

Response to Review of Hilsum's *In Extremis*

In Extremis: The Life and Death of the War Correspondent Marie Colvin

by Lindsey Hilsum. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Photographs. Index. Hardcover, 378 pp. USD\$28.

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In Extremis: The Life of War Correspondent Marie Colvin

by Lindsey Hilsum. London: Chatto & Windus, 2018. Photographs. Index. Hardcover, 400 pp. £20. Page references are to the Chatto & Windus edition.

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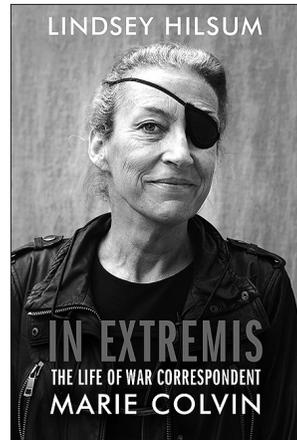
David Swick's review of Lindsey Hilsum's biography of Marie Colvin, published in the August 2020 issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* (212–15), is beautifully written. And it does well to highlight Colvin's brilliance and bravery as a war correspondent, her commitment to giving a voice to the voiceless, and her chaotic private life. But I feel some important aspects of both Colvin's reporting and Hilsum's coverage of it are ignored.

Swick highlights Colvin's initial weird and menacing meetings with Libya's Col. Gaddafi, but makes no mention of Hilsum's criticism of her handling of Gaddafi. For Colvin failed:

. . . to report in any depth on violations of human rights under Gaddafi, mainly because Libyans were too scared to talk. She knew that he played on foreigners' fascination with his outlandish clothing and appearance, and quickly saw through the myth of him as a desert Bedouin living in a tent, but she never investigated the political murders and disappearances of those who opposed him. (148)

In the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Colvin and her friend, Judith Miller, of the *New York Times*, became far too close to Ahmed Chalabi, head of the opposition Iraqi National Congress. And by reproducing Chalabi's lies to Western journalists about Iraq possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction (258), Colvin sadly played a part in preparing the way for that appalling, unnecessary, illegal conflict. Hilsum writes: "The previous year, Marie had written a long piece based on a videotaped interview with a supposed defector that turned out to be false" (258). Why did Colvin not see through the lies? "Maybe her sympathy for the underdog had blinded her" is Hilsum's answer (258).

Since 1986, Colvin had worked for Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* (always



consistent in its rabid support for U.S. and U.K. military adventures) and was clearly prepared to do her boss' bidding. On one occasion, as part of the newspaper's relentless campaign against the BBC, she was asked to write a piece making fun of the corporation's celebrated foreign correspondent, Kate Adie—and how Adie, “in her desperation to secure a story, was driving her minder to a nervous breakdown.” Colvin did as she was told; “Adie never spoke to her again” (146).

There are also other glaring problems about the book that Swick ignores. Throughout, Hilsun's attempts to place the events Colvin covered in a broader political context are woeful, merely following conventional narratives. For instance, there is no mention of the fact that the 1986 U.S. attacks on Libyan targets incorporated a deliberate attempt to assassinate Gaddafi. Indeed, the notion of U.S.-led Western imperialism indulging desperately in a series of adventures (dubbed “humanitarian” in the dominant rhetoric) driven by the demands of a massive military/industrial/intelligence/media complex against largely manufactured enemies is nowhere considered.

Thus, the 1991 Gulf conflict, in which 250,000 Iraqi soldiers perished (according to Colin Powell, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, writing in his memoir of the conflict, *My American Journey*), was solely the fault of “Saddam Hussein” and “his” August 1990 invasion of oil-rich Kuwait (128–29). In 1999, according to Hilsun, the Serbian conflict erupted after Serbian forces marched forty-five Kosovar Albanian farmers to a forest at Račak and shot them (186). To oppose the brutal Serbian rule, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began to fight for independence. No mention of the fact that the KLA was effectively a creation of the CIA, which funded, trained, and supplied it with weapons. And that the conflict was largely an attempt by NATO (in its fiftieth anniversary year) to establish a post-Cold War *raison d'être* (Hammond, “Reporting ‘Humanitarian’ Warfare,” 2000).

Hilsun's failure to acknowledge the role of intelligence in modern warfare is also striking. The CIA receives only a passing reference. Britain's MI6 is ignored completely until the last page (373) when Hilsun reports that its head (along with the foreign secretary) attended one of Colvin's memorial services—at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, off Trafalgar Square.