

Like Asking a Suspect to Investigate His Own Crime:

By Liane Clorfene-Casten

It's one of those chapters of U.S. history that too few of us like to read, first because it's not neatly written, and because the story doesn't end on an uplifting note. Chapters where commercial interests crisscross with foreign policy concerns, and produce disastrous results. And where, in the name of the "national interests" and "national security," everybody winds up a loser. Especially veterans of America's armed services.

In February, 1994, Sen. Donald Riegle (D-MI), then the chairman of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, reported that Iraq's "chemical and biological arsenal had been firmly established with the help of the U.S. government—which has been sending such materials to Iraq for years." According to the Riegle Committee's report, many of the same chemical and biological agents that the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq has spent the past seven years trying to track down and destroy were first supplied to the Iraqi Government from U.S. commercial sources as part of Washington's commitment to Saddam Hussein and his war against the Iranian Government of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iraqi Government would employ many of these chemical and biological agents during its eight-year war with Iran (1980-1988), and, later, against Iraq's own Kurdish population.

Today, in the face of steadily mounting evidence, it is clear that substantial numbers of U.S. troops who served in the Gulf War (1991) were exposed to an assortment of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons, as well as U.S. military munitions derived from depleted uranium sources, U.S. military pesticides, and the smoke and soot from the massive oil-well fires that the retreating Iraqi forces set during the war. Of course, unanswered questions still remain. Exactly how many Gulf War troops were exposed to these toxic and infectious agents? How many of them became ill as a result? How did dangerous chemical and biological agents act, whether alone or in combination, to cause the cluster of symptoms known as Gulf War Syndrome (or illnesses)? That the jury is still out on

these as well as other questions is in itself revealing.

How has the executive branch responded to these questions? With official denials. Gulf War commander Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf told the Senate Armed Services Committee in early 1997 that "We never ever had a single report, number one, of verified chemicals and, number two, of anyone ever showing any symptoms consistent with nerve agent poisoning." The Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Ill-

nesses (PAC) similarly claimed in early 1997 that it could find "no evidence" of the veterans' exposure to specific chemical and biological agents in the Persian Gulf Theater of Operations. Incredulously, the PAC tried to link their symptoms to a kind of combat-related neurosis instead.

Reason Magazine, and Princeton University English professor and the author of *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* Elaine Showalter, were only too eager to climb aboard the denial bandwagon. Krauthammer for one, who in an earlier incarnation had earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine, cavalierly dismissed what he called that "nebulous constellation of symptoms—muscle pains, chronic fatigue, memory loss, mood changes, intestinal disorders, rashes—that afflicts many Gulf War veterans"—symptoms that very well could bring an end to the productive lives of the people afflicted with them.

These official and journalistic denials have been roundly contradicted by men and women who served in the Gulf War, and who reported their observations to any number of congressional and private investigations. The veterans reported, in chilling detail, how they saw with their own eyes the yellow and green bands on their detection kits, the symbols for chemical and biological weapons. They saw the big mushroom clouds of material raining down on unprotected troops following the demolition of the gigantic Iraqi weapons depot at Kamisiyah. They smelled the strong ammonia-like odor in the air that burned their eyes and skin, that made their lips go numb, that created a strange taste in their mouths, and that started uncontrollable runny noses and watering eyes. They heard the chemical alarms sounding off, as many as 14,000 alarms in all—in fact, so many alarms that commanding officers often ordered them to be turned off. Other vets moved among damaged Iraqi artillery destroyed by the depleted uranium weapons that the U.S. military deployed for the first time in combat during the Gulf War—weapons that the Pentagon's Office of the Special Assistant for Gulf War Illnesses finally admitted early this year could cause cancer, kidney, respiratory and skin disorders in anyone inhaling or otherwise ingesting the residue from them. And the vets remember all-too-well being given, without their informed consent, a batch of inoculations that was supposed to protect them from



for their part, right-wing pundits such as Michael Fumento and Charles Krauthammer, right-wing forums such as the *Wall Street Journal's* opinion pages and

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The Dirty Little Secret Behind the White House Sex Scandal

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advertisers, whether they assemble that audience through print, radio, television, or via the Internet.

