where do you go from here? Your boss, A.M. Rosenthal, has a theory that if you're an investigative reporter, then you have to do it your whole life. Do you agree?

No, I don't think anything is a lifetime project. First of all, life changes every three weeks. But I know what he's saying. He's saying there's a certain something in your blood. Something in your bloodstream that makes you want to go and expose.

Maybe it's some sort of psychologically freaky thing that makes you want to do it. I don't think about that too much. I don't want to tamper with that if it's true; if there is some sort of horrific defect, a personality defect that forces me to make other people look bad. I can bad-mouth a lot of people a lot and I'm not very charitable privately. I'm a bitchy sort of kvetch sometimes. So maybe there is something in me that wants to make everybody else look bad. But all right, I'll live with it. It's not the world's worst fault.

I hope, though, that Abe doesn't think people want to be reporters all their lives. Because there's nothing worse than a reporter who's over 40. They start looking behind them. I've still got some years to go but—one of the things is, you can't make enough money. Isn't that a terrible thing to say? I'm in a situation where I'd like to make more money. It's a very crass materialistic thing to say, but it's a fact. I wouldn't mind making a million dollars on a book. Having Robert Redford play me wouldn't bother me at all. I'd even settle for . . .

You'd settle for?

Tab Hunter.