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PASSPORT

Seymour Hersh unleashed

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By **Blake Hounshell**



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In a speech billed as a discussion of the Bush and Obama eras, *New Yorker* journalist Seymour Hersh delivered a rambling, conspiracy-laden diatribe here Monday expressing his disappointment with President Barack Obama and his dissatisfaction with the direction of U.S. foreign policy.

“Just when we needed an angry black man,” he began, his arm perched jauntily on the podium, “we didn’t get one.”

It quickly went downhill from there.

Hersh, whose exposés of gross abuses by members of the U.S. military in Vietnam and Iraq have earned him worldwide fame and high journalistic honors, said he was writing a book on what he called the “Cheney-Bush years” and saw little difference between that period and the Obama administration.

He said that he was keeping a “checklist” of aggressive U.S. policies that remained in place, including torture and “rendition” of terrorist suspects to allied countries, which he alleged was ongoing.

He also charged that U.S. foreign policy had been hijacked by a cabal of neoconservative “crusaders” in the former vice president’s office and now in the special operations community.

“What I’m really talking about is how eight or nine neoconservative, radicals [errata: whackos] if you will, overthrew the American government. Took it over,” he said of his forthcoming book. “It’s not only that the neocons took it over but how easily they did it — how Congress disappeared, how the press became part of it, how the public acquiesced.”

Hersh then brought up the widespread looting that took place in Baghdad after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. “In the Cheney shop, the attitude was, ‘What’s this? What are they all worried about, the politicians and the press, they’re all worried about some looting? ... Don’t they get it? We’re gonna change mosques into cathedrals. And when we get all the oil, nobody’s gonna give a damn.’”

“That’s the attitude,” he continued. “We’re gonna change mosques into cathedrals. That’s an attitude that pervades, I’m here to say, a large percentage of the Joint Special Operations Command.”

He then alleged that Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who headed JSOC before briefly becoming the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, and his successor, Vice Adm. William McRaven, as well as many within JSOC, “are all members of, or at least supporters of, Knights of Malta.”

Hersh may have been referring to the Sovereign Order of Malta, a Roman Catholic organization committed to “defence of the Faith and assistance to the poor and the suffering,” according to its [website](http://www.sovereignorderofmalta.org/).

“Many of them are members of **Opus Dei**,” Hersh continued. “They do see what they’re doing — and this is not an atypical attitude among some military — it’s a crusade, literally. They see themselves as the protectors of the Christians. They’re protecting them from the Muslims [as in] the 13th century. And this is their function.”

“They have little insignias, these coins they pass among each other, which are crusader coins,” he continued. “They have insignia that reflect the whole notion that this is a culture war. ... Right now, there’s a tremendous, tremendous amount of anti-Muslim feeling in the military community.”

Hersh relayed that he had recently spoken with “a man in the intelligence community... somebody in the joint special operations business” about the downfall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. “He said, ‘Oh my God, he was such a good ally.’”

“Tunisia’s going to change the game,” Hersh added later. “It’s going to scare the hell out of a lot of people.”

Moving to Pakistan, where Hersh noted he had been friendly with Benazir Bhutto, the journalist told of a dinner meeting with Asif Ali Zardari, the late prime minister’s husband, in which Hersh said the Pakistani president was brutally disdainful of his own people.

Hersh described a trip he made to Swat, where the Pakistani military had just dislodged Taliban insurgents who had taken over the scenic valley, a traditional vacation area for the urban middle class. Hersh said he asked Zardari about the tent cities he saw along the road, where people were living in harsh, unsanitary conditions.

“Well, those people there in Swat, that’s what they deserve,” the Pakistani president replied, according to Hersh. Asked why, Hersh said Zardari responded, “Because they supported the Taliban.” (Note: Hersh’s conversation is not recounted in his 2009 *New Yorker* article on Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, presumably because it couldn’t be verified.)

The veteran journalist also alleged that the CIA station chief in Islamabad, who was recently recalled after his name surfaced in Pakistani court documents and in the lively Pakistani press, had actually been fired for disputing the plans of Gen. David Petraeus, who took over the Afghan war last summer after General McChrystal was summarily dismissed.

“When Petraeus issued a very optimistic report about the war in December that he gave to the president,” Hersh said, the station chief “just declared it was bankrupt... internally. He just said ‘This is completely wrongheaded. The policy’s wrongheaded.’ Off he goes. Out he goes.”

“I’ve given up being disillusioned about the CIA,” Hersh said. “They’re trained to lie, period. They will lie to their president, they will lie certainly to the Congress, and they will lie to the American people. That’s all there is to it.”

Hersh was speaking on the invitation of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, which operates a branch campus in Qatar.

**Note: Listening to the recording a second time, I believe Hersh said “whackos,” not “radicals.”*