

**THE BLOG**

News Nukes Duke's Puke

By Marty Kaplan

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When I learned online that San Diego Republican Duke Cunningham had resigned from Congress after admitting that he profited from his position on the Defense Appropriations Committee by taking \$2.4 million in bribes from defense contractors whom he steered contracts to, I turned on CNN's "Live From..." to learn more.

What was I thinking?

It was noon Pacific Time. Here's the rundown of pieces I saw: Weather in the upper midwest. Breaking news: mall shooting in North Carolina. Curtain-raiser on Bush's immigration speech. US immigration service uniforms made in Mexico. Saddam's trial. A brief reader about a second Time reporter to testify in Plamegate. Marble falls from Supreme Court pediment. Then the tease, before the quarter-past break: Elderly woman killed by pack of dogs. It was 12:31 pm before I saw the Dukester's tears, *sans* further context, analysis, or commentary.

Ok, I'm not entirely naive. I know that Greta and Rita have a lock on the blondes-reporting-on-missing-blondes beat (as Ted Koppel calls it). I know that "if it bleeds, it leads." I know that Presidents use their power to set the news agenda. I even know that television is a "push" medium, where viewers experience news linearly, in a sequence reflecting management's judgement of what's important and what will hold attention.

But I also know that this is arguably the most corrupt Congress in American history. That Cunningham is the tip of an iceberg. That until now he fouled the air with the same kind of denials that we're still hearing from DeLay, Ney and the rest of the boys. That his resignation and admission of guilt will conceivably be seen in retrospect as a turning point in the unraveling of Republican dominance of Congress. That taking bribes from defense contractors in wartime is a particularly despicable form of treachery. And that most people still take their cues about what's important more from what the networks push, and less from what they pull from the Web.

Much of 24/7 cable news is either right-wing propaganda, infotainment, or both. Infotainment is a malignancy. It displaces real news, important news, things that people need to know, information that everyone should have in order for our system to function.

I don't think that the producers and editors at "Live From..." are politically biased; I don't think they held the Cunningham story until the second half-hour because they wanted to downplay bad news for Republicans. I think it's

worse than that. CNN, like the other networks, broadcast and cable, has actually managed to make the word “news” not necessarily synonymous with the word “journalism.”

UPDATE: On Wolf Blitzer’s “Situation Room,” CNN’s next show in the lineup, the Cunningham story was covered below the fold, at quarter-past the hour. Any increase in prominence was immediately undone by the ludicrous he-said/she-said false equivalence trap. In this case, “she” was Nancy Pelosi, whose quote linked the Cunningham story to the unfolding Abramoff saga. “He” was an unnamed Republican source who said it had nothing to do with Abramoff, and that even if it did, Democrats were caught up in that one, too. Net result: The story gets absorbed by the It’s-all-politics-as-usual narrative. Nothing to look at here, folks, just move along.

UPDATE2: Cunningham’s stand-up *mea culpa* speech may well have earned him some pity; at least it wasn’t one of those passive-voice first-person-invisible weasel-conditional mistakes-were-made-and-if-anyone-was-hurt-it-is-regrettable *faux* responsibility-takings. But before you let a television clip make you go all misty, have a look at some of these blasts from the past collected by an old medium, print:

Jan 17, 1991: During a news conference at Lindbergh Field, Cunningham says he had received intelligence that Iraqi-sponsored terrorists were operating in San Diego County. The incident aggravates tensions left over from his primary campaign, when he outraged local Arab-Americans with a brochure bearing the picture of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi that accused his Egyptian-born opponent of having been influenced by oil interests.

Oct 6, 1992: Cunningham makes the Washington Post’s “Reliable Source” column by suggesting the liberal leadership of the House should be “lined up and shot.”

Oct. 9, 1992: The Los Angeles Times quotes Cunningham as urging President Bush to attack Bill Clinton’s patriotism, telling him: “This is an issue that will kill Clinton when people realize what a traitor he is to this country. In some countries, if something like this came out, he would be tried as a traitor. Tokyo Rose had nothing over Clinton.”

May 11, 1995: A House debate over water pollution erupts in furor when Cunningham declares that lawmakers backing an amendment he opposed were the same people who support “homos in the military.” Later, he calls Rep. Pat Schroeder, D-Colo., a “socialist.”

Nov. 17, 1995: Colleagues and Capitol police break up a scuffle that starts after Cunningham, a former Navy fighter pilot, tangles with Rep. James Moran, D-Va., who used to be an amateur boxer, during the debate on a Republican-sponsored resolution that would bar President Clinton from sending American troops to Bosnia without prior congressional approval.

Feb. 26, 1998: When acting Army Secretary Robert Walker told a House subcommittee about efforts to combat sexual harassment and discrimination in the military, Cunningham calls the efforts “B.S.” and asserted that “our kids don’t like. . . political correctness.” He also insists that some members of Congress openly promote communism and that France has a Communist government.

Aug 5, 1998: Cunningham undergoes surgery to remove a cancerous prostate gland.

Sept. 5, 1998: At a forum for prostate cancer sufferers, Cunningham makes a crude reference to a fellow congressman who is gay and, in a fit of temper, directs an obscene gesture toward an audience member telling him, “(expletive) you.” .

Nice guy.