More precisely, Chicago Media Watch believes that the media's "feeding frenzy" over the recent allegations of a sex scandal at the White House is the logical culmination of what happens to news organizations when they face competitive pressures to produce coverage of events in such a way that their coverage enhances their ratings and boosts their circulation—and increases their profits, needless to say. As Chicago Media Watch Advisory Board member Joan Levin put it so well, all that it takes to explain the coverage of the White House sex scandal is a simple syllogism: Sex lures viewers. Commercial media exist to pimp for advertisers by exposing consumers to the advertisers' products. Therefore, the commercial media are very good at covering sex scandals. Clearly, what Joan's syllogism lacked in Aristotelian rigor, it more than made up for in empirical validity.

This, in turn, is because in a highly competitive business environment such as the one that prevails in the United States, media have no choice but to engage in pack journalism, lest the pack race ahead to feed on the next titillating "scandal," and leave one of its members behind. That decisions about the "newsworthiness," let alone the *truthfulness*, of the stories that fill our everyday lives might be based on a less salacious perspective, a longer-term perspective, perhaps even one oriented toward the enlightenment of viewers and readers, rather than their mesmerization, their instantaneous gratification, and "now, a word from our sponsors," is quite impractical these days. Any news organization that attempted it would find itself without advertiser support before next weekend came. No commercial media outlet, under constant pressure from chief financial officers and shareholders to enhance its earnings by selling a larger audience

to its advertisers, would dare risk its survival on so socially meritorious a mission. Certainly not for very long. That is the dirty little secret behind our inundation with the media's coverage of the White House sex scandal.

Today's media organizations have no choice but to hunt with the pack. But the outcome of pack journalism isn't necessarily the truth. Much less an enlightened citizenry. Instead, it is journalism of the lowest common denominator. It is titilla-

And the premium prices that the media's sales departments can now demand from their advertisers going forward. The pimp that stands in between our real human and political interests as citizens of the most powerful nation on earth and the mutilated interest structures of the collective voyeur, reduced to peeping through keyholes and snickering over jokes on Talk Radio and late-night TV, while the U.S. military's troop strength in the Gulf region reached some 35,000 personnel, and the cruise missiles and B-52 bombers were prepped for launch.

Pack journalism produces nothing less than the *tabloidization of our everyday lives*. But at what price?

At least it is gratifying that a backlash against the media's performance in the White House sex scandal is underway. If the backlash leads to a permanent disruption of pack journalism, good. But that would require fundamental change in the institutional nature of the commercial media. And that is a very big IF.

Quite the contrary. The recent talk of "scandal" in Washington teaches us the opposite lesson. Our media wouldn't dream of passing up a titillating news flash that just came in from somewhere, for the more enlightened distillation of the essence of the same event so much as twenty-four hours later. And the reason they wouldn't is be-

cause they can't. They simply can't. Because they are commercial media, after all. And because no matter how many well-intentioned editors and critics and Codes of Ethics there may be, in the end, in the "final analysis," the commercial media cannot help but remain true to what they are.

Legend has it that Goethe refused to read newspapers until they had sat upon his shelves for a little while—a week, say, or maybe as long as a month. That way, he wagered, he could better escape mistaking the merely ephemeral for the humanly significant events of his day.

But at Chicago Media Watch, we are not holding our breath.



tion. It is "Yow!" "Clinton's Temptations." "Monica and Bill." "The Secret Sex Wars." "That's Entertainment: President Clinton's Boffo Sexcapades." "All the President's Women." "Fatal Attraction!" "Clinton: The Cheating, Lying, Dirty Phone Calls & Steamy Sex." "Monica's Own Story." And "Is He Finished?" (We challenge anyone to tell us which of these actual headlines from the months of January and February appeared on the covers of respected magazines, and which on the covers of the supermarket tabloids.)

Above all, it is the doubling or trebling in the number of "hits" that each news organization's website has been receiving.

Gulf War Syndrome and the Silence of the Media

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the enemy's weapons, but in many instances very well may have contributed to their resulting illnesses.

Then many of the same formerly healthy veterans told Congress of their attempts to get treatment from VA hospitals. "Take aspirins," they were told. "Take Motrin." Or, worse, they were told "There's nothing to worry about." Or, "You're suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder."

"I'm told to go away," says one vet. "I'm told I'm crazy. I'm told to shut up. I'm told I'll ruin my career. What the hell difference does it make? I'm dying."

Veterans told of being shuffled from one VA hospital to another with no follow-up or coordination. A handful received medical disability. Many thousands received nothing. And now, several years later, other family members are being diagnosed with some of the same symptoms as the vets themselves. It is possible that Gulf War Syndrome is spreading here.

