
Dirty Water

What Everyone Knows —Except Halliburton

by Edward Spannaus

“Everyone knows that drinking, or washing with poop, is bad for you,” said Dr. Jeffrey Griffiths, Director of Global Health at Tufts University, and one of the world’s leading water quality experts, at an April 6 Senate hearing called by the Democratic Policy Committee (DPC).

“The reasons are so obvious, we consider them common sense,” Dr. Griffiths continued. “When water is contaminated with pathogens, we become infected with bacteria, viruses, or parasites.” Griffiths pointed out that, 100 years ago, intestinal diseases were common in the United States, largely as a result of contaminated water—and today, our long lifespans are primarily a result of the fact that “feces do not contaminate our water supplies [and] our food and water do not have feces in them.”

Everyone seems to know this—except Dick Cheney’s Halliburton. Rumsfeld’s Pentagon has paid Halliburton’s KBR subsidiary more than \$11 billion to provide logistical and construction support for the U.S. Army in Iraq. These are the types of activities which used to be done by the Army itself, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but which are now “outsourced” to private contractors whose only concern is obtaining the most profit for the least effort.

The April 6 hearing was a follow-up to one held on Jan. 23, in which two former Halliburton employees testified that the contractor had supplied unsafe water to troops in Iraq. This was not drinking water, but, almost as bad, it was the water that troops used to shower, wash their hands and faces, brush their teeth, wash their clothes, and even to make coffee.

DPC chairman Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) reported that, although Halliburton had denied the allegations, the DPC subsequently obtained an internal Halliburton report, written by the company’s top water quality manager, Wil Granger, which said that shower water had not been disinfected at camp Ar Ramadi, which exposed the population there “to potentially harmful water.” Granger emphasized: “This event should be considered a ‘NEAR MISS’ as the consequences of this action could have been VERY SEVERE resulting in mass sickness or death.” The Granger report also said that this was not an event exclusive to this camp, but that the same deficiencies were present at all camps “countrywide” in Iraq.

On the eve of the April 6 hearing, Halliburton informed

the DPC that it was disavowing the report, claiming that it contained only Granger’s “personal conclusions,” and that it “is not an official company report”—even though the cover sheet of the report designates it as an official KBR document.

Dr. Griffiths told the committee that cholera and dysentery were common in Iraq even before the first Gulf War, and that the situation had so deteriorated after 1991, that the Euphrates River today “is essentially an open sewer.” Yet, KBR was drawing water from the river, within two miles of sewage outlets and it was not filtered to remove parasites, nor chlorinated to kill bacteria and viruses, before it was supplied to troops and other camp personnel for showering and washing purposes. In these activities, infectious agents can easily enter the body in a variety of ways—through cuts or abrasions in the skin, through the eyes, or through aspiration or inadvertent swallowing.

Senator Dorgan read from an e-mail which the committee had received from a U.S. Army surgeon currently serving in Iraq, Capt. Michelle Callahan, who said that the situation at her base was “almost identical” to that at the Ar Ramadi base, and that “even after KBR had gone through the investigation at Ar Ramadi they still provided doubly contaminated water to soldiers” at her base, Forward Operating Base Q-West.

“In January,” Captain Callahan wrote, “I noticed the water in our showering facility was cloudy and had a foul odor. At the same time (over a two-week period) I had a sudden increase in soldiers with bacterial infections presenting to me for treatment. All of these soldiers live in the same living area (PAD 103) and use the same water to shower. I had 4 cases of skin abscesses, 1 case of cellulitis, and one case of bacterial conjunctivitis.”

Callahan described how she had asked her “preventive medicine environmental officer,” a lieutenant, to test the water for that PAD, and that the tests showed no chlorine residue, and were positive for coliform bacteria. When the officer investigated, he found that “concentrate reject” from the water purification unit was being used to fill the water tanks used for showering, and other purposes. This water tested positive for coliform and *E. coli* bacteria.

When KBR was confronted with the fact that the water was unsafe and in violation of Army regulations, the KBR technician claimed that the water was safe because it was filtered through carbon prior to going into the purification unit. “This argument is wrong,” Callahan stated. “All the bacteria and chemicals that make it through the charcoal are concentrated to twice the level as in the raw water. This is the water with which the soldiers at Q-West have been showering, shaving, and brushing their teeth.”

In the Fall of 2003, Halliburton/KBR was caught serving contaminated food to American soldiers, according to Pentagon auditors who reported finding “blood all over the floor,” “dirty pans,” “dirty salad bars,” “rotting meats . . . and vegetables” in mess halls in Iraq. It seems that “Halliburton’s War” is also aimed at U.S. troops.