

Lies Of Our Times



Chomsky
on Haiti

Hiss Case
Revisited
Dioxin
Watch

Motives in
Somalia

No Place to Go

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Cover: The ousted Palestinians at the Lebanese Army checkpoint, protesting Israel's refusal to take them back. Credit: AP / Wide World Photos.

A Note to Our Readers:

We have reported extensively on the aftermath of the Gulf War and the long-lasting effects it has had for the people of Iraq, especially the children. We are reminded that the plight of those in the U.S. military who resisted the slaughter of Desert Storm is also far from finished.

A recent issue of *The Veteran*, the newspaper of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, had a letter from Paul E. Cook, a Gulf War resister now in the Camp LeJeune brig. His application for conscientious objector status, filed after serving in the invasion of Panama, was denied. Then he was ordered to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. There, he refused to carry a weapon and was charged with "failure to the utmost to engage the enemy," which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. He asks that letters supporting his application for parole be sent to: Parole Coordinator, Marine Corps Brig, Camp LeJeune, NC 28542.

Reminders: January-February is a combined issue, the first of 1993. You did not miss an issue! Also, we now have a Canadian bank account; subscribers and would-be subscribers in Canada can use Canadian checks in U.S. dollars.

Lies Of Our Times

A Magazine to Correct the Record

Published by
Sheridan Square Press, Inc.

Produced and Distributed by
Institute for Media Analysis, Inc.

145 West 4th Street
New York, NY 10012
Tel: (212) 254-1061
Fax: (212) 254-9598
Telex: 650-305-3524/MCI

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Lies Of Our Times, Volume 4, Number 1-2,
whole number 34, January-February 1993,
copyright © 1993, by Sheridan Square Press,
Inc., and Institute for Media Analysis, Inc.
All rights reserved. Indexed in the *Alterna-
tive Press Index*. Available in microform
from University Microfilms.

Lies Of Our Times (ISSN: 1046-7912) is published
monthly (except February and August) for \$24 per year
by Sheridan Square Press, Inc., 145 West 4th Street,
New York, NY 10012. Second-class postage paid at
New York, NY, and additional mailing office. POST-
MASTER: Send address changes to *Lies Of Our
Times*, 145 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012.

To Our Readers

Lies Of Our Times is a magazine
of media criticism. "Our Times" are
the times we live in but also the
words of the *New York Times*, the
most cited news medium in the U.S.,
our paper of record. Our "Lies" are
more than literal falsehoods; they en-
compass subjects that have been ig-
nored, hypocrisies, misleading em-
phases, and hidden premises—the
biases which systematically shape
reporting. We can address only a
sampling of the universe of media
lies and distortions. But we hope
LOOT will go a long way toward
correcting the record.



The Times

Detoxifies Dioxin

Peter Montague

During August and September of 1992, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released drafts of eight chapters of its long-awaited reassessment of the dangers of dioxin. The agency promptly convened a four-day meeting of independent scientists from September 22 to 25 to review and discuss the drafts.

The day after the meeting ended, the *Times* reported that "an independent panel of scientists concluded today that dioxin was not a large-scale cancer threat except for people exposed to unusually high levels of the toxic compound in chemical factories and from accidents" (Keith Schneider, September 26, p. 9).

According to several panelists the *Times* quoted, "The risks ... are largely confined to chemical workers and people exposed to high levels of dioxin from industrial accidents. They said the levels of dioxin ordinarily found in the environment had not been shown to be dangerous to people." And, the article continued, "several panelists said today that they did not consider the levels of dioxin in most Americans, about 5 parts per trillion in fat, to be an important health hazard."

Thus the *Times* asked its readers to believe that a panel of independent scientists reviewed the draft and concluded, apparently by consensus, that dioxin is only a danger to the health of heavily-exposed chemical workers and victims of rare accidents, and that for them the sole danger is cancer; that existing levels of dioxin in the environment are not harmful to people; that the risks of dioxin are lower than previously believed; that laboratory animals and some wildlife may be at risk but this has little to do with humans because humans—for reasons unknown—seem to be uniquely unaffected by low doses of dioxin.

Once this comforting *Times* account appeared on the wire, it was immediately picked up by many other news organizations. The result was a nationwide media blitz saying dioxin is basically harmless to humans. The *Detroit News*, for instance, repeated the *Times* story, then capped it off September 29 with an editorial entitled, "The End of Dioxin Hysteria?" which concluded, "But the fact that dioxin has turned out to be something of a non-issue where humans are concerned suggests the religious zeal with which some environmentalists are trying to close down the chemical industry deserves to be greeted with extreme skepticism."

