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SPECIAL REPORT
Inside the investigation of whether the death of a U.S. Marine triggered the killing of 24 Iraqis—and a military cover-up

BY MICHAEL DUFFY, TIM MCGIRK & APARISIM GHOSH



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EATING

Is Teflon Risky?

Nonstick pots can emit nasty stuff if used incorrectly

BY MICHAEL D. LEMONICK

The amazingly slippery, heat-resistant plastic known as Teflon was discovered purely by accident by DuPont chemist Roy Plunkett in 1938. By 1950, the company was making a million pounds annually as a low-friction coating for bearings and gears. In 1960 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved it for use in cookware. Today some 60% of all pots and pans in American kitchens

are nonstick—to say nothing of muffin pans, cookie sheets, cake pans, deep fryers and waffle irons.

Unfortunately, it turns out that when Teflon is heated to over 600°, the coating can break down and release a chemical called perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA. The fumes can be fatal to pet birds. In humans, DuPont acknowledges, they can cause a reversible flu-like condition called polymer-fume fever, first noted in the company's labs. In animals, though, PFOA can cause cancer, immune-system damage and death. And about 95% of all Americans have traces of PFOA in their blood.

No study has proved that cooking with Teflon is harmful to humans. But DuPont paid \$107.6 million in 2004 to settle a lawsuit brought by some 50,000 people who lived along the Ohio River near its West Virginia plant. They claimed PFOA contamination had caused birth defects and other health problems. The company admitted no liability

but in December 2005 made a settlement with the EPA based on eight violations for failing to disclose its own findings on the safety of PFOA. This April, hearings began in a class action against the company by nonstick-cookware users from 15 states. In January, an EPA advisory board labeled PFOA a likely human carcinogen.

The EPA has since asked DuPont and seven other companies that use PFOA to phase out the chemical. Although DuPont disputes the classification as a carcinogen and won't stop making Teflon, the company has pledged that by 2015, it will reduce the amount of PFOA used to make the coating

and will guarantee that the chemical won't be released into the environment from DuPont manufacturing plants.

Yet in spite of all this, the agency website says, "At the present time, EPA does not believe there is any reason for consumers to stop using any consumer or industrial related products that contain PFOA." That's under normal use. You should not heat an empty nonstick pan to high temperatures or risk destabilizing the surface by plunging a hot pan into cold water, nor should you use nonstick pans for cooking at very high temperatures in general.

While nonstick cooking offers big benefits—ease of cleanup, drastically reduced need for oil—nobody has yet invented a coating that works as well as Teflon. But there's a low-tech solution that dates back hundreds of years: a good cast-iron skillet. It's cheaper than a coated pan, it browns food better, and as for the nonstick factor, when properly seasoned, it's nearly as good. —Reported by Lisa McLaughlin/
New York

Are aluminum and plastic safe?



◀ **ALUMINUM**
Despite fears that it might cause Alzheimer's, there's no clear proof. The amount you ingest from pots and foil is minimal in any case

▶ **PLASTIC**
If you heat food in a wrap or container not labeled as microwave safe, you could get some chemical contamination. So check before nuking

