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LIVING

Back to the Future

by JAMES RIDGEWAY

February 9, 1999



Terrified children fleeing napalm attack in Vietnam (see "Napalm Bombshell") AP/WIDE WORLD

Gloating though they may be over what looks like the conquest of the Republican right in impeachment, Clinton's embattled supporters have little to look forward to. The Democrats are deeply divided in Congress, with much of the party gearing up to fight Clinton on both trade and social issues. The "impeachment campaign" may well help the Democrats regain control of the House. But this would be a victory tinged with irony.

Clinton faces strong opposition to his free-trade policies among Democrats clustered around House Minority Whip David Bonior. And members of this same group have thrown down the gauntlet on the president's plan to tie Social Security to the stock market.

In the end, a Clinton "victory" on impeachment may not mean much. That's because since his election in 1992 Clinton has methodically set out to break up the New Deal. He has left the Democratic Party a mangled wreck, its base consisting largely of:

Liberals, who sided with Clinton even when he dumped welfare.

Unions, whose weak leadership will do anything to stay in Clinton's good graces but whose rank and file oppose his economic policies.

Women's groups, badly damaged by a president who has supported their issues but whose personal treatment of women has been demeaning.

African Americans, who have cheered on Clinton even in the face of his destructive social-welfare policies.

The basic issue facing Democrats remains intractable: how to redistribute a modicum of wealth from the suburbs and the upper middle class to the poor and the working class. After six years of Clinton, the social divide is more stark than ever.

Blood Pressure

Arkansas Scandal Tied to Clinton Spreads

The scandal involving sales of diseased blood from Arkansas prisons while Bill Clinton was governor spread last week as a group of desperately ill Canadians announced they would hold a press conference in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday, February 24.

“When this case first came to light some 15-plus years ago,” a White House spokesman said on Canadian TV last week, “there was no testing being done to detect the AIDS virus. It is impossible to say that the president knew [the danger]. The accusations that President Clinton knew the blood was tainted are wrong.”

The international imbroglio has its roots in a program to sell prison blood, which was started two decades ago in Arkansas. In the early '80s, Clinton's administration awarded a contract for prison medical services to Health Management Associates, a company set up by Francis Henderson, an Arkansas doctor. Later, Leonard Dunn, a friend of Clinton's and a campaign fundraiser, became CEO.

Until then, the Arkansas prisons, as well as prisons in other southern states, had been making a profit selling inmate blood. But in 1982 a glutted blood market crashed, threatening the program. “I called all over the world,” Henderson

subsequently told state police investigators, “and finally got one group in Canada who would take the contract.”

The “group” was Continental Pharma Cryosan Ltd., a Canadian company notorious in the blood trade for practices such as importing blood from Russian cadavers and relabeling it as Swedish. Cryosan never checked out the plasma-collecting centers in the U.S. from which it obtained blood, depending instead on the licensing procedures of the Food and Drug Administration. The FDA’s procedures were also lax.

Little was known about AIDS during this period, and Cryosan president Thomas Hecht said there was a “strong feeling” that prison plasma was safer than that taken from the population at large. This is hard to believe. Here’s how a former inmate, appearing on the Canadian TV program *The Fifth Estate*, described giving blood: “Have sex in the fields on your way going to the plasma, you know, anybody in the dormitory, going to take a quick bath, run and have sex in the showers, then go to plasma. Go shoot up and go to plasma.”

In Canada, the tainted blood was turned into clotting factor and sold to the Red Cross. When in 1983 Canadian officials discovered the source of the blood, they canceled the contracts. An international recall followed— blood from Arkansas had gone to Europe and Japan, and in at least one instance was sent back to the U.S.— but it was too late. By then, most of the blood that had been sent to Canada had been used by hemophiliacs.

Unfortunately, the recall didn’t stop HMA’s prison blood business, which continued until 1994. According to one prison subcontractor, officials knew that hepatitis was rife in the ’70s, and by 1980 were concerned about a “killer” hepatitis, which became known as hepatitis C. In 1985, there were press reports about AIDS

in the prisons. That same year a group of inmates filed suit in federal district court to require AIDS testing.