In a Different Voice

Other accounts of the conference, however—by reporters and participants in the four-day meeting—bore little resemblance to

the version published by the *Times*. For example, on October 9, Erich W. Bretthauer, the EPA's assistant administrator for research and development, sent a memo to EPA chief William Reilly giving the commissioner his own views on what EPA had learned so far about dioxin. Bretthauer's memo made several points, each of which was either contradicted or missed entirely by the *Times*:

- To understand the risks of dioxin, we must consider a broad range of health effects—not just cancer. In animals, dioxin has been observed to cause certain noncancer effects by disrupting the body's endocrine system—effects that include reproduction, behavior of offspring, and changes in the immune system.

- The amount of dioxin already present in the environment, and in the bodies of Americans, is at, or close to, levels that, in animals, cause hormone shifts, reproductive disorders, changes in behavior, and immune system damage.

- Recent studies indicate that dioxin causes cancer in humans; they need further evaluation so that EPA can form a new official position about the chemical's hazard to humans.

- Insufficient data are available to develop a reliable model with which to predict cancer hazards to humans from low-level exposure to dioxin.

- Available data seem to indicate that dioxin will cause cancer in humans in proportion to the exposure—high doses will cause many cancers, lower doses will cause fewer cancers; the one dose that is risk-free is zero.

- Risks from existing background levels of dioxin in the general population need to be "carefully considered."

On October 16, the *Wall Street Journal* summarized Bretthauer's memo this way: "Data reviewed by an independent scientific panel suggest that the danger from dioxin may be broader and more serious than previously thought, according to an internal Environmental Protection Agency memo" (Ruth Gutfeld, p. B9).

In its summary of the September conference, the business journal, *Environmental Reporter*, interviewed EPA Office of Health and Environmental Assessment Director William H. Farland, who summarized the meeting by saying dioxin is "a major health threat" and that the draft report is "unlikely to ease public concern over dioxin" (October 2, 1992, p. 1504).

Farland also said that "scientists at the recent meeting reported a host of non-carcinogenic effects at very low dose levels—near background levels—as well as the ability to cause cancer in humans at high doses."

In brief, the EPA's reassessment of dioxin's toxicity—based on several thousand studies of dioxin—while incomplete, shows that dioxin is a *far worse problem* than originally believed. Reilly initiated the reassessment in response to complaints by the paper and chlorine industries, who charged that EPA's regulation of dioxin was too strict because low levels of dioxin are harmless and that there is a "threshold," a level of exposure to dioxin below which no ill effects are seen. Not only has EPA's reassessment substantiated its original view of dioxin as a potent toxin for which there is no observable threshold, the study has added a host of new concerns which were discussed at length. These included concerns about disruption of the reproductive system, harm to the immune system, and behavioral changes in offspring of dioxin-exposed parents.

An earlier version of this article appeared in *Rachel's Hazardous Waste News*, #310, November 4, 1992. Published weekly, Peter Montague's newsletter is \$40 per year from the Environmental Research Foundation, P.O. Box 5036, Annapolis, MD 21403.



One way to solve the problem: At a town meeting, residents of dioxin-infested Times Beach, Missouri, listen as a regional director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency offers to buy the entire town.

One of the most important revelations of the meeting was that these endocrine-system effects in animals are observable at body burdens similar to the body burdens in Americans today.

If upheld in the coming weeks and months of scientific review, this view would provide a scientific foundation for a demand that "zero-discharge" be adopted as the basis for control of dioxin. In this case, even the earlier argument over a threshold is moot, since exposures due to residual toxins are sufficient to cause

health problems. Farland said as much in his interview with *Environmental Reporter*: "We have to be very cautious about any additions of dioxin to the environment. We must be very concerned about these high background levels of dioxin and what they may mean for human health."

High Stakes

Industries that emit dioxin into the environment—paper producers, waste incinerators, metal smelters, and herbicide producers and users—are feeling tremendous pressure to curtail emissions, pressure that seems likely to increase.

Newspapers, of course are dependent upon paper for their existence and have a material interest in keeping paper prices low. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the paper industry has already spent more than a billion dollars trying to control dioxin.

