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April 21, 2009



Hanford Nuclear Reservation: A Look at the Nation's Most Polluted Nuclear Weapons Production Site

We speak with investigative report Karen Dorn Steele about the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, the nation's most polluted nuclear weapons production site. Steele won a 1994 George Polk Award for a newspaper series on squandered money in the \$50 billion Hanford nuclear cleanup. [includes rush transcript]



Guest:

Karen Dorn Steele, a local investigative reporter in Spokane, WA. She won a George Polk Award for a 1994 newspaper series on squandered money in the \$50 billion Hanford Nuclear Reservation cleanup, the nation's most polluted nuclear weapons production site.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: Before I say goodbye to you, Karen Dorn Steele, I wanted to ask you about one other issue that is very close to here in Spokane, and it's the issue of the Hanford Reservation, for which your coverage, "Wasteland," won a George Polk Award.

Well, on Hanford, on the campaign trail last year, Senator Obama at the time was asked about the Hanford Nuclear Reservation cleanup. This is him being questioned at a campaign stop in Pendleton, Oregon last May.

QUESTIONER: Every year the government promises to fund the Hanford cleanup project in eastern Washington, and every year they find a way to take away the funding, which, in results, a lot of lost jobs. Washington's current policy seems to be the solution to pollution is dilution.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA: Oh, nice.

QUESTIONER: What is your policy?

SEN. BARACK OBAMA: Here's something that you will rarely hear from a politician. And that is, I'm not familiar with the Hanford site, and so I don't know exactly what's going on there. Now, having said that, having said that, I promise you I'll learn about it by the time I leave here on the ride back to the airport.

AMY GOODMAN: That was presidential candidate Obama. Karen Dorn Steele, you're very familiar with the Hanford Reservation. Tell us very briefly what it is and what are the latest developments around this site.

KAREN DORN STEELE: Hanford is the nation's largest plutonium production complex. It made the plutonium for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki. In the course of weapons production, it sent a lot of radiation into the air, contaminating the region. There's now a major lawsuit with over 2,000 plaintiffs winding its way through the federal courts. It was filed in 1991, seeking compensation. So far, the lawyers defending the government contractors have racked up about \$60 million in defense costs, and not one sick person has received a dime. So it's a justice issue. Again, sovereign immunity is being claimed by the government, and the government agreed to indemnify these contractors who came in during World War II.

AMY GOODMAN: How is it—how far is it from Spokane? How large is the Hanford Reservation?

KAREN DORN STEELE: Hanford is about 130 miles from Spokane, and it's about half the size of Maryland. It's a huge facility.

AMY GOODMAN: And who were these 2,000 people?

KAREN DORN STEELE: The 2,000 people were largely farmers and other rural people who lived in the vicinity from the mid-'40s through the early '50s, when the emissions from the plutonium factory, mostly of radioactive iodine, were the heaviest.

AMY GOODMAN: And finally, your piece "Wasteland" was about the corruption and the amount of money that was spent.

KAREN DORN STEELE: That's correct. President Obama may not have heard of it,

but this is a huge scandal, in that \$50 billion has been spent or will be spent over the thirty years of—that is planned to clean up Hanford. And there's been a lot of wasted money, and that's what we looked at.

AMY GOODMAN: Karen Dorn Steele, I want to thank you for being with us. *The Spokesman-Review*, you're no longer there. I went to the offices. I saw the big spaces, the desks replaced by couches now. So many people have—well, you took a buyout.

KAREN DORN STEELE: Yes, I did. It's sad. We're a privately owned company, and we've had a series of layoffs since 2001, just like newspapers nationwide. It's tough times for the newspaper industry.

AMY GOODMAN: Thanks very much for being with us, and congratulations on the George Polk Award you won for "Wasteland," for your coverage of the Hanford Reservation.

KAREN DORN STEELE: Thank you.



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