According to those tracking the numbers, approximately 15,000 Gulf War veterans are already dead as a result of complications from Gulf War Syndrome, and 100,000 to 200,000 are sick, disabled, or dying. Sometimes, the estimates range as high as several-hundred-thousand. Already, it is believed that more than 20 percent of the population in the countries surrounding the Persian Gulf are suffering similar maladies as well.

By the time the Human Resources subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Reform & Oversight began to hold hearings into Gulf War illness, in March, 1996, the pattern of official denials, indifference, lies and obfuscation had become painfully consistent. After months of testimony and investigation, the full committee found the "status of efforts on Gulf War issues by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Food and Drug Administration to be irreparably flawed. We find those efforts hobbled by institutional inertia that mistakes motion for progress. We find those efforts plagued by arrogant incuriosity and a pervasive myopia that sees a lack of evidence as proof. As a result, we find current approaches to research, diagnosis and treatment unlikely to yield answers to veterans' life-or-death questions in the

foreseeable or even far distant future.

"Sadly, when it comes to diagnosis, treatment and research for Gulf War veterans, we find the Federal Government too often has a tin ear, a cold heart and a closed mind....Absent precise exposure data which can never be recaptured, the best evidence linking toxic causes to chronic effects lies within the bodies and minds of Gulf War veterans. That evidence has been too long ignored."

Just like the Agent Orange cover-up (see L. Clorfene-Casten, *The Nation*, Nov. 30, 1992), the Gulf War veterans had gone into battle, had been exposed to dangerous chemical and biological agents — and then returned home only to be left twisting in the wind by the same gov-

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ernment that had promised to protect them. But couldn't.

"[We see] an astonishing example of the lengths the Defense Department is going to deny reality," Sen. Riegle observed. "Horrendous statistics show the true scale of this problem and the heartlessness and irresponsibility of a military bureaucracy that gives every sign of wanting to protect itself more than the health and well being of our servicemen and women who actually go and fight our wars. This data confirms that these illnesses are becoming a major threat to the health and well-being of a significant and rapidly growing number of individuals and warrants a serious and all-out effort by the government to determine the precise causes of the illnesses."

Appallingly, the media have been largely silent on this story for the better part of the last seven years. Why weren't investigative reporters flocking to uncover the facts? Where were the major news

organizations on Gulf War Syndrome? Why has there been virtually no in-depth reporting by the mainstream media? No ground-breaking series of articles? No *Gulf-Wargate*?

Why not, we wonder?

Ask Joyce Riley, R.N., B.S.N., Captain, U.S.A.F. inactive reserve, and the spokesperson for the American Gulf War Veterans Association, a group dedicated to bringing greater awareness and help for veterans who, like her, served in the Gulf and are now sick. Riley has made up countless press kits filled with incriminating documentation, using hundreds of dollars of her own money, and has sent them to reporters around the country—AP, UPI, Reuters, *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, *Dateline NBC*, and many others—who at first told her they were anxious to use the information. But nothing ever came of it. Invariably, the same reporters would confess to her that they could see what she was saying, that she possessed plenty of evidence to support her case, but that they couldn't run the story. They were stopped by their editors and station managers.

"Why such a controversy?" asks James J. Tuite III. The former lead investigator for Sen. Riegle's Banking Committee, Tuite is one of the most incisive critics to have taken up the cause of those vets suffering from Gulf War Syndrome. "The problem seems relatively straightforward—doesn't it? Not exactly. The very same agencies and governments who were responsible for providing protection against the hazardous exposures these individuals suffered during the Gulf War are now responsible for determining what is wrong with them. Here is where science and politics collide. We have asked the same government—whose actions may have resulted in the illnesses—to investigate itself. This is like asking a suspect to investigate the crime."

And so in 1998 we have come full circle. While the U.S. military spent the first two months of this year building up its troop strength in the "Persian Gulf Theater of Operation" (old terms die hard), little was being reported on the chemical, biological and radioactive threats these troops could face upon arrival. Quietly. Lethally. And without much public protest, in large part because the media were not investigating and reporting this crucial aspect of the Gulf War story.

The Gobble Game:

The Chicago Media Watch Conference on Media Deregulation and the Public Interest

The Preamble to the Telecommunications Act of 1996 affirms that the Act's goals are "To promote competition and reduce regulation in order to secure lower prices and higher quality services for American telecommunications consumers and encourage the rapid deployment of new telecommunications technologies." Rightly skeptical of these claims and eager to test them against the hard realities of today's media and communications "markets," Chicago Media Watch convened a day-long conference in December at the Lake Shore Campus of Loyola University, in Chicago. "Media De-Regulation and the Public Interest," we called it. In brief, we wanted to learn whether the one really has anything to do with the other?

