

60 Minutes Does it Again – Rave on Ms. Stahl

Debunking the Leslie Stahl's of the world.

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One of the 60 Minute segments of April 30, 2006, dealt with the Hanford Reservation in Eastern Washington State. This at one time was the secret location of many nuclear facilities, which made the plutonium for the U.S. weapons programs including the bomb dropped on Nagasaki. It continued to make plutonium into the early '70s. Part of the process required the production of high level liquid wastes containing large amounts of radioactivity. Since the late '40s these wastes have been stored in huge steel tanks, often of 1 million gallons each. This liquid and the solid salt cake and sludge contained within the tanks have been the subject of scare stories for decades.

This particular segment was a confused jumble of many Hanford issues. Certainly the Department of Energy is culpable for a number of problems, which have occurred over the decades. Likewise, some of the large Department of Education contractors must own their share of responsibility too. However, Bechtel the current contractor in charge of building some of the largest waste cleanup facilities here, is capable of defending itself and has done so admirably. **Leslie Stahl certainly did not tell the whole truth** which was available to her and her staff. Major problems, which 60 Minutes refuses to grasp are the many changes of regulations and design criteria which take place after construction begins. In fact big media itself has historically had a major role in this “regulatory instability” for decades in the entire US nuclear industry.

My concerns are directed at the program subtexts for most of these issues, namely the exaggerated effects of low level radiation and related health risks alleged to exist at Hanford. Not mentioned by Stahl are the 30 years of exaggerations about Hanford, which exist to this day. Likewise, local and state media have failed to address the exaggerations, as have state and national political leaders, and of course the environmental movement so quick and breezy with wild assertions. It was too much to hope that the prestigious Stahl and her staff would begin undoing the nonsense even after all these years. Regrettably, she didn't since scare stories still sell.

60 Minutes continues to do massive damage to the American psyche in its lurid simplistic portrayals of complex environmental issues. And since 1979 when Harry Reasoner sprang the 60 Minutes segment regarding the Illinois Power Plant problems on 24 million households, or when it presented the Alar scare story of 1989, 60 Minutes continues to have a strained relationship with the truth. Fortunately Illinois Power had their wits with them at the time and made their own video tape right alongside those of the 60 Minutes cameras. The results were a stunning indictment of the 60 Minutes agenda to misrepresent the truth and have apparently been used to demonstrate propaganda in journalism schools.

Ms. Stahl begins with the Hanford bashing one-liner that "Hanford is the most contaminated site in the world." In the world of science and incredible detection capabilities, the term is meaningless, and she gives no basis for what she meant. There are healthy workers, healthy neighbors, and healthy wildlife and wildflowers everywhere which somehow she did not or would not mention.

Ms. Stahl sustained fear and perpetuated myths using the word “plume” to describe the tritium in the ground water. It is a common term in modeling groundwater hydrology.

The plume is largely tritium, which was produced at Hanford and also is a naturally occurring weakly radioactive form of hydrogen occurring in all of the world's bodies of water (and human tissue). With a 12.3 year half-life more than 85 percent of the initial tritium formed at Hanford has decayed to a harmless end product helium-3. Put that in your balloons. In the meantime tritium continues to be formed naturally in the upper atmosphere as it has done for billions of years.

She did not mention that this material is used to make exit signs in office buildings and in some aircraft. It is also used in landing strip lights in the Arctic to help bush pilots find landing fields at night. Lives have actually been saved this way. She did not mention anything about radiation doses, health effects past or present, or any of the many epidemiology studies done around Hanford showing no observable adverse health effects.

The tritium in the Columbia River is such a weak source of radioactivity that one would have to drink more than 1000 liters of Columbia River water, to get the same radiation dose we get from drinking a single liter of milk, which contains the more potent naturally occurring radioactive potassium-40. And yes, tritium has a half life of only 12.3 years while potassium-40 has a half life of 1.4 billion years.

Washington State governor Christine Gregoire was equally unenlightening claiming that a catastrophe could be caused if this gets into the Columbia River. Well the tritium reached the river decades ago and reported all over the world. No catastrophe has occurred and many health studies costing tens of millions have shown exactly that. Where do these people get their advice?

The brilliant economist Tom Sowell provides an excellent framework in which to view the Stahls and Gregoires of the nation. He lays this all out in his excellent book "The Vision of the Anointed" (1996). These people are of the "anointed," and to them evidence or facts are irrelevant. Advice is not needed for them. The views of the anointed are not subject to any challenge, since they are intimately entwined with ego. These visions are highly resistant to any facts that threaten their existing beliefs and assumptions. Sowell continues that, "Desperate evasions of discordant evidence (by the anointed), and the denigration and even demonizing of those presenting such evidence are indicative of the high stakes in contemporary cultural wars..." The views of Stahl and even Gov. Gregoire are so out of touch with what is known about the safety history of Hanford operations, its workers, and its neighbors, that they cannot withstand scrutiny. It literally boggles the mind.

"For the anointed," Sowell continues, "it is desperately important to win, not simply because they believe that one policy or set of beliefs and values are better for society, but because their whole sense of themselves is at stake." As such in this case they seem content to ignore hundreds of safety programs, huge epidemiology studies of workers and surrounding communities, tremendous decades-long environmental monitoring programs, none of which support their alarmism. To ignore such documentation and those familiar with them is a dangerous destruction of the hard-earned wisdom and experience of thousands of Hanford experts.

Yet another health study of Hanford neighbors has been recently completed which findings are utterly consistent with the many others done earlier and show no adverse health effects (Tri-City Herald April 25, 2006). The efforts to find such harm have been increasingly desperate by the antinuclear crowd and their political allies in need of victims. With about 10 such studies done over the past 30 years, costing upwards of 50 million dollars, it has been a very costly pursuit of small risks subsidized largely by the

unsuspecting tax payers. The reason for the findings of no adverse health effects is simple, the radiation doses were too small, are too small, and will be too small in the future.

The tremendous damage done to the nation by this media-nourished anxiety toward Hanford is not limited to the wasted billions of the nation's resources spent in the futile pursuit of zero risks. It also has resulted in the recent destruction of a special one-of-a-kind reactor located at Hanford as well. The reactor called the Fast Flux Test Facility (FFTF) was one of a very special design capable of advancing many national programs requiring special nuclear isotopes. These programs ranged from space power needs, advances in new reactor materials, reactor safety programs, and new medical diagnostic and therapeutic isotopes for cancer, heart disease, and others (see for example www.medicalisotopes.org).

With new isotopes clinical trials in cancer therapy are achieving greater than 80 percent remission rates in patients with certain cancers who have already failed chemo and whole body radiation. The European nuclear oncology community is so successful with isotope technology and so far ahead of the U.S., that chemotherapy is being phased out as a treatment modality. The FFTF could have been used to manufacture dozens of these special isotopes, some of which could only be produced in this reactor. There are dozens of letters from nuclear oncologists desperately requesting useable amounts for such cancer studies.

In a notably tragic cancer trial case, many cancer patients who had failed chemotherapy and whole body radiation had exhibited great response to cancer treatment with new isotopes. When the supply of the isotopes suddenly dried up, they were simply sent home to die. The anointed are invariably unable to see beyond the present and view the dreadful harm they cause elsewhere.

More than 500,000 Americans die each year of cancer, and this reactor and the isotopes it might have produced could have reduced this death rate significantly, given the clinical trial successes already achieved. These are but two of the awful prices paid when the anointed are permitted to make ghastly judgments and policies, and exploit fear. Clearly, 60 Minutes remains an unreliable source of such information.

And by the way, to the extent that the efforts of the Hanford workers helped end one World War and prevented another, it would have been appropriate if Stahl had thanked them for conducting her interviews in English, instead of Japanese or Russian.