The *New York Times*, with its heavy stake in Maine and Canadian paper mills, has taken an editorial stance decidedly in favor of the reclassification of dioxin (see *RHWN* #248, #249, #275; and James Ledbetter, *Village Voice*, November 27, 1991, p. 5). The *Times* received at least three letters to the editor complaining about its misleading coverage of the September meeting—two of them from scientists who participated in the meeting and who strongly objected to the *Times*'s reporting. The newspaper also received a letter from a consultant to the incinerator industry who said it was "comforting" to learn that the dioxin now found in the bodies of Americans is "less toxic than previously assumed." The *Times* did not print either of the letters from the scientists, but did print the letter from the consultant, who argued that automobiles are the leading source of dioxin. This theory, which is no doubt comforting to the incinerator industry, and to the paper and newspaper industries, is almost certainly false.

Dioxin's gruesome reputation, derived from disclosures of its effects in mass exposures like Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and the 1983 evacuation of Times Beach, Missouri, has fueled extensive research.

After discovering that the streets of Times Beach had been contaminated with dioxin, the federal government bought out and evacuated the entire town. At the time, minuscule amounts of dioxin had been proven to cause cancer in laboratory animals. Descriptions of dioxin have frequently been accompanied by the epithet, "most toxic substance known to man." It has retained this undisputed heavyweight title, and the question of how to regulate and control the chemical has become an important political and economic issue.

In 1990, the EPA announced plans to regulate the effluent of paper mills, after discovering dioxin was a byproduct of paper manufacturing. In response, the paper and chemical industries began an extensive public relations campaign in an effort to influence a process certain to lead to requirements for costly new methods and equipment. The *New York Times*, with its large stake in the paper industry, was a natural ally in this campaign.

After the EPA's revelation concerning dioxin in paper mill effluent, the headlines around the country on May 1, 1990, tell the story:

"U.S. Plans to Cut Paper Mills' Dioxin Discharge" —*Los Angeles Times*

"EPA to Issue Rules to Reduce Amount of Dioxin Released in Making of Paper" —*Wall Street Journal*

"EPA Seeking to Reduce Dioxin in White Paper; Cancer Risk Said to Justify Mill Restrictions" —*Washington Post*

"Little Danger Found in Dioxin From Paper Mills" —*New York Times*

The *Times*'s apologetics did not end on this date. It has continued to print every doubting voice on the subject. In three articles published August 15 and 16, 1992, the *Times* dissected new "data" questioning the dangers of dioxin. The *Times*'s reporting set the tone for how many others in the media chose to play the story.

—Michael LaCombe

Lies Of Our Times



**Ray Bonner
Vindicated**

**Pollution's Pals
at the *Times*
Herb Schiller
at the GAP**

**The POW/MIA
Lobby**

Guatemala: The Complicity of Silence

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Cover: How can one express the heartbreak? A Mayan woman displays a photograph of her missing son. Credit: Jim Tynan / Impact Visuals.

A Note to Our Readers:

Thanks to all our subscribers who generously contributed to our recent fundraising drive. Your donations will allow us to go ahead with much-needed outreach work so we can put the magazine into the hands of more people.

We're not out of the woods yet, though. So if you feel *LOOT* has an important role to play in holding the mainstream media accountable, and you haven't yet contributed, please consider doing so. Your money will be well spent.

And if you have already contributed, try this: Convince a friend to subscribe. Our subscribers are our lifeblood. When you see your friends and neighbors eagerly reading your copy of *LOOT*, suggest that they subscribe. Many thanks.

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Sheridan Square Press, Inc.
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Fax: (212) 254-9598
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Business Manager Ellen Davidson
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Proofreader Bill Montross

Lies Of Our Times, Volume 4, Number 6,
whole number 37, June 1993, copyright ©
1993, by Sheridan Square Press, Inc., and In-
stitute for Media Analysis, Inc. All rights re-
served. Indexed in the *Alternative Press In-*
dex. Available in microform from University
Microfilms. Printed in the U.S.A.

Lies Of Our Times (ISSN: 1046-7912) is published
monthly (except February and August) for \$24 per year
by Sheridan Square Press, Inc., 145 West 4th Street,
New York, NY 10012. Second-class postage paid at
New York, NY, and additional mailing office. POST-
MASTER: Send address changes to *Lies Of Our*
Times, 145 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012.

To Our Readers

Lies Of Our Times is a magazine of media criticism. "Our Times" are the times we live in but also the words of the *New York Times*, the most cited news medium in the U.S., our paper of record. Our "Lies" are more than literal falsehoods; they encompass subjects that have been ignored, hypocrisies, misleading emphases, and hidden premises—the biases which systematically shape reporting. We can address only a sampling of the universe of media lies and distortions. But we hope *LOOT* will go a long way toward correcting the record.