■ **Promoting competition?** Hardly. "Capitalism doesn't enjoy competition," University of Wisconsin professor Robert McChesney argued during our first panel. Instead, the capitalist seeks to eliminate his competition; this is as true of the media giants as it is of the super-market chains. Since the passage of the Telecom Act in February, 1996, "four of the Baby Bells have merged into two, and the ownership of 4,000 radio stations has changed hands," McChesney said. "This is causing radio to become less local in focus and more national, more prepackaged, more homogenized." Indeed, the same is true across the rest of the media spectrum, from local telephony to magazine and book publishing to broadcast and cable television. "Cable television is totally concentrated in five companies," McChesney continued. "Even where there are 100 choices in channels, they are all owned by the top ten or fifteen media companies, so in fact there isn't any real choice." Fellow panelist and Washington D.C.-based consumer attorney Kathleen O'Reilly agreed: "The telecom companies are running off together arm-in-arm," she said. "It's the same in the media industry as in any other that's undergone deregulation—vertical integration follows deregulation, and the very abuses that fathered the anti-trust movement 100 years ago turn up all over again."

■ **Protecting consumer interests?**

Don't make us laugh. As Kathleen O'Reilly went on to add, telecom "service quality is going down without the rates that customers pay for their service going down with it." Later on, the three participants in our third panel of the day lamented another area in which quality of service continues its degradation: *media content*. "Presenting stories is the way we become human," Temple University professor George Gerbner observed. "But there's been a sea change in who's telling the stories. Local people are no longer telling their own story. Today, it's giant corporations that are telling us about ourselves. And that has radically changed the acculturation process." According to Gerbner, what the globalization of media firms has meant is the *homogenization* of the media's messages the world over. In this diversity-crushing environment, media providers place a premium on the kinds of content that "need no translation and fit into every culture." That way, they enhance the salability of their messages across as many borders as possible. As a consequence, violence and sex predominate, and their predominance changes the way we become who we are.

"It takes emotion to move merchandise," Marshall McLuhan once remarked. That is, it takes what Rocky Mountain Media Watch director Paul Klite likes to call "McNews"—newscasts that are "exactly the same across the country," wherever the viewer is. Klite's group studied TV newscasts from 100 different U.S. stations. Murder was the single most commonly reported event. In fact, they found that upwards of 50 percent of all TV reporting deals with acts of violence. "Women and minorities are vastly underrepresented," Klite's group found. "They are shown as victims and perpetrators, not as sources." Other examples of the media condemning segments of the population to invisibility abound. Particularly the "white, mainstream media," as *In These Times* senior editor Salim Muwakkil called them. He noted that "There was practically no coverage" of the one-million-woman march. "What made the white, mainstream media uncomfortable about the march was its af-

firmation of black agency and black nationalism," Muwakkil explained. The white, mainstream media may be good at serving the needs and interests of certain segments of white, mainstream society. But their coverage of that growing minority of the American population that doesn't match this demographic category is simply atrocious.

■ **Serving the public interests?** Tested against reality, this implied purpose of the Telecom Act of 1996 is the biggest joke of all. The "privatization of the First Amendment" proceeds apace, said Jerry Landay, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois and a member of Chicago Media Watch's Advisory Board. The Supreme Court ruled in its famous *Red Lion* decision of 1969 that "It is the right of the viewing and listening public and not the broadcasters that is paramount." Twenty-five years ago, the redefinition of commercial speech (i.e., corporate speech, primarily) as political speech had yet to take place. And the Fairness Doctrine still allowed citizens to respond to corporate speech. Each of these pillars once supported a communicative architecture that was more balanced on the side of the public interests than what we find today.

It was the overwhelming consensus among the panelists at our December conference that the Telecom Act of 1996 not only has failed to promote the salutary objectives that once were claimed for it by its supporters, but, more important, that it actually has succeeded in bringing about quite the opposite state of affairs. Foremost, the Telecom Act encourages mergers and acquisitions among the media firms. Greater concentration of ownership means less, not more, competition. The power of the media consumer has waned proportionately in the new deregulatory business environment. Basic service has not improved. Universal service threatens to become a relic of the past. Cable TV rates have risen faster than inflation, while cable companies have failed to show any interest in entering the telephony field. Nor have the cable companies begun to undertake the massive in-

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