

A New Twist in Seth Rich Murder Case

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media dismisses any link between the murder of DNC official Seth Rich and leaked DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory” – while blaming Russia instead – but a new possibility has arisen, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

With U.S.-Russia tensions as dangerously high as they’ve been since the worst days of the Cold War, there is potential new evidence that Russia was not behind a hack of the Democratic National Committee, although Congress and the U.S. mainstream media accept the unproven allegation of Russia’s guilt as indisputable fact.

The possible new evidence comes in the form of a leaked audiotape of veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in which Hersh is heard to say that not Russia, but a DNC insider, was the source of the Democratic emails published by WikiLeaks just before the start of the Democratic National Convention in late July 2016.

Hersh said on the tape that the source of the leak was former DNC employee Seth Rich, who was murdered on a darkened street in a rough neighborhood of Northwest Washington D.C. two weeks before the Convention, on July 10, 2016. But Hersh threw cold water on a theory that the murder was an assassination in retaliation for the leak. Instead, Hersh concurs with the D.C. police who say the murder was a botched robbery.

Mainstream news outlets have mocked any linkage between Rich’s murder and the disclosure of the DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory,” but Hersh’s comments suggest another possibility – that the murder and the leak were unrelated while Rich may still have been the leaker.

In dismissing the possibility that Rich was the leaker, mainstream media outlets often ignore one of the key reason why some people believe that he was: Shortly after his murder, WikiLeaks, which has denied receiving the emails from the Russian government, posted a Tweet offering a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the solution of the mystery of who killed Rich.

Julian Assange, WikiLeaks founder and publisher, brought up Rich’s murder out of context in an [interview](#) with Dutch TV last August. “Whistle-blowers go to significant efforts to get us material and often very significant risks,” Assange said. “As a 27-year-old, works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered just a few weeks ago for unknown reasons as he was walking down the

street in Washington.”

Pressed by the interviewer to say whether Rich was the source of the DNC emails, Assange said WikiLeaks never reveals its sources. Yet, it appeared to be an indirect way of naming Rich, while formally maintaining WikiLeaks’s policy. An alternative view would be to believe that Assange is cynically using Rich’s death to divert the trail from the real source.

But Assange is likely one of the few people who actually knows who the source is, so his professed interest in Rich’s murder presents a clue regarding the source of the leak that any responsible news organization would at least acknowledge although that has not been the case in many recent mainstream articles about the supposed Seth Rich “conspiracy theory.”

Hersh’s Unwitting Tapes

Hersh’s taped comments add another element to the mystery, given his long record of shedding light into the dark corners of the U.S. government’s crimes, lies and cover-ups. He exposed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War; revealed illegal CIA spying in the 1970s spurring wide-ranging Congressional investigations and reform; and uncovered U.S. torture in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In the audiotape – which Hersh told me was made without his permission – he quoted an unnamed government source who told him that Rich offered the DNC emails to WikiLeaks in exchange for money.

“What I know comes off an FBI report. Don’t ask me how. You can figure it out, I’ve been around a long time,” Hersh says on the tape. “I have somebody on the inside who will go and read a file for me. This person is unbelievably accurate and careful, he’s a very high-level guy and he’ll do a favor. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

The FBI cyber unit got involved after the D.C. police were unable to access protected files on Rich’s computer, Hersh said. So the FBI “found what he’d done. He had submitted a series of documents, of emails. Some juicy emails from the DNC,” to Wikileaks, Hersh said.

“He offered a sample, an extensive sample, you know I’m sure dozens of emails and said ‘I want money.’ Then later Wikileaks did get the password, he had a Dropbox, a protected Dropbox,” Hersh said.

“Wikileaks got access, and before he was killed ... he also, and this is also in the FBI report, he also let people know, with whom he was dealing. ... I don’t know how he dealt with the Wikileaks and the mechanism but ... the word was passed

according to the NSA report, 'I've also shared this box with a couple of friends so if anything happens to me it's not going to solve your problem.'" Hersh said he didn't know what this "problem" was.

