

Still burning in the backyard: 12th anniversary of Chernobyl

Hearsay & Heresy

By J.J. Wylie
Staff Opinion Writer

A dozen years ago, the nuclear genie peeked out of its bottle: just before 1:30 on the morning of April 26th, 1986, the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl power station in the Ukraine exploded. This explosion sent up a radioactive cloud that could be detected across the planet. That cloud contaminated some 40,000 square miles of land in what is now parts of Ukraine and Belarus, and it forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from the immediate area.

This event has been characterized as the worst nuclear accident in history, and the death toll caused by it is still rising. According to Reuters news service, the Ukrainian government estimates that the current thyroid cancer rates in children from the area surrounding Chernobyl are ten times what they were before the accident. Talk about collateral damage - this is contamination that infects your very genes.

The May, 1998, issue of Harper's Magazine, perhaps in honor of the Chernobyl tragedy's twelfth anniversary, contains an

excerpt of the first-hand testimony of a woman whose husband helped fight the fire at Chernobyl. It is a harrowing account, wherein the woman talks about her husband fighting a burning reactor in his shirtsleeves because he and his fellow firefighters weren't warned of the dangers of radiation contamination. If there's anything more tragic than giving up your life in the service of your country, it's doing it unwittingly.

The wife then talks of the following two weeks that it took her husband to die of radiation poisoning. During that time, this firefighter, who had never meant to be a martyr to nuclear power and who had only been "called out to attend an ordinary fire," underwent such agonies as puking up parts of his own anatomy (while his wife scooped the gore out of his mouth with her hand) as his feet swelling so large that he had to be buried barefoot "in soldered zinc coffins, under slabs of concrete" because he was "too radioactive" to be laid to rest by his family.

It seems that the bodies of the people who fought to control Chernobyl's exploding reactor may never stop burning. Somehow, the thought of the half-life of an irradiated corpse seems more horrible than the thought of death itself.

And the reactor is still burning, though now it is contained in a steel-and-concrete "sarcophagus" ostensibly designed to shield the world from the deadly reactions still occurring in the reactor's core.

But the sarcophagus is cracked, and Ukraine's government is planning to bring Chernobyl's number three reactor (which is just next door to the shattered-and-buried number four) back on-line because the country needs the power it can generate. Not coincidentally, the starting of Chernobyl's third reactor is scheduled to occur just days before the annual meeting of western hemisphere countries which contribute to the upkeep of the sarcophagus, and Ukrainian President Kuchma is asking the world's seven richest nations to pony up some two billion dollars to help repair it and to build new reactors to replace Chernobyl's. What timing.

Even at ground zero, where an entire city stands virtually empty because it is "too hot" to inhabit, it appears that remembrance must



give way to geopolitical machinations. Do we let the Ukrainians restart Chernobyl, or do we break out our collective checkbooks to help keep this nuclear demon safely in its box?

Can we blame President Kuchma for playing international hardball? After all, he's got this smoldering monstrosity sitting in his proverbial front yard. And without power, we may as well be living in the Stone Age, be we Americans or Ukrainians (I wonder: if you were forced to give up either electric power or the right of free speech, which would you choose?)

Also, if the sarcophagus dete-

riorates further, I doubt that the radiation that will leak out will observe political boundaries as it contaminates both land and air and chromosomes. Remember: fallout from the 1986 explosion was measured on the North American continent. This is one issue that blurs the artificial line between foreign and domestic affairs.

At the end of the Chernobyl fireman's wife's testimony, she says a few words about those who still work at Chernobyl. "They have worked at the atomic power station all their lives," she says. "and to this

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Random Musings

By Darryl Richardson
Editor-in-Chief

"Idiot, n. A member of a large and powerful tribe whose influence in human affairs has always been dominant and controlling."—Ambrose Bierce

The news hit me like a ton of bricks. I was speechless and shocked. In a million years, I would never have guessed that this could be true.

The Jerry Springer Show is faked!

Yes, that classic example of daytime trash TV reportedly features some guests who aren't what they say they are. Not to mention that some of the hair-pulling, eye-gouging catfights that have become the show's trademark may be staged. What is the world coming to?

I'll admit that I have occasionally watched part of Springer's show.

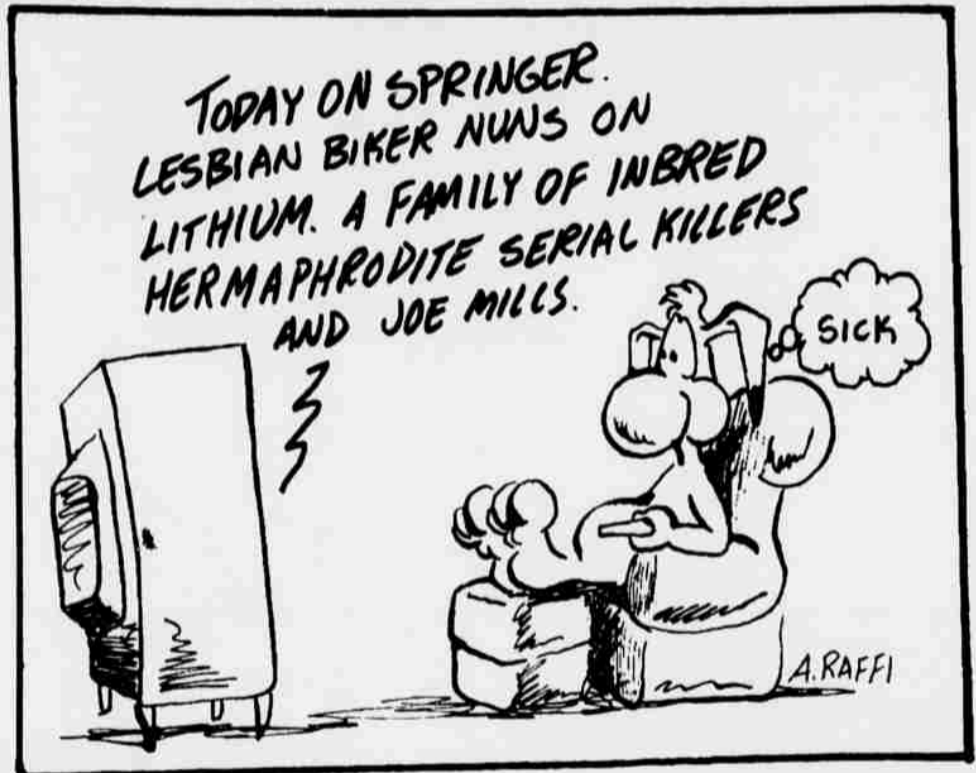
I've seen it while flipping through the channels on those rare mornings when I am at home. I've also seen some of the highlights on Talk Soup in the evenings. But in no way am I a fan of the show. In fact, I think that it truly shows how far the American way of life has fallen.

If you have ever watched this lame excuse for a television show, you know exactly what I mean. Every single episode features some form of love triangle or obese people in love with thin people or white trash in love with white trash or people with some sort of weird sex job or some other form of stupidity. Every show has some screaming and yelling, a fight with lots of wrestling and biting and a crowd that screams for more. You'd almost swear you were watch-

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BY ALEX RAFFI



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