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## Not the 9 o'clock news

**September 11 appears to have laid bare the shallowness of much American news reporting of the last decade**

By Thomas O'Dwyer

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An unsolved mystery that newsmen sometimes mull over in idle moments is where does all the other news go when a really big news story breaks. What would have been filling our newspapers and televisions if September 11 had never happened? Where did all the other news go - and if it went, surely it cannot have been as important as it would have been if it hadn't (went, gone, whatever)? You can bet it wouldn't have been the plight of women under the Taliban or the stability of Pakistan's military dictatorship - that was the week that wasn't.

More recently, as we edited screech upon long monotonous screech on the night of the assassination of Rehavam "Gandhi" Ze'evi, doing our mindless bit to transform the former nasty little racist bigot with underworld connections into the saint of the day - Father Teresa of Transfer - the tedium was relieved by wondering what would have filled the newspaper had not foul murder been visited upon this foul personage.

Still, in abandoning our journalistic principles to speak the truth fearlessly, there was some consolation in knowing we were in good company with the temporary mindless, like Yossi Sarid babbling about "an opponent who was a friend and a friend who was an opponent." At least that loony leftist Benny Begin remained immovable about Ze'evi being the nation's "moral and political contagion."

Six years ago, we actually had a chance to solve the mystery of what the other news would have been. I was then working for "the other" English newspaper here on the night Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, and the almost-completed entire newspaper had to be remade only a couple of hours before deadline, so we knew what the alternative news would have been. Except that's not very enlightening, because the other news would have been about the last and greatest peace rally we have ever seen here.

The inside pages were filled with reports of the poisonous incitement and character assassinations of the "Oslo gang" that led to the very news story that replaced them - the murder of a prime minister.

The disgusting attempts to "Rabinize" the Ze'evi assassination have been adequately and brilliantly scorned this week by Doron Rosenblum and Aviv Lavie, and the subsequent merciful "Gandhi shrinkage" is footnoted in this weekend's Magazine by Arie Caspi.

All we are left to wonder is why the post-Rabin government of Shimon Peres did not then impose full closure on Yigal Amir's home town, on the settlements, on Bar-Ilan University, and send the tanks and undercover killers in to "take out" or round up the Jewish "terrorists" celebrating the murder of the nation's leader.

Why on earth were the houses of Yigal Amir, Margalit Har-Shefi and other "wild weeds" not razed to the ground? And anyway, how did they become "wild weeds" and have nothing to do with the vicious inciters and leaders on the right, while the assassins of Gandhi immediately became the personal responsibility of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority? Rabinizing Gandhi indeed. Perhaps we could have saved the country had we Gandhized the Rabin murder instead and uprooted those wild weeds instead of Arab olive trees.

### Healthy shame

September 11 actually broke through the cordon of the war on terrorism and the anthrax scare in the form of books, and one can only feel sorry (but only a little) for the authors. These are of the "instant" genre, on topics presumably deemed "hot" when they were commissioned long before September - mainly celebrity biographies.

The International Herald Tribune's book column reviewed the autobiography of Anne Heche (the bisexual former lover of Ellen Degeneris, if you care) as if it were handling something nasty the dog brought home. The reviewer wondered if this was the sort of thing we used to think important only two months ago.

Since Osama bin Laden, Afghanistan and anthrax became not a story, but the whole story, much of the media seems healthily

ashamed of picking up such doggy poo as sleazy sex scandals or celebrity gossip. September 11 appears to have laid bare the shallowness of much American news reporting of the last decade: Politics, scandal, sex, money and celebrity - preferably all together - dotted the media firmament with stars like O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, and recently, Gary Condit.

The Afghan filmmaker Jawed Wassel was gruesomely murdered and dismembered by one of his movie financiers in the first week of October. Before 9-11 it would have been front-page tabloid fodder; now in the more sober New York Post, it scraped into page 11 with three paragraphs.

Could it be that serious news, even world affairs, has made a comeback? Even in media carrying news of the Jews, where the serious stuff never went away, everything now seems to have a bin Laden or an anthrax angle - the current anthrax scare has Jewish organizations as jumpy as other Americans. For example, the offices of several Jewish organizations were checked for anthrax this week following the discovery of spores in the offices of New York governor George Pataki. (His offices are in the same midtown Manhattan building as 325 people working for the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.)

Canadian columnist Shawna Richer this week pondered how newspaper editors the world over had arrived at their desks early on the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 11, "already mulling over the stories they planned to pursue," stories that never saw the light of day. Oddly enough, at her own Globe and Mail, "Editors were excited about a piece about Patrick Dolan Critton, a man who was captured the previous weekend for hijacking an Air Canada jet in the 1970s. Simon Haupt, The Globe's New York correspondent, had interviewed Critton the night before."

So the news would have been an old hijack story revisited, and how weird is that.

"Instead, readers found an 88-page paper on their doorsteps on Wednesday morning, 52 pages of it were wholly dedicated to the terrorist attacks and the deaths of more than 5,000 people."

But it's an ill wind that doesn't blow somebody some good. In Britain, less than an hour after the terrorists hit the World Trade Center, an adviser to the transport minister sent an e-mail to all government ministries urging ministers to take advantage of the tragedy in parliament: "This is a good day to bury bad news," she wrote.

The good news for her is that she's lucky to have a benign boss who refused to fire her.

Good news, too, for the formerly notorious Gary Condit, the California congressman who was embroiled in the saga of the missing intern Chandra Levy, with whom he had an affair. He has moved from never being off the news pages to never being on them. The last report we saw of him, after he was rattled by Connie Chung's interrogation on television, was a report on the weekend before the terrorists struck, saying he would not run for reelection. Does anyone care?

In the news food chain, Gary, you turned out to be the weakest link. Good-bye!

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