Either Hersh misspoke when he mentioned an "NSA report," instead meaning the FBI report, or the National Security Agency may have provided a record of Rich's communication to the FBI. Both the FBI and the D.C. police have denied that the FBI got involved in the case.

The Tape Is Leaked

The Hersh audiotape was posted on a website called Big League Politics, which displays links to Project Veritas, a right-wing group run by James O'Keefe, though there is no evidence that Veritas was involved in the Hersh tape. Veritas does undercover audio and video recordings of unsuspecting subjects and has been accused of doctoring its video and audiotapes. But a recent O'Keefe undercover video of a CNN medical producer saying the network's coverage of the Russia-gate story was "bullshit" was confirmed by CNN, which took no action against the producer.

People who believe that Hersh's apparent revelation could reduce Russia-U.S. tensions are clamoring for him to confirm what he said. Popular blogger Caitlin Johnstone wrote: "If Hersh has any information at all indicating that the WikiLeaks releases last year came not from Russian hackers but from a leaker on the inside, he is morally obligated to volunteer all the information that he has. Even the slightest possibility that his information could help halt America's collision course with Russia by killing public support for new cold war escalations makes his remaining silent absolutely inexcusable."

Only Hersh's voice is heard on the taped interview, which was conducted by Ed Butowsky, a wealthy Republican donor and Trump supporter. Until now, Hersh's only public comment about the tape was to National Public Radio. "I hear gossip," Hersh said. "[Butowsky] took two and two and made 45 out of it."

I contacted Hersh on Friday via email. He confirmed to me that it was his voice on the tape by angrily condemning those who he said secretly recorded him, without identifying them. He did not respond when I asked him whether he thought the tape may have been altered. Hersh refused to comment further.

On June 2, in an exchange of emails between Hersh and Butowsky, Hersh denied any knowledge of the FBI report. That was two months before Hersh discovered that he had been secretly recorded when the tape was made public on Aug. 1 by Big League Politics. A screenshot of the Hersh-Butowsky email exchange was published by Big League Politics last week.

"I am curious why you haven't approached the house committee telling them what you were read by your FBI friend related to Seth Rich that you in turn read to me," Butowsky wrote.

Hersh replied: "ed –you have a lousy memory...i was not read anything by my fbi friend..i have no firsthand information and i really wish you would stop telling others information that you think i have...please stop relaying information that you do not have right...and that i have no reason to believe is accurate..."

Without informing him that he had been recorded, Butowsky replies: "I know it isn't first hand knowledge but you clearly said, my memory is perfect, that you had a friend at the FBI who read / told you what was in the file on Seth Rich and I wonder why you aren't helping your country and sharing that information on who it was?"

Further suggesting that Rich may have been the source of the DNC emails, WikiLeaks [posted](#) a link to the audiotape on Twitter.

Hersh has given no indication he's planning to write a piece based on his source who he said has seen the FBI report. Hersh has found it difficult to be published in recent years in the United States. He has been writing for the *London Review of Books* until that publication earlier this year rejected a piece challenging the purported U.S. evidence blaming a chemical weapons attack in Syria, which led to Trump's bombing of a Syrian air field. Hersh's story was published instead in a major German weekly, *Die Welt*.

MSM Contempt

Corporate media's uniform reaction has been to treat the idea of Seth Rich being WikiLeaks's source as a "conspiracy theory" – while mostly ignoring Assange's hints and now the Hersh tape. Major U.S. media outlets cover Russia-gate as if Russian interference in last November's U.S. election is proven, rather than based on a shaky "assessment" by "hand-picked" analysts from three – not all 17 – U.S. intelligence agencies.

If Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller is serious about getting to the bottom of who WikiLeaks's source is there are several avenues he could pursue. He could check Rich's bank accounts to see if there was a transfer of money from a representative of WikiLeaks. He could try to find Rich's friends who may have been given his DropBox password. He could seek to interview Hersh.

