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WTC air fit to breathe? Yes

EPA outstanding amid chaos

Point/Counterpoint

By MARIANNE LAMONT HORINKO

There's been a great furor in recent days over a report by the Environmental Protection Agency's inspector general on air quality in lower Manhattan after 9/11. If the critics cared about what the inspector general really said about the agency's conduct during this tragedy, without too much trouble, they could have found this declaration in the report:

"In regard to the monitoring data, we found no evidence that EPA attempted to conceal data results from the public."

Or this one:

"[The inspector general] spoke to a number of experts in the field of environmental monitoring, including physicians, industrial hygienists and researchers. These experts generally agreed that the levels of airborne asbestos detected in the air outside the perimeter of Ground Zero in lower Manhattan did not present a significant increase in long-term risk to the public."

So what's going on? Why this report? And why the inflammatory charges of deliberate lying about safety?

With respect to Inspector General Nikki Tinsley, it's a mystery. Virtually every one of the recommendations contained in her report had been identified and changes begun well before her report was written. What is most distressing is the tone on the report, the feeling that this was simply business as usual, and EPA should have done better.

The report is so divorced from the reality of 9/11, so oblivious to the chaos, fear and uncertainty that defined those early days at Ground Zero that it trivializes the events and the extraordinary efforts of EPA and other responders.

wonder at the depth of cynicism to which they have sunk to charge this administration and this agency with deliberately lying to the people of New York about the health risks.

They can't hide behind the excuse of not knowing what went on. And they knew from the very beginning the acts of courage that were being played out by responders from all levels of government.

What purpose would such "deception" serve? What gain is achieved by such a "deliberate" decision to "mislead," as some charge?

No deception took place. The inspector general's own words cited above acknowledge that. The EPA, working with other agencies under conditions that most could never envision, provided data as soon as it could. In an atmosphere of incessant clamoring for information, the agency was confronted with environmental contamination never seen before and ever-changing and ever-growing data. Even through the chaos, the agency used its best professional judgment and gave the best and most accurate assessment of the conditions.

To suggest otherwise, to allege sinister motives in the government response, is to demean the courage, dedication and sacrifice of all who responded to this tragedy and reminds us too well of how low we have sunk in our public discourse.

**Horinko is acting administrator
of the Environmental Protection Agency.**

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