

Media portrayal of drugs is racist

Syndicated Columnist **Molly Ivins**

There is something ugly and troubling going on in the news media's presentation and discussion of one of our worst national nightmares. The burgeoning horrors of addiction to crack cocaine are being reported and discussed in the press and on television with a deep and subtle but unmistakable racism.

The easiest way to recognize it is through the historical similarities between this outbreak of fear-and-horror stories and those that accompanied earlier waves of drug hysteria: In this country, hysteria over drugs is always associated with a feared racial minority. At the turn of the century, the astonishing hysteria over opium stemmed not so much from widespread effects of the drug, which were in fact quite limited, as from its association with Chinese immigrants, who had been brought over to work on the Western railroads. In the '20s and '30s, there was a wave of hysteria about cocaine because it was associated with blacks, although the sophisticates of the era such as Cole Porter were the ones using it. "Cocainized blacks" were said to have superhuman strength, and the drug supposedly made them insanely aggressive. There was such a wave of propaganda centered on this thesis that every Southern police department went from using .32-caliber revolvers to .38s because it was believed that a .32 couldn't stop a cocainized black.

In the '40s and 50s there was an especially laughable national snit over marijuana, which was associated with Mexicans. Marijuana, like cocaine, was said to make its users violently aggressive and to give them unnatural physical powers — to a later generation of dope smokers who had a lot of trouble getting up off the sofa to find some Cheetos in the kitchen when stoned, these silly claims were taken as evidence that all warnings about the dangers of drug use were exaggerated. There was also an immense lot of rot about the effects of LSD in the straight press during the '60s because it was associated with hippies, another despised pariah group. All these false warnings helped set up a widespread social acceptance of drug use among the hip in the '70s and '80s.

So we have had one wave of hysteria, always with racist overtones, after another — while we largely ignored the effects of the most damaging drug of all, alcohol. As I have said before, we have cried, "Wolf" many a time — and now the damn wolf, the biggest, meanest one there ever was, really is here. Crack is everything all the other drugs were supposed to have been and kept turning out not to be — as one New York family court judge said, "It makes me yearn for the good old days of heroin addiction."

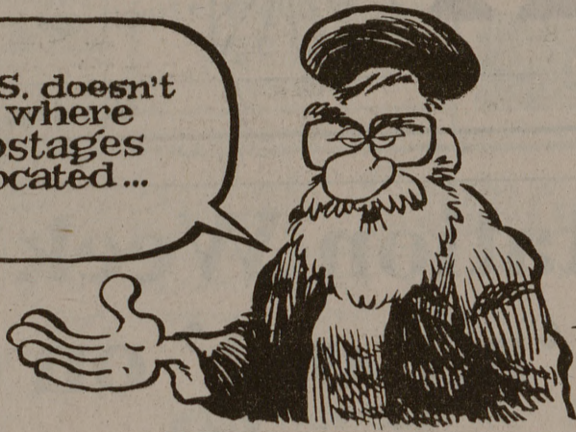
You may think it is impossible for the press to exaggerate the effects of crack addiction — especially since those effects are even now snowballing in the inner cities, an avalanche of health prob-

lems, crime problems and social problems that staggers the imagination. It's like all the old inner-city problems squared. But the exaggeration is also in the lack of historical context in the reporting, always a problem for the historical American press. The persistent habit we have of blaming the victim ("Well if she didn't want to get raped she shouldn't have been walking in that part of town at night") surfaces in the after story. Discussion of the "disintegration of the black family," a popular scapegoat since Sen. Patrick Moynihan first wrote about it in 1965, is being used as an all-purpose rationalization. It is supposed to explain the cause of crack addiction, why there's no cure for crack addiction and why there's no point in trying to do anything about crack addiction and why it's all their fault anyway.