"Someone ought to ask Mueller, if he had an ounce of integrity (which [he doesn't](#)), why he's not showing these FBI and/or NSA reports to his Grand Jury which could blow the lid off of 'Russiagate' that Mueller was appointed to investigate," former FBI official and whistleblower Coleen Rowley told me in an

email. "It's sad the FBI could be keeping this secret. But I think the [Rich] family could sue to get the FBI Report that Hersh mentioned or now that FOX is sued, its attorneys could try to subpoena the FBI documents in discovery." She added that the FBI would likely fight such a subpoena, however.

The lawsuit that Rowley mentioned was filed by Rod Wheeler, a D.C. private detective, against Butowsky and Fox News. Wheeler was hired by Butowsky on behalf of the Rich family to find the killer. In a Fox News item on May 16, Wheeler was quoted referring to a Fox source in the federal government who said that Rich was WikiLeaks's source.

Fox News retracted the story a week later citing unspecified breaches of its editorial policies. At the time Fox had suffered ad boycotts when its chairman, Roger Ailes, and then its top presenter, Bill O'Reilly, faced sexual harassment allegations. Both later resigned. Sean Hannity, another top presenter, continued to pursue the Rich story until he was threatened with an ad boycott, at which point Fox retracted the story.

Wheeler's suit now alleges that he was misquoted and that the purpose of the Fox story was to distract attention from Russia's connection with the DNC emails. Big League Politics has posted audio of Wheeler saying that Aaron Rich, the victim's brother, blocked him from pursuing leads on Seth Rich's computer.

It is not clear if Hersh's source is the same as Fox's (or if Fox was using Hersh in a second-hand way). Butowsky has a connection with Fox as an on-air commentator. The date of the Hersh audio recording has not been made known although it presumably predated his email exchange with Butowsky on June 2.

If an FBI report exists indicating that Rich was the source of the DNC emails and the report is made public, it could reduce tensions with Russia that Congress ratcheted up further last week by escalating sanctions – a form of economic warfare – against Russia as punishment for its alleged role in exposing the DNC emails and others belonging to Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta.

The DNC emails revealed DNC officials improperly interfering in the Democratic primaries to undercut Clinton's chief rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders. The Podesta emails included the contents of Clinton's speeches to Wall Street and other special interests as well as pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

On Jan. 6 – before leaving office – President Obama's intelligence chiefs oversaw "hand-picked" analysts from the CIA, FBI and NSA creating an

“assessment” blaming Russia for the hacked emails albeit without presenting any hard evidence. Russian officials have denied supplying the emails to WikiLeaks and WikiLeaks has denied receiving them from Russia.

Craig Murray, a former British ambassador to Uzbekistan and an associate of Assange, has said categorically that the WikiLeaks source was a leak from an insider, not a hack. In an email message last week to former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, which McGovern shared with me, Murray wrote: “To my certain knowledge neither the DNC nor Podesta leaks to Wikileaks involved Russia. I met with someone while in Washington who, to the best of my knowledge, was an actual leaker.”

Nevertheless, the unproven allegations of Russian interference in the election have raised tensions between the two nuclear powers to levels not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War and possibly worse. Stephen Cohen, a leading U.S. expert on Russia, said the current showdown may be even more hazardous than the Cuban missile crisis.

“I think this is the most dangerous moment in American-Russian relations, at least since the Cuban missile crisis. And arguably, it’s more dangerous, because it’s more complex,” he told Democracy Now! in April. “Therefore, we ... have in Washington these – and, in my judgment, fact-less – accusations that Trump has somehow been compromised by the Kremlin.”

In the missile crisis “there was no doubt what the Soviets had done, putting missile silos in Cuba,” Cohen said. “No evidence has been presented today of anything. Imagine if Kennedy had been accused of being a secret Soviet Kremlin agent. He would have been crippled. And the only way he could have proved he wasn’t was to have launched a war against the Soviet Union. And at that time, the option was nuclear war.”

As it still is today.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of How I Lost By Hillary Clinton published by OR Books in June 2017. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at @unjoe.
