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counterpunch

edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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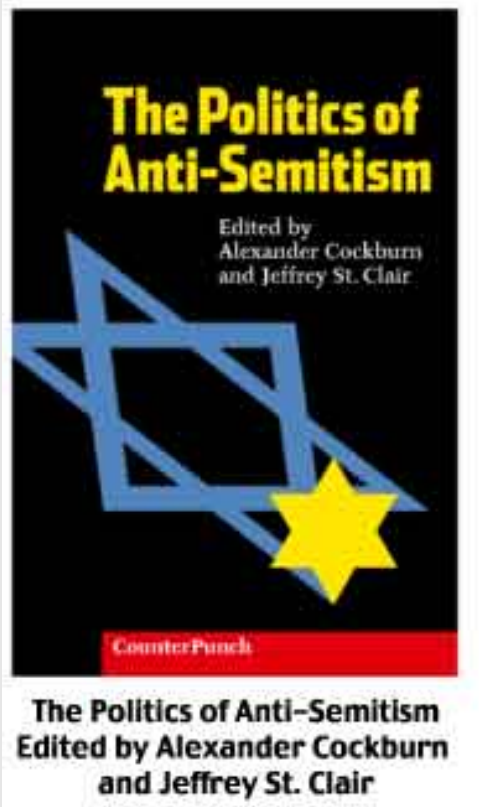
January 8, 2004

Wounded "Held Captive" at Walter Reed

Disabled Vets Fire Back at Rumsfeld

By DAVID VEST

The organization known as Disabled American Veterans has been helping U.S. combat casualties figure out what benefits they have coming to them and how to apply for them since 1920. Lately the Bush administration has been going out of its way to make the DAV's job harder.



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Their job would be hard enough even if the government appreciated their efforts and was glad to see them coming. Incredibly, it doesn't and it isn't. Not any more.

An army of U.S. veterans more than twice the size of Operation Iraqi Freedom have lost their health insurance benefits since Bush took office. As many as half a million vets are homeless. Seven VA hospitals are being closed as part of an effort to "restructure" the Department of Veterans Affairs. Meanwhile, veterans of the Iraq campaign can fall in line with over 250,000 U.S. veterans who are already waiting at least six months to see a doctor.

Although it hasn't hesitated to send them to face death in Iraq, the administration has consistently opposed any attempt to extend full benefits to Reservists and National Guardsmen, twenty percent of whom have no health insurance by General Accounting Office estimates.

It was one thing when the White House tried to roll back increases in monthly imminent-danger pay and family separation allowance, and another when it called a modest proposal to increase the sum given to families of soldiers who die on active duty "wasteful and unnecessary."

Finally, it occurred to the firm of Bush Cheney Rumsfeld Rice Minions and Myrmidons to wonder how much money the country would save (and how much more could be diverted to Bechtel and Halliburton contracts) if veterans couldn't even find out what their benefits are.

And so now we learn that ever since Operation Iraqi Freedom got underway, it has been easier for a terrorist to get into the United States legally than for a DAV representative to get into a military hospital to help

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wounded soldiers with their benefit applications. Sickeningly, the Pentagon has been severely limiting DAV access to wounded veterans and doing it on grounds of "security." Oh, yes, and protecting "privacy."

It protects the veterans' privacy by not allowing them to speak with DAV representatives "unmonitored."

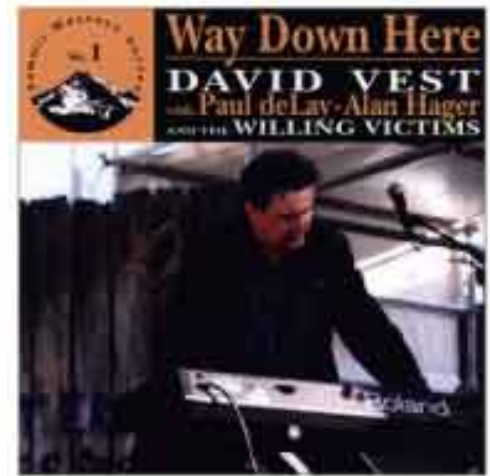
Fortunately someone blinked and it wasn't the Disabled American Veterans.

When he got back to the office after celebrating New Year's and opened his mail, Donald Rumsfeld found a letter informing him that he had messed with the wrong people this time.

Here's part of what DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director David W. Gorman had to say to the Secretary of Defense:

"At one facility in particular [Walter Reed Army Medical Center] our efforts to visit with wounded patients have been severely restricted. For example, all requests to visit patients must now be made through the WRAMC headquarters office, which then selects the patients we may visit and strictly limits information about the patients, even the patient's name and the nature of the injury is withheld without express permission. The DAV's representatives also are escorted at all times while in the facility, and all contact with patients is closely monitored by the escort. This is particularly unnerving and inappropriate as all conversations between a representative and client are confidential in nature.

"I believe these overly broad restrictions on patient access inhibit the ability of our professional accredited representatives to help ensure these wounded service members have the vital information they and their



Way Down Here
David Vest
and the Willing Victims



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families need in order to obtain the medical care and benefits many of these veterans will depend on for decades to come.

"The American public would be outraged if these restrictions became public knowledge."

[Would they? Hard to tell. There has been little or no coverage in the mainstream media since the DAV released the letter.]

Gorman goes on to say:

"The record of benefits awarded by the VA shows our honored wounded and injured are getting less than they are rightfully entitled. Those wounded and disabled in service to our nation should not be held captive and deprived of the knowledge that would allow them to receive all their rightful benefits, earned on a battlefield half a world away. It brings great dishonor to our nation to learn of disabled veterans suffering physical and economic hardships following their release from medical treatment solely because they are unaware and uninformed of their rightful benefits."

Think of it ... wounded veterans "held captive" ... prevented from seeing people who have a congressional charter to serve them ... not allowed to speak with DAV reps in private, lest their "privacy" be violated ... an administration that regards Disabled American Veterans as security risks.

A government increasingly unable to tell the difference between terrorists and its own citizens.

David Vest writes the Rebel Angel column for CounterPunch. He and his band, The Willing Victims, just released a scorching new CD, [Way Down Here](#).

He can be reached at: davidvest@springmail.com

Visit his website at <http://www.rebelangel.com>

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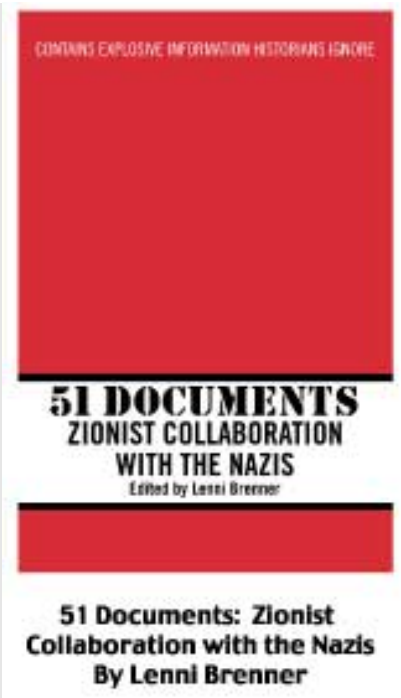
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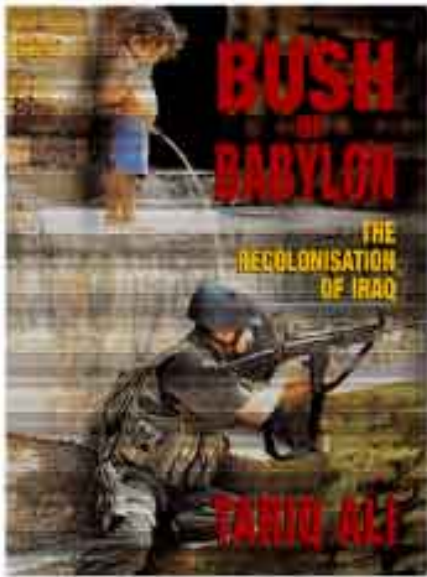
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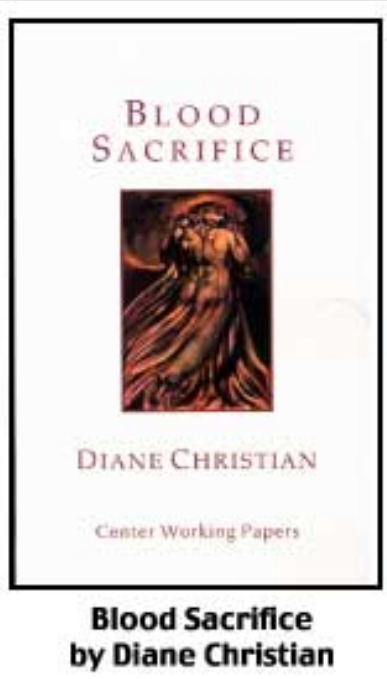
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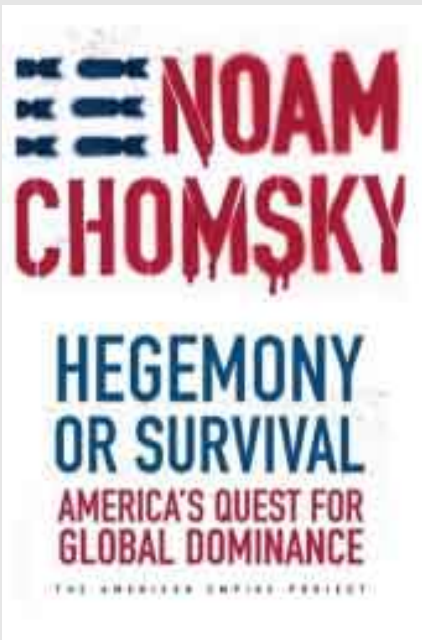
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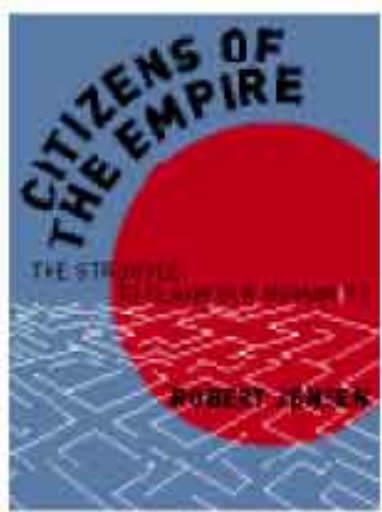
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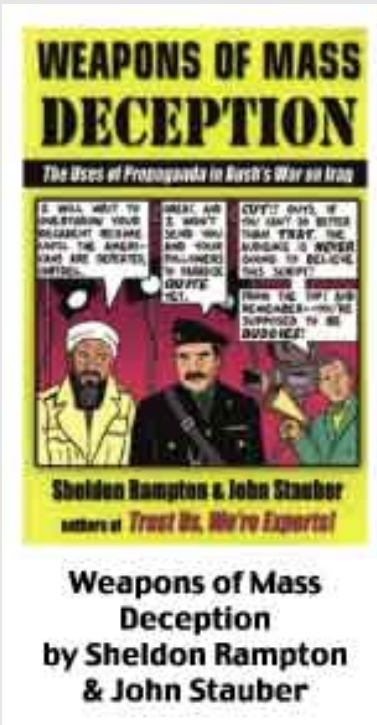
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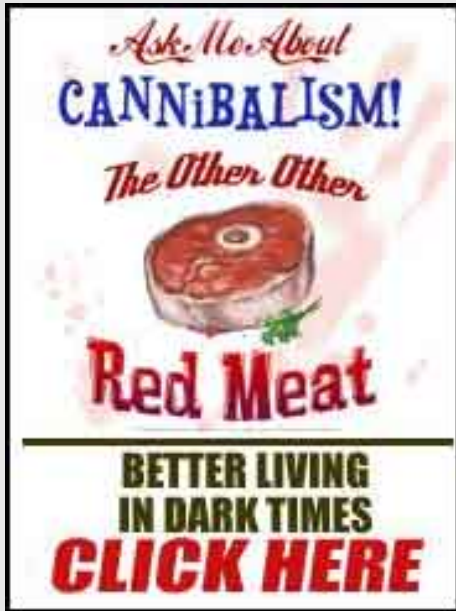
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