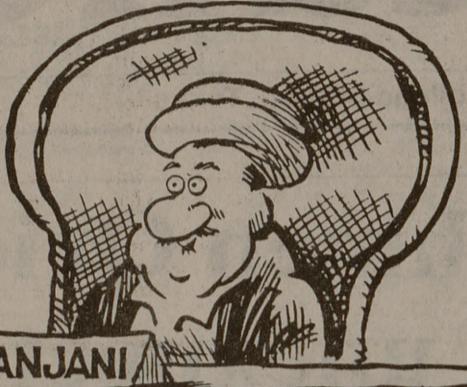
If you've been around long enough you recognize what's wrong with the stories. I hate to follow the example of AIM and other right-wing propagandists by picking on our best newspaper instead of our worst, but some recent stories in *The New York Times*, which has been giving extensive coverage of the crack problem, are useful examples of what the press is doing wrong. Last week the *Times* ran a story about a nightmarish night in a hospital emergency room in the ghetto in Oakland, Calif. The story detailed the endless flow of crack addicts into the emergency room; the large number of repeat customers, including gunshot victims who had been shot before; a huge, scary black man absolutely berserk on crack who could scarcely be held down by leather straps, several cops and half a medical personnel in the room; and exhaustion and discouragement of the physicians, including a moving quote from a '60s liberal who had just burned out trying to handle the flood of trauma coming through the place.

There was only one trouble with the otherwise excellent story — I wrote myself more than 20 years ago. And I have every reporter of every era who ever spent a night in a big-city hospital emergency room. They were like that before crack and they'll be like that after crack: There is always an endless flow of the detritus of humanity into hospital emergency rooms; there are always repeat customers — addicts, alcoholic wives who won't leave their abusive husbands, dumb criminals who have been shot before, the whole sorry parade; there is always some huge man who can barely be held down by a dozen people — high on anything from glue to white lightning, crazy, afraid, makes no difference; there are always burned-out professionals in emergency rooms and it is always hard to decide whether their exhaustion or their dedication is most touching.

The U.S. doesn't know where its hostages are located...



RAFSANJANI



But at least WE know precisely where our frozen assets are held...



MARGULIES ©1989 HOUSTON POST

They're in SAVINGS & LOANS...

RAFSANJANI

Mail Call

Got the parking blues

EDITOR:

The TAMU parking lots are shrinking and the garage is off limits to students housed off campus. Many students may get a little irritated with the Department of Parking, Transit and Traffic Services and their decision allocating any future reserved spaces to dorm students, but this decision affects only one Aggie at a time. Nay one off-campus Aggie that thinks he or she will get a Park-n-Ride permit, but they had better hustle over and get one quick. The P-n-R spaces have been cut by approximately half.

I understand that the Department of Parking, Transit and Traffic Services is slowly eliminating the less expensive Park-n-Ride to increase ridership on the off-campus shuttles and to increase revenues from the more expensive parking permits. I guess I'm writing this letter because I am one

student who is frustrated at seeing the hundreds of yellow parking tickets sticking to all those windshields, at hearing of inane parking policy changes, and at feeling like I'm driving an expensive Ford around in the Neiman Marcus selection of parking lots.

The majority of TAMU students live off campus, so there should be several thousand one's looking for a parking space. No problem — we're all friendly Aggies and help each other out, right? President Mobley, can one friendly Aggie park in your driveway this semester?

Ginger M. Berry
Graduate Student

Letters to the editor should not exceed 300 words in length. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must be signed and must include the classification, address and telephone number of the writer.

Keep this for future reference!

This summer was a hot one for *The Battalion's* opinion page and I expect the fall to be even hotter.

Save the whales. Save the trees (the trees in the way of the Memorial Student Center's expansion). Nuke the trees. Add a crossword puzzle to the page. Tell the drill team girls to find some place else to prance. One letter writer, after becoming slightly peeved that an ad for a memorial service for Khomeini ran in the paper, even suggested that we at *The Battalion* go to Iran and run ads for terrorists.

I heard it all this summer. We were bombarded with so many flag-burning letters that I had to sort through and burn some of them. But all the letters and feedback are certainly greatly appreciated — after all these are the controversial issues and opposing viewpoints that make people turn to page two.

Now that's my opinion. Not the opinion of the entire *Battalion* staff, not the opinion of the editorial board and certainly not the opinion of the entire University. It's mine. All mine and, according to the first amendment, I'm entitled to such opinions. And some of these belong on the page — after all, isn't opinion the stuff of which page two is made?

I am writing this column to clarify some things for the readers of page two. A common reader misconception is that the opinions on the page are the opinions of everyone who works for the paper. I have received several letters to the editor that have said similar things, namely that the "narrow-minded, emotional rather than reasonable" views of *The Battalion* staff and its editorial board are reflected in the columns and editorial cartoons we run on the page. One letter clearly suggested that the entire editorial board is in favor of abortion on demand.

This is a matter of opinion. Let me



Juliette Rizzo
Opinion Page Editor

make it clear early in the semester that I, as an editor, do not let my opinions appear on the page unless I express them in a column under my byline; nor do I let my personal views affect the daily decision of what to print. And as for the joint opinions of the editorial board, which is composed of nine editors, including myself, they are designated on the page as such and are not usually voiced daily, only when a situation arises about which we feel strongly enough to take a stance.

The remainder of the page is a random sampling of opinions from readers whose interest to respond is sparked by issues addressed both on and off the page. Guest columns, which are always welcomed, are just that — they are written by someone other than a *Battalion* staff member. And our letters column, Mail Call, is, as Paul LaRocque of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* once said, the readers' soapbox. To dispel this myth that we sometimes make up letters for the page, let me say that letters to the editor are written by the readers for the readers. And to fill Mail Call, what some say is the most read section of the page (and the paper for that matter), we need all the letters we can get. So don't be afraid to write one. We don't bite, and heck, we at *The Battalion* don't even answer them back.

It's easy, too. Just write a letter, you don't even have to type it (that's just something we journalists do), and hand

deliver it to a *Battalion* staff member in room 216 of the Reed McDonald Building — the orange and red building next to the Bus Stop Snack Bar.

To sum it all up, page two is a forum for individual expression about national, international and local events. It's kind of a combination of every page of *The Battalion*, including the sports page. (Hey, we even ran a Pete Rose column once.) To keep the page interesting, we need your input.

Now I realize that the opinions on the page do not necessarily agree with other people's opinions. But expressing my one opinion paves the way for others to do the same in the forms of letters to the editor and guest columns. So, if you agree with the opinions on the page, tell us. And if you get hot under the collar from something other than the summer heat, don't keep your opinions to yourself — let them be heard. EXPRESS YOURSELF! A common misconception is that a newspaper's editorial page is used as a medium of expression for the opinion page staff only. Wrong. Page two is not ours — it's yours.

Juliette Rizzo is a senior journalism major and opinion page editor for *The Battalion*.



MARGULIES ©1989 HOUSTON POST

The Battalion

(USPS 045 360)

Member of
Texas Press Association
Southwest Journalism Conference

The Battalion Editorial Board

Scot Walker, Editor
Wade See, Managing Editor
Juliette Rizzo, Opinion Page Editor
Fiona Soltes, City Editor
Ellen Hobbs, Chuck Squatriglia, News Editors
Tom Kehoe, Sports Editor
Jay Janner, Art Director
Dean Sueltenfuss, Life Editor

Editorial Policy

The Battalion is a non-profit, self-supporting newspaper operated as a community service to Texas A&M and its College Station.

Opinions expressed in *The Battalion* are those of the editorial board of the author, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Texas A&M administrators, faculty or the Board of Regents.

The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes within the Department of Journalism.

The Battalion is published Monday through Friday during Texas A&M regular semesters, except for holiday and examination periods.

Mail subscriptions are \$47.11 per semester, \$31.62 per school year and \$160.11 per full year. Advertising rates are listed on page 11.

Our address: *The Battalion*, 230 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-1111. Second class postage paid at College Station, TX 77843.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Battalion*, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-1111.