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Political pundit who calls Flint's water crisis 'overblown' loses gig

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By Ray Sanchez, CNN

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(CNN) — In a sea of outrage over the toxic drinking water in one of America's most beleaguered cities, one man has emerged as a leading skeptic of the GOP pundit and Flint resident Bill catastrophe.

Bill Ballenger admits Flint's water system has problems but questions the severity of contamination.

Ballenger says water crisis is "vastly exaggerated"

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Republican pundit, former state lawmaker and Flint resident Bill Ballenger, 74, His view comes amid growing says he has not been poisoned from bathing and drinking from the taps of a outrage over toxic drinking water in the Michigan city

His former boss says Ballenger "is own facts"

them.

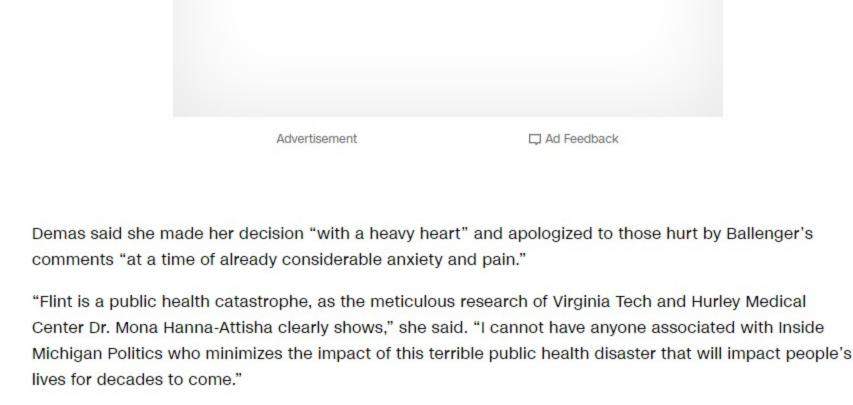
entitled to his opinion, but not his

city where authorities continue to advise people not to consume the water. "The publicity ... is overblown," Ballenger told CNN on Thursday. That candor cost him his job as a contributing writer for Inside Michigan

Politics, a political analysis newsletter. In a statement Wednesday, newsletter editor and publisher Susan Demas called Ballenger's comments about the calamity "indefensible" and said he would no longer be associated "in any way, shape or form" with the publication. Ballenger drew fire after he expressed his views in a local

radio interview Tuesday, the day Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder apologized to the people of Flint for failing

"He is entitled to his opinion," Demas said of Ballenger, "but not his own facts." ADVERTISEMENT



Researchers from Virginia Tech have said the Flint River is highly corrosive - 19 times more so than the Lake Huron supply. Flint residents have voiced complaints about their brown and foul-smelling tap water since officials

switched the city's water supply from Lake Huron to the dirty Flint River in April 2014 as a cost-cutting

Scientists not in agreement with Ballenger

had doubled in recent years, she told CNN. "In some neighborhoods, it actually tripled," she said. "(In) one specific RELATED VIDEO neighborhood, the percentage of kids with lead poisoning went from about She helped expose Flint

where the water lead levels were the highest."

Though experts have described Hanna-Attisha's findings as incontrovertible, Ballenger said he isn't

be perpetuated as a story is doing a lot of damage to Flint as a community."

"The idea that the entire population of Flint has been poisoned and that we all have elevated blood levels because of this is just a total canard," Ballenger told Detroit's WJR radio. "It's just a crock, and for this to

Ballenger admitted that some people have been exposed to lead poisoning, but he questioned the severity



2,182 - have shown elevated lead levels.

Washington's response.

to make this better."

investment.

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late.

Tran contributed to this report.

population, spikes in violent crime and increasing poverty.

'I think mistakes were made'

measure.

water crisis

convinced.

Sign Me Up Those findings went against trends across the country, which had seen lead levels dropping every year.

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Hanna-Attisha, director of the pediatric residency program at Hurley Medical Center, discovered that the percentage of children in Flint with lead poisoning

5%, to almost 16% of the kids that were tested. ... It directly correlated with

it mean for the rest of the world?

X

of the contamination and said further studies were needed. Ballenger, who previously was a member of the Michigan House of Representatives and the Michigan Senate, was born and raised in Flint, WWJ reported.

He lives in an upscale part of the city part time, according to CNN affiliate WJRT-TV. "Lead in the water is no joke," Ballenger's neighbor Razan Al-Midani told the station.

the precautions." Ballenger, a former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

"Our water is tasting fine, but I don't want to take the risk, so I've been purchasing bottled water," Al-Midani said. "I would say, 'Be better safe than sorry,' even if it has been exaggerated, you still have take

"There is a problem with the water in Flint," he told CNN. "But for parts of the last decade ... Flint has been pounded. It's lost half its population. This is terrible publicity for Flint. It's vastly exaggerated."

Since auto plants began closing in the 1980s, Flint - a city of 100,000 - has been struggling with declining

under President Gerald Ford, pointed to reports showing that about 2% of people tested in Flint - 43 out of

Asked whether residents with lead-poisoned children or who complain about smelly and foul-tasting water were wrong, Ballenger said: "I'm not telling them they're wrong. I think mistakes were made in the way the switch was made to the Flint River to use that as a source of water and to keep the water clean. Mistakes were made."

Flint Mayor Karen Weaver, Snyder and President Barack Obama have declared states of emergency, with

The city switched back to the Lake Huron water supply in October, but the damage was already done to

Ballenger's stand on the crisis counters a growing tide of concern from around the nation.

the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security leading

the lead pipes. The state is now handing out filters and bottled water with the National Guard.

State Attorney General Bill Schuette is investigating whether any laws were broken. Class-action lawsuits by Flint residents will attempt to prove the culpability of government officials.

neurotoxin on a community, according to experts.

"The entire city was exposed," Hanna-Attisha told CNN. "Every neighborhood had high water lead levels." And every neighborhood had children with high blood lead levels." The financially struggling city is poorly equipped to deal with mitigating the impact of an irreversible

"There's no treatment, but there's a lot of things that we can put in place for these children," Hanna-

Attisha said, citing universal preschool, nutrition, education and health services. "We owe it to these kids

CNN's AnneClaire Stapleton, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Ben Tinker, Tim Hume, Eliott C. McLaughlin, Sara Ganim and Linh

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