

Aaron Mate: Seymour Hersh did not retract Syria reporting

The Grayzone's Aaron Mate harshly critiques a controversial scene in Laura Poitras' new Netflix documentary on the career of legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, "Cover-Up," in which Hersh appears to renounce his own reporting questioning the official story on Syrian chemical attacks. Aaron exposes deceptive editing by Poitras and reveals email correspondences in which Hersh challenged media characterizations of the scene. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Aaron

There's a new documentary by Laura Poitras about Seymour Hersh's career. It's called *Cover Up*. It's out now on Netflix, and it's great—a really great film. There's one part I take issue with, though, which is where she's interviewing Sy about his reporting in Syria. His reporting on Syria focused on the allegations that the Assad government used chemical weapons in two instances: Ghouta in 2013 and Khan Sheikhoun in 2017. Both of these cases were used to call for U.S. airstrikes on Syria. In Ghouta, we know what happened—Obama didn't bomb Syria in the end. In 2017, after that chemical attack, Trump did bomb Syria, in part to show he was a tough guy, unlike Obama.

And in both cases, Sy did reporting on Syria, showing that the U.S. was burying its own intelligence—showing that Assad didn't do it. Which, again, even if you knew nothing about the evidence, would make logical sense, because why would Assad do the one thing he knew would trigger U.S. military strikes? That was the situation under Obama's so-called red line, where he said the only red line he had, when it came to what could make him bomb Syria, was the use of chemical weapons—which then incentivized insurgents who wanted the U.S. to intervene to carry out a false flag.

So anyway, Sy's reporting advanced the case that this was indeed a false flag. And that was controversial for people who didn't want to even consider that yet another U.S. intelligence claim could be a lie. People couldn't possibly imagine that, despite a long list of past deceptions. So in this film *Cover Up*, Sy is talking about his personal feelings toward Assad, whom he interviewed a few times many years ago. He says, "I didn't think Assad could be capable of some of the crimes he committed." And he's referring to torture—the documented torture under Assad's government. That's what he's talking about.

But the way the film is edited, it shows headlines of Sy's articles, which are about chemical weapons. So the audience is left with the false impression that Sy is somehow retracting his reporting on those allegations. People have used that to claim that Seymour Hersh is retracting his reporting. There was an article in *The Nation* magazine saying that Sy basically no longer stands by those stories, and that's just not true. I've talked to Sy about this repeatedly—he does stand by that reporting. What he was saying in the film was that he thinks he misjudged Assad.

He didn't think he'd be capable of presiding over the torture process that was carried out under his watch, and also the way he just fled the country—abandoning his own top aides and taking off with a lot of money. He also just didn't think that Assad would do something like that. So that was Sy reflecting on that in the film. And I think it was—and I said this when I first saw the film to Laura Poitras, the filmmaker—edited in a really sloppy fashion and created a very misleading impression. And people have seized on that to make this false claim that Sy has retracted his reporting.

But what's funny about this *Nation* article is that Sy had an email exchange with the reporter who wrote the story—I forget his name—and Sy told him, from what I understand, that he's not retracting his reporting. But this article basically suggests otherwise. So I've asked *The Nation* to correct it, and I haven't heard back yet. Certainly, anyone with a vested interest in fueling this deception about Syria's chemical weapons has seized on it to falsely claim that Sy is retracting his reporting. And again, this is par for the course. These people can't contest his reporting on the merits, which has been substantiated by so much evidence that's emerged, including from James Clapper.

Obama's own director of national intelligence went to Obama and said the case against Assad was not a "slam dunk," which was a deliberate reference to the Iraq WMD hoax. Clapper refused to put the U.S. intelligence community's name on any document formally accusing the Assad government because they knew the evidence wasn't there. And then, of course, you have the OPCW cover-up scandal again, where the OPCW suppressed evidence of another false flag in Douma, which we've covered extensively here at *The Grayzone*. None of these people will ever try to contend with that, because they can't challenge people like Sy and myself on the facts. So, therefore, they resort to deceptive controversies like this.

#Max

None of these people know anything about the chemical attacks or about Syria—especially Laura Poitras. And there's no way she would ever, in an open forum, agree to debate that, because she'd have no idea what she's talking about. She's just hippie-punching and, uh, doing liberal gatekeeping to show that it's what she has to do in order to, uh, pay tribute to Seymour Hersh's long career. She has to show that this is what *The Nation* says.

But arguably the most consequential misstep of Hersh's career came in 2014, when he wrote a piece for the **London Review of Books** challenging claims that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons on his own citizens—blah, blah, blah. Like, that's just the standard line. By the way, this is the first thing I've read from **The Nation** in years. That's the standard understanding in left-liberal circles of where Sy Hersh went wrong. And they never allow themselves to question why, for example, the Ghouta sarin attacks took place after the OPCW determined, under Carla Del Ponte, that Jabhat al-Nusra and other factions possessed sarin.

#Aaron

And after Assad had invited weapons inspectors into the country—they were already there. I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm sorry.

#Max

Yeah, they were in the country. They were going to Khan al-Assal, and they were in Damascus—so, in territory completely controlled by Jaysh al-Islam and all these other fanatical elements backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and so on. Completely controlled by them, this supposed sarin attack occurs just a few kilometers from where the OPCW inspectors are staying, in order to divert them from going to the place where there was a sarin attack by Jabhat al-Nusra, the faction that now controls Syria. I mean, come on. And then there's all the forensic evidence that you put forward just on 2013—Khan Sheikhoun and then Douma. I mean, it just seems so much more obvious those were false flags, and that raised further questions about what took place in Ghouta.

But the idea that this is the lowest point of Sy Hersh's career is absurd. For me, this was the highest point, because he could have just sailed off into the golden sunset, in the twilight of his life, with the Abu Ghraib scandal and the My Lai massacre under his belt. But instead, he went for more and raised really important questions about issues that I think anyone watching this understands were important. We just couldn't accept the official line that **The Nation** still does. Remember, **The Nation** was edited by people who were lock, stock, and barrel in favor of regime change in Syria—Roane Carey, Adam Shatz, who's now at the **LRB**. They all signed those letters condemning you and condemning us.

And now they have nothing to say about what's happening in Syria. Of course—they were cheerleaders for al-Qaeda taking over. They were left imperialists, and they're left in the dust, I guess. But now Laura Poitras tries to revive this. And I think Seymour Hersh could have stuck to his guns more and raised more questions about what we were supposed to learn after Assad was deposed or disappeared. Remember the mass graves that we said were going to expose this gigantic holocaust? Stephen Rapp, Muaz Mustafa, and all these regime-change operatives went to Syria with bulldozers. And where is that? Where are the millions of people?

#Aaron

Well, I mean, look, there were some mass graves discovered—which, to me... there were.

#Max

It's like people who had fought in the war.

#Aaron

Exactly. There was a horrible war. And the part that gets missed is that we fueled it with one of the biggest—if not the biggest—covert arming programs in history. The Syrian insurgency was probably the most well-armed insurgency ever, which is the part no one, especially in the West, ever acknowledges, because they want to paint a very simplistic view of the war. But also, I think more importantly for this discussion—where are the chemical weapons? If Assad had this massive stockpile that he supposedly kept using even after giving it up in 2013 under a deal brokered by Russia to avoid U.S. military strikes, then where are they? It's been a year. They haven't found anything. Where's the sarin? Where's the chlorine that was supposedly dropped on Douma?

I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if they're working to plant something. But the point is, after a year, they couldn't come up with anything. And no one's remarked on that—like, at least after the Iraq invasion, people were willing to say, "Where are the WMDs?" The Bush administration had to admit there were none. But on chemical weapons, there's been this massive deception. The regime-change campaign—so much of it rested on claiming that Assad had chemical weapons, that he gassed his own people. Where are they then? Where's the stockpile? And look, on the issue of Laura, let me just say, to be fair to her, what she says is that she has friends who were tortured by the Assad government. So therefore she had to challenge Sy. Okay, but the problem there is, Sy never said there wasn't torture.

He didn't—none of his reporting is about torture in Syria, which he never denied. His reporting was on the issue of chemical weapons. And, yeah, we tortured some folks—sure. But the point is, for some reason, people have this mental block where they just don't want to deal with it. It's also about the degradation of journalism, about the gathering of facts. What do the facts say? People, on this issue, because of the power of our propaganda system, just don't want to deal with what the facts actually say. And that's why you repeatedly have incidents like this, where disingenuous claims are made that don't contend with the facts of the matter—including the fact that Sy has not retracted his reporting. And outlets like *The Nation* are unfortunately claiming otherwise.

#Max

So if he's not retracting, and he did email Poitras or *The Nation* to correct that, then that's something Sy should publicly address. And just another point—I think there are a lot of questions for

Bashar al-Assad that many people would want to ask. Sy Hersh is being attacked for interviewing him, as so many journalists did. Now, I don't believe Assad can be reached by journalists anymore because of the political sensitivity of his residency in Moscow, and because Russia doesn't want him speaking to Western journalists. That's just my sense—I don't have any proof of that. But I think any journalist who wants to know what happened in the last days in Syria, or what's happening now, would want to speak to him. So, you know, it's about punishing journalists for doing journalism and saying, "Oh, why don't you morally condemn him?"

#Max

And you have to do this and that to be respected among the left-liberal class of, you know, wash-ups in the U.S.

#Max

No. So I think Sy Hersh should issue a statement here. But I know you're in touch with him, or you have some— I mean, I know Sy as well.

#Aaron

I don't think he really cares what **The Nation** says about him. I think that's what it comes down to. And also, look, the film is—it's a great film. It celebrates his legendary career. And yes, they had their differences on this one issue, but I just don't think he wants to make an issue out of it. That's my take. And it's unfortunate that Laura— to me, it's a critique of her. You're celebrating this guy who's been proven right countless times, who's challenged propaganda, paid a price for it, took risks. But on this one issue, you throw him under the bus in a really deceptive way.

Because again, if you watch the film, the way it's edited, I can understand why someone would be left with the impression that he's retracting. When I saw the film a few months ago, I told Laura this, and I urged her, if there was still time, to edit that sequence to make it clearer. He's not retracting his reporting—he's expressing his reflections on Assad's character. But he's not retracting his reporting that U.S. intelligence suppressed their own evidence of a false flag. That was the story. Unfortunately, she didn't heed my advice, and so here we are.