In 1986, Clinton called for an investigation of HMA after it was accused of negligent care. The investigation eventually cleared HMA of criminal wrongdoing, but a second inquiry, by an independent California firm, concluded that HMA had violated its contract in 40 areas, and put much of the responsibility for its poor performance on state prisons chief Art Lockhart. Asked by reporters whether Lockhart should resign, Clinton said, “No. I do not think that at this time I should ask Mr. Lockhart to resign.”

Clinton acknowledged he had been aware of problems with inmate health care when the corrections board renewed HMA’s contract the previous year, saying, according to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, “Everybody in the state knew about them.” Clinton said he originally thought the board wouldn’t renew the contract. “But then [the chair of the corrections board] called me and said that based on available money and the alternatives, he thought HMA should be given another chance. The only thing I said was that there should be some sort of outside monitor.” The contract was renewed.

Why did Clinton’s Arkansas administration permit the sale of what turned out to be diseased blood? That is the question the Canadian hemophiliacs will be posing next week in Washington.

Napalm Bombshell

Deadly Chemical Imperils Black Community

Residents of Fallbrook, California— home of former Klan leader Tom Metzger— are breathing a sigh of relief now that the U.S.

military plans to get rid of two million gallons of leaking napalm that has been stored near their town by burning it next to a black community along the Mississippi River in Louisiana.

The military wants to ship the Vietnam-era chemical to a plant owned by Rhodia Inc., located at the foot of a bridge on U.S. 190 near Southern University, a black college, and an adjacent black town. Efforts to burn the jellylike substance that U.S. fliers once dumped on Vietnam have been rejected in California, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri.

“This stuff should not be sent 2000 miles to be burned in someone else’s backyard,” said Mary Lee Orr of the Environmental Action Network. Southern University vehemently opposes the plan, and Louisiana governor Mike Foster has temporarily halted the project, promising to study it.

The Southern California establishment is delighted that the stuff will be dumped out of state. Pontificated the *San Diego Union*: “It’s difficult to understand why anyone can ignore the fact that the napalm, in its leaking bomb canisters at Fallbrook, represents a far more serious threat to the environment than when it is put in new tanks, diluted and finally burned in special furnaces. Particularly in Louisiana, where chemical manufacturing is rapidly becoming the state’s leading industry.”

Rhodia seems to have been selected in part because the company already has a permit to burn hazardous fuel. The firm produces sulfuric acid as well as more benign products such as artificial vanilla used in Hershey’s syrup and M&M candies.

“It’s no different than the gasoline truck that drives by you,” argued Lee Saunders,

an

environmental public-affairs officer for the U.S. Navy, which is charged with storing and disposing of the napalm. “We live with it and we deal with it, and there’s a trade-off,” Saunders added.

Napalm includes benzene, polystyrene, and gasoline, all of which cause cancer.

You Never Know

Winning Health-Care Alternatives

Since 43.4 million Americans don’t have health insurance, politicians— ever mindful of the votes to be gained if they seem sympathetic— are falling all over themselves making symbolic gestures. That was certainly the case with Clinton’s ballyhooed tax-break proposal for caregivers of elderly patients who require long-term care.

Clinton’s plan for a \$1000 tax credit to help cover nursing-home or home care is, of course, merely emblematic. People spend upwards of \$50,000 annually for nursing-home care. At home, the cost of taking care of someone badly disabled can run over \$100 a day, and few insurance plans provide any recompense.

Thus, people increasingly have little choice but to heed free-market remedies— for example the innovative plan being offered by Franklin Memorial Hospital in Farmington, Maine, which allows strapped patients to work off the cost of an operation. Under the plan, a receptionist with no health insurance is paying for her \$8000 gallbladder operation by entering data in the hospital computer. A florist is working off \$275 owed on his colonoscopy by providing a bouquet each week for the hospital lobby.

Footnote: For the lazy gambler without insurance, there is a “giveaway” sponsored by onlinesurgery.com, a Web site that



race-int.

Die, Dummy

Australia has come up with an ingenious way of twisting the knife deeper into the social-welfare system that’s sure to find favor among American right-wingers. John Howard, the country’s Liberal prime minister, plans to deny unemployment benefits to welfare claimants between the ages of 18 and 24 who can’t read or write. Beginning in April, they will be required to take government-funded remedial courses if they fail basic literacy and numeracy tests.

Additional reporting: Ioanna Veleanu

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