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Polluters and Their Friends

Peter Montague

As Congress prepares to consider renewing the nation's two major toxic waste laws—Superfund and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)—the major polluters and their friends are preparing their own initiatives. For a taste of what to expect, consider the *New York Times*'s five-part series on toxics and waste that ran between March 21 and March 26, 1993.

The first article, Keith Schneider's "New View Calls Environmental Policy Misguided," set the tone and the themes for the series (p. 1). It began by stating that "many scientists, economists and Government officials have reached the dismaying conclusion that much of America's environmental program has gone seriously awry. These experts say that in the last 15 years environmental policy has too often evolved largely in response to popular panics, not in reaction to sound scientific analyses of which environmental hazards present the greatest risks."

**The *Times* is clearly,
and threateningly, an apologist
for those who are poisoning us.**

Toxic Dumps Dangerous? Not to Worry

The critical message the *Times* stories presented is this: The nation's toxic waste program is itself a colossal waste because toxic chemicals, and especially toxic wastes, are not dangerous at all. Furthermore, we got ourselves into this expensive mess because Congress didn't listen to the technical experts but listened, instead, to the voters.

Here is the *Times* argument in a nutshell:

- "Billions of dollars are wasted each year in battling problems that are no longer considered especially dangerous." Examples the *Times* cited are toxic dumps and asbestos in schools.

- "Since 1980, ... thousands of regulations were written to restrict compounds that had caused cancer in rats or mice, even though these animal studies often fail to predict how the compounds might affect humans."

- There is a "new, third wave of environmentalism ... sweeping across America" composed of "farmers, home-owners and others who are upset largely by the growing cost of regulations that didn't appear to bring any measurable benefits." The only spokesperson Schneider quoted for this "third wave of environmentalism" was Richard J. Mahoney, chairman of Monsanto, the chemical company.

- This third wave "has moved into universities, city halls, state capitols, and even to the highest levels of the E.P.A." At this point the *Times* quoted the EPA Science Advisory Board's 1990 complaint that Congress had passed laws based on "public perceptions of risk [rather] than of scientific understanding of risk."

- The dour message of these third wave environmentalists is that the "experts" have not been allowed to set the United States' environmental agenda; instead we have had "environmental agenda-setting by episodic panic." In other words, our problem is too much democracy.

Congress Listens to the Voters

- As a result of Congress's refusal to listen to the experts, the U.S. is spending \$140 billion per year on the environment (\$100 billion by the private sector, \$40 billion by the government), roughly half what we spend on the military (Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1991, 14th Edition* [Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1991]). However, not all the environmental money is wasted, said the *Times*. "Few experts question the value of spending roughly \$3 billion each year on new sewage treatment plants." But: "Many experts ... question the wisdom of spending billions of dollars to protect people from traces of toxic compounds."

The *Times* then quoted Richard Goodwin, who was identified as a "private environmental engineer," saying we're wasting money on toxic dumps. What the *Times* did not mention is that Dr. Goodwin is a consultant to the incineration industry and has conducted a campaign to have toxic ash exempted from federal and state regulations.

- "The toxic waste program stands as the most wasteful effort of all" because "many of the [abandoned chemical dump] sites pose little if any danger," the *Times* said, without offering any substantiation.

Guess What? Dioxin Isn't Really Bad for You

- To support its claim that dumps pose little or no danger, the *Times* then offered still another unsupported assertion: "New research indicates that dioxin may not be so dangerous after all. None of the former residents of Times Beach [Missouri], have been found to be harmed by dioxin, and two years ago, Dr. Vernon N. Houk, the Federal official who urged the evacuation [of Times Beach], declared that he had made a mistake" (see "Letters to LOOT," *LOOT*, May 1993, p. 24).

- The *Times* went on to maintain that while we're spending billions to protect the public from relatively harmless substances like dioxin, we're allowing real problems to grow unchecked. Examples are mercury in fish and lead in children.

- But back to the *Times*'s central theme: "Perhaps no environmental program has come under more criticism than the Superfund and its progeny."

The *Times* launched into a lengthy description of a Superfund site in Mississippi where soil was cleaned up to a standard that would allow children to eat a half a teaspoonful of it every month

This article is adapted from Peter Montague's article in the March 23, 1993, *Rachel's Hazardous Waste News*, #330. Published weekly, Montague's newsletter is \$25 per year from the Environmental Research Foundation, P.O. Box 5036, Annapolis, MD 21403.

for a lifetime without getting cancer. (Half a teaspoon a month for 70 years equals 3,000 grams of soil.) The *Times* ridiculed such cleanliness as a goal: "E.P.A. officials acknowledged that at least half of the \$14 billion the nation has spent on Superfund cleanups was used to comply with similar 'dirt-eating rules,' as they call them."

In making fun of the Superfund program, the *Times* failed to examine the basis for the EPA's premise that children need to be protected from industrial poisons in the soil.

Kids Who Eat Dirt Are at Serious Risk

The cleanup standard the *Times* ridiculed is based on the assumption that children eat soil, which is in fact true. Contaminated soil is an important source of toxic lead in children (Patrick L. Reagan and Ellen K. Silbergeld, "Establishing a Health-Based Standard for Lead in Residential Soils," *Trace Substances in Environmental Health*, Vol. 23 [1990], pp. 199-238).

The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has studied children's behavior. It turns out that some children eat soil directly and other children merely transfer soil from their hands to their mouths. CDC estimates that 5 percent to 10 percent of all children eat dirt directly (a behavior pattern called "pica") and that such children may ingest an average of 8,000 grams of soil during their first five years of life (R.D. Kimbrough and others, "Health implications of 2,3,7,8-tetra-chloro-dibenzo-dioxin (TCDD) contamination of residential soil," *Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health*, Vol. 14 [1984], pp. 47-93). The best available evidence, therefore, indicates that the EPA's cleanup standard (3,000 grams ingested during a lifetime) may not be strict enough to protect all children.

The first four articles in the *Times*'s series were remarkable in several respects: They never mentioned pollution prevention; they claimed, or implied, numerous times that toxic chemicals and radioactivity have not harmed anyone, but they provided no evidence that this is true; and they ignored a large body of scientific literature that contradicts their claims and conclusions.

There can be little disagreement that the United States' environmental goals and priorities have gone awry in the past 20

The Superfund

Superfund refers to the main body of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act. As noted above, the recent *Times* series on environmentalism ridiculed the Superfund law for being too stringent. However, many argue that it does not go far enough. Passed in 1980, the act was meant to locate and detoxify chemical waste dumps across the U.S. But the problem was much more intractable than initially perceived by the authors of the law.

In 1989, Congress's Office of Technology Assessment concluded that the standard remedies for Superfund sites were not working. By the early 1990s, it was clear that the original methods called for in the Superfund had to be thoroughly revamped if the central goal of the law—to protect the public from toxins released into the soil from chemical dumps—was to be achieved.

As Peter Montague noted in *RHWN* #332, the only sure way to detoxify waste dumps would be to excavate contaminated soil and store it in reinforced concrete buildings. However, according to Montague, "this solution suffers from a major drawback: It would make the size of the problem visible to everyone, and therefore eventually might create major unrest among the public. Therefore, solving the problem of old chemical dumps is now known to be technically difficult, very costly, and potentially politically explosive."

—Peter Rothberg

years. In its analysis, however, the *New York Times* has failed to offer evidence to support its assertions. Furthermore its writers have exhibited a breathtaking ignorance of basic facts. What is most ominous is that when the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works opened its hearings in Washington on March 24, 1993, debate was based partly on statements and viewpoints outlined in the *Times* series.

The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act

In 1976 Congress passed the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), the nation's basic law for managing hazardous wastes, including municipal solid wastes. The legislation was announced as providing "cradle to grave" control of toxic waste. As that phrase implies, Congress and the EPA in 1976 fully expected to bury most wastes in "graves" (landfills).

During the early 1980s, the EPA established elaborate licensing procedures for hazardous waste generators, processors, and haulers. However, as the 1980s progressed and more and more waste was discovered, the loopholes in the RCRA appeared to be larger and larger. Mining wastes, for example, which are voluminous, are exempt from RCRA. In 1991, the

National Academy of Sciences revealed that about 95 percent of hazardous wastes are exempt from RCRA.

In addition, since 1976, much has been learned about landfills. Now, the EPA admits that all landfills eventually leak, so putting toxic waste in such "graves" is unlikely to promote public health and safety.

As a substitute, the EPA has been urging construction of incinerators, but now incinerators themselves have been identified as a major source of pollutants.

RCRA will be reauthorized by Congress during the next year or two, and it promises to be a major fight between the polluters and the environmental community.

—Peter Montague