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From: Kara Simonetti [mailto:[REDACTED]]

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The Story That Puts Other 'News' In Perspective

By Tina Brown

Thursday, April 1, 2004; Page C01

The best thing about Richard Clarke's testimony was that we were finally

shocked by something important instead of pretending to be shocked by something ridiculous. After the Dean scream and the Jackson nipple and the many TV hours invested in such incendiary issues as the rightness or wrongness of reconstructive breast surgery for teenagers with self-esteem issues, the Clarke Chronology was a sonic boom that will go on reverberating through the op-ed classes, whether or not the Clarke Apology to the 9/11

families moves the polls.

We were about to OD on hearings, at least the courtroom kind -- Martha, Kobe, Michael, the wacko trial of Tyco boss Dennis Kozlowski. Who, in the end, can relate to the date-rape complications of a zillionaire basketball giant, the financial finaglings of a domestic dominatrix-tycoon, or the alleged pedophilia of a loony recording legend who makes up his face like Joan Crawford and maintains a private zoo? For news junkies numbed by the freak shows of celebrity justice, the Clarke story has been bracing.

"Mostly, TV languishes in an area that doesn't much please me, but once in a while it rises to the occasion and moves beyond the 'Fear Factor' or 'American Idol' or 'Survivor' and becomes more or less what we thought it would be when we all got into this goddamn business," Don Hewitt, czar of "60 Minutes," said to me about Clarke's explosive debut on the show with

Lesley Stahl. "Dick Clarke taking on George Bush was a great big moment."

The stakeout culture needed this moral lift. Clarke suddenly restored our definition of news. Instead of souped-up sound bites and personality smackdowns, we had someone as credible as the national coordinator for counterterrorism in the White House through four administrations emerging from 30 years in his bureaucratic cave to speak on a matter of life and death.

This was a reality show, but it was also reality. People may have had a hard time identifying with Paul O'Neill's abortive adventure at Treasury -- a

high-priced CEO who made a bad career choice, he never lost the aroma of the boardroom -- but Clarke, for all his scary IQ, is somebody we recognize.

Every office has someone like him, a super-competent guy whose big, square, argumentative head you learn to dread when it appears around the door announcing bad news. The Bushies made the mistake of thinking the world would see Clarke as they did -- arrogant, relentless, alarmist, fussy, disloyal to the team, all of which might be true, but none of which really mattered against the gravity of the issue. The most famous office bore of the 20th century was Winston Churchill.

Thirty years of turf wars and PowerPoint strategizing served Clarke well for his succession of gladiatorial encounters. After "60 Minutes" and six hours of hearings, he was still hanging tough for the jabs of Tim Russert on "Meet the Press."

They want to declassify my transcript? Sure. Declassify Condi's too, and my e-mails and my memos, while we're at it. Want to talk about my letter of resignation? Here's the letter the president wrote me. Yikes. Who knew this off-the-radar guy would turn out to be such a star? The Bushies clearly didn't. Or else they might have paused before demoting him and cutting him loose.

It's his Tom Clancy quality that gives Clarke dramatic resonance. In Clancy's novels the heroes are always midlist guys like him, career patriots who are frustrated by the politicians -- except that in Clancy's usual scheme the politicians are craven liberals and in this case they are craven conservatives. (In the movie version Clarke would be played by Gene Hackman or Robert Duvall.) The Bushies now recognize this, which accounts for the histrionic level of the counterattack. Sen. Bill Frist frothed about Clarke's "appalling act of profiteering, of trading on insider access to highly classified information," overlooking the inconvenient fact that the book went through the normal channels of White House approval, a process that ironically was so bureaucratically sluggish it delayed the publishing date to the charged moment of the 9/11 hearings.

When Russert ominously replayed Frist's charge on "Meet the Press" and asked if Clarke would donate his royalties to the children of the dead, Clarke imperturbably raised him again. "Tim, long before Senator Frist said what he said, I planned to make a substantial contribution, not only to them but to the widows and orphans of our special forces who have fought and died in

Afghanistan and Iraq." Then expertly he lifted the discussion out of the distasteful realm of big-bucks New York publishing back into the shadows of Clancyland: "I also have to consider the fact that friends of mine in the White House are telling me that the word is out . . . to destroy me professionally. One line that somebody overheard was, 'He's not going to make another dime in Washington in his life.' " To be continued . . .

The Condi Rice hearings will supplant Clarke in sex appeal. The new story line of "Bush's best girl in trouble" has too much of a sweeps week flavor not to win the next round. No one really wants to focus on the most uncomfortable part of what Clarke had to say at the hearings: that all the sacrifices of the war in Iraq have made the world less safe.

C2004, Tina Brown

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