

SOUNDBITES

ANOTHER "HUMANITARIAN" INVASION

French responsibility for the tragedy in Rwanda continued to be underplayed, as French troops returned to the country to general U.S. media applause. "Helping Rwanda" was how the **Washington Post** referred to the French "humanitarian mission" on its June 24 front page. Another **Post** piece (6/27/94) was headlined, "Saved By French Troops, Rwandans Thank God." As Jane Hunter reported last issue, France's role in Rwanda has been far from humanitarian—France was the biggest supplier of arms to the genocidal Rwandan government, and intervened in 1990 to support the government against rebel forces. The intervention this year seemed to be calculated less to protect civilians than to harbor the former rulers responsible for mass murder as they fled the capital. Media maps of Rwanda (e.g., **New York Times**, 7/30/94; **Newsweek**, 8/1/94) frequently labeled the part of Rwanda occupied by France as the "Safe Zone." The label was particularly Orwellian, given that the clandestine radio broadcasts that urged Hutus to flee Rwanda to Zaire—resulting in thousands of deaths—are believed to have originated from this area.

ORWELL THAT ENDS WELL

Much of the Washington press corps cheered when Clinton chose Leon Panetta to be his new chief of staff. **NBC's** Tim Russert (**Nightly News**, 6/27/94) explained why he approved of Clinton's decision: "For the last month, he reached out, he considered several outsiders. He finally decided on Leon Panetta. Why? Because he's finally realized that if you're going to move the wheel of change down here, you need an insider." You can only have change in Washington if an insider is in charge? That's what insiders in the Washington press corps think.

YOUTH GONE BAD

A **Harper's Magazine** article by David Lipsky and Alexander Abrams (7/94) described a dramatic shift in stereotypes about "Generation X"—people born between 1961 and 1972. While nowadays it's common to hear this group described as "slackers"—"overly sensitive at best and lazy at worst," **Time** magazine wrote in 1990—this cliché was preceded by the exact opposite caricature: that 20-somethings were job-obsessed. "Determined, career-minded, fiercely self-reliant," the **New York Times Magazine** called recent college grads in 1987; those under 30 were "young people who want to work," **Fortune** reported in 1989. Why the dramatic turnaround in 1990? That was the start of a recession that hit young people especially hard, Lipsky and Abrams note. The media reasoning seems to be that if young people don't have jobs, they must not want them.

NON-COMMERCIAL SHOPPING

Last year, a new low was reached in the commercialization of public television when Chicago's **PBS** affiliate, **WTTW**, turned over its airwaves for 40 hours of home shopping. The supposedly non-commercial station argued that the "Holiday Gift Exchange" was legal because the merchandise came from non-profit institutions. But the legality remains to be seen: Chicago's Coalition for Democracy in Public Television has filed a complaint with the FCC, charging that the home shopping violated restrictions on commercialism. **WTTW** responded (**Chicago Sun-Times**, 7/7/94) that coalition organizer Scott Sanders "should get a life."

"FREE TO BE PRETTY"

"Remember this wickedly funny American TV commercial from a few years ago?" asked **NBC Nightly News** (8/2/94), showing footage of dumpy Soviet "fashion models" from a Wendy's ad. "Well, things have changed a bit here. Russian women are now free to be pretty.... There is a new femininity there." Using a U.S. hamburger ad to show how "things have changed" in Russia is a bit peculiar, but even stranger was correspondent John Dancy's dismissal of feminist organizing there: A source is described as "one of Russia's few feminists," and Dancy says "there's little agitation among women here for a better deal." In fact, the feminist Women of Russia Party got 8 percent of the vote in the December '93 elections, making it one of the larger parties in the Russian parliament.

FORGOTTEN TONKIN

This summer of historic anniversaries led to lengthy media reminiscences about Nixon's resignation, the Moonwalk, Woodstock, etc. But most news outlets missed a big anniversary: the 30th anniversary of the fabricated Gulf of Tonkin crisis (Aug. 2-4, 1964), which opened the floodgates to the Vietnam War. National media would have had to recall how they had uncritically accepted White House distortions about "unprovoked" attacks against U.S. warships in the gulf; although the **New York Times** had praised President Johnson at the time (8/5/64) for giving the public "the somber facts," at least one of the supposed attacks never took place. Perhaps that's why the anniversary was overlooked—even as the **New York Times** (8/7/94) ran a full-page spread on anniversaries that included some three dozen events, including Chappaquiddick (25 years ago), the first Barbie doll (35 years) and the invention of the bikini (50 years).