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Conspiracy theories offered in tabloid

(AP) — Readers of *The Spotlight*, a fear-mongering tabloid look-alike, were treated last September to a report describing Soviet-made tanks spotted on U.S. highways and railroads.
"American Citizens Want to Know... IS OUR TOWN NEXT? Why are Strange Military Maneuvers Taking Place all over America?" the headline screamed. *The Spotlight* never named an enemy. It never stated the presumed purpose of tanks and other vehicles shown in photographs. It only implied a nasty surprise, which would take place with President Bill Clinton's consent.

"Obviously, the military has done nothing about it, which leads many to suspect that its intentions are not altogether innocent," *The Spotlight* said.

The Spotlight, which claims a weekly circulation of 100,000, comes from the Washington-based Liberty Lobby, an organization the Anti-Defamation League calls an anti-Semitic "network of hate."

Like scores of publications, newsletters, Internet chatter, radio shows and other sources, the tabloid traffics in the folklore of the paranoid.

Here's a sampling of beliefs offered in the popular literature of self-styled American patriots:

- The United Nations plans to take over the U.S. Army, police the United States with foreign troops, and disarm all Americans.
- Rewritten versions of the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution have been drafted in wait for a U.S. takeover by the New World Order.
- The United States owns aircraft propelled by unconventional means, described as the flying boomerang, the flying cigar, the classical disk and teardrop.
- A U.S. military training compound in Fort Polk, La., is really the United Nations' North American training center.
- State and federal governments are conspiring to subvert and eliminate your local sheriff.
- The federal government plans to stage fake chemical spills in a few towns in Texas and Kansas, prompting evacuations that will allow "government forces" to search homes for guns and other contraband.
- Dots on the front of road signs in Michigan signal directions for

invading U.N. forces.

• Stickers on the back of road signs in Colorado, bearing codes such as CDOT95, designate routes for takeover forces. So do bar codes on the back of highway signs.

• President Clinton will hire 100,000 Hong Kong Chinese for his personal police and order them to seize every gun in America.

• Electronic devices the size of a rice grain allow the government to track people anywhere in the world, change their moods and personalities and control reproduction.

The conspiracies and imagined secrets spin out, endlessly and everywhere. Last fall, officials at Yellowstone National Park got calls from people asking if the United Nations was running the park.

"We assured them it isn't," said Cheryl Matthews, a park spokeswoman in Mammoth Hot Springs, Wyo., "that it's managed by the National Park Service, a federal agency, and it's owned by the American people."

Social psychologists and scholars of myth say these scary stories are invented and believed by people who need to explain their misfortunes and discomforts in life.

"Some level of our psyches that has not evolved at all since the caves... projects these demonic forces," said Harold Schechter, an author and professor of American literature and culture at Queens College, City University of New York. "The bad things happen in your life because they do. But that's a very, very hard concept to accept or live with."

The particular American variation, Schechter suggested, is "a secularized, politicized religion. These people have demonized the government."

Those who call themselves patriots evidently take to frontier mythology, he said: "The rugged, gun-toting all-American hero. You're going to see yourself as the last of the true Americans."

Anyone might be prone to believe such stories, said Professor Philip Zimbardo, who teaches psychology at Stanford University and is an expert on the social psychology of madness.

"There's enough conspiracy theories floating around for a reasonable person to say they can't all be wrong," he said.

Dow Corning bankruptcy filing delays end of lawsuits

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Dow Corning Corp. filed for bankruptcy protection Monday in a move that could keep thousands of women waiting years to collect so much as a dime from a \$4.25 billion breast-implant settlement.

The move jeopardizes the already shaky settlement, because Dow Corning — once the world's No. 1 maker of implants — is supposed to contribute nearly half the money.

The bankruptcy filing could also delay or reduce payments for women who are suing Dow Corning over health problems such as lupus and breast hardening.

"The fact that the corporation will not be responsible for its mess is outrageous," said Joan Rice of Potomac, Md., who had her Dow Corning implants taken out.

A leader of an advocacy group for implant recipients said she was flooded with scores of calls from women distressed at the thought of lengthy bankruptcy proceedings and more delays in payments for surgery to have implants removed.

"There are women threatening suicide about this," said Gail Armstrong of the National Breast Implant Coalition in Dallas.

Dow Corning, based in Midland, Mich., filed for protection under Chapter 11 of the U.S. bankruptcy code in Bay City, Mich., citing potentially astro-

nomical expenses from liability lawsuits.

Big companies in other major product liability cases have taken similar action, delaying payments to claimants for years.

In the case of Manville Corp., asbestos claims brought 10 years ago are only now getting paid, and at a rate of 10 cents on the dollar. Some asbestos victims have died in the meantime.

Women in the Dalkon Shield birth-control case had to wait years because of a bankruptcy filing by A.H. Robins & Co. But more than 96 percent of claims have been paid.

Dow Corning said women had no reason to be upset with the company. Seeking Chapter 11 protection should help Dow Corning survive to pay its share of the settlement, said T. Michael Jackson, a spokesman.

"It should reassure women with implants because by taking this step and taking it now we can preserve our financial position," Jackson said.

Nonetheless, the move raises the possibility that the company won't pay 100 cents on the dollar for its debts.

Under Chapter 11, a company gets a reprieve from bills while it works out a way to pay creditors and survive as a healthy business. Its business decisions are subject to approval by a judge.

Dow Corning, a joint venture of Dow Chemical Co. and Corn-

ing Inc., had 1994 sales of \$2.2 billion in sales but reported a \$6.8 million loss, which it attributed to the expenses of breast implant claims.

The implant settlement, crafted by a federal judge in Birmingham, was meant to resolve thousands of lawsuits against makers of silicone gel implants. It is the biggest product liability settlement in U.S. history.

Dow Corning agreed to pay the largest share, \$2 billion. But Dow Corning is still fighting hundreds of lawsuits by women who rejected the deal, and Jackson said that was a key consideration in seeking bankruptcy protection.

The Food and Drug Administration has banned the use of silicone breast implants for patients who want them strictly for cosmetic reasons.

Dow Corning and other manufacturers deny the products hurt anyone. The company even took out full-page ads in major newspapers last week, defending the implants as safe even though it stopped making them in 1992.

Women with implants initially were promised payments of \$105,000 to \$1.4 million through the settlement. But a recent analysis showed there was not enough money to compensate all the women seeking payments in the initial phase of the deal.

Faced with those numbers, the judge presiding in the settlement instructed women's lawyers and

implant manufacturers to renegotiate in a bid to save the agreement. Those talks began earlier this month.

While estimates on the number of women with implants vary widely, more than 400,000 women have registered to participate in the settlement. Between 9,000 and 10,000 others have rejected the deal and are free to sue.

A women's attorney said the bankruptcy filing may actually help implant recipients, who are now in position to become Dow Corning's main creditors.

"That means that any reorganization plan by Dow Corning has to be approved by us," Ralph Knowles said. "They are a thriving company and have lots of assets. We may be able to get more out of them through bankruptcy than we would have otherwise."

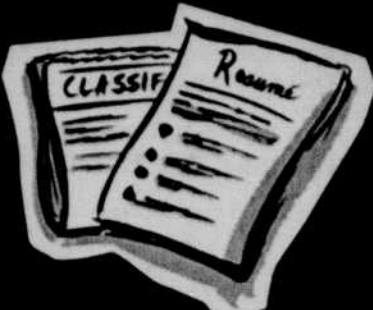
But a lawyer with the consumer group Public Citizen said Dow Corning's action means that the settlement is in jeopardy.

"It may be that Dow believed it had no choice, but it sure does throw a monkey wrench into a speedy resolution of this matter," said Alan Morrison. "It certainly does dash the hopes of all these women who had hoped to get payments anytime soon."

Settlement talks resume Tuesday in Dallas, Jackson said. Dow Corning will be part of any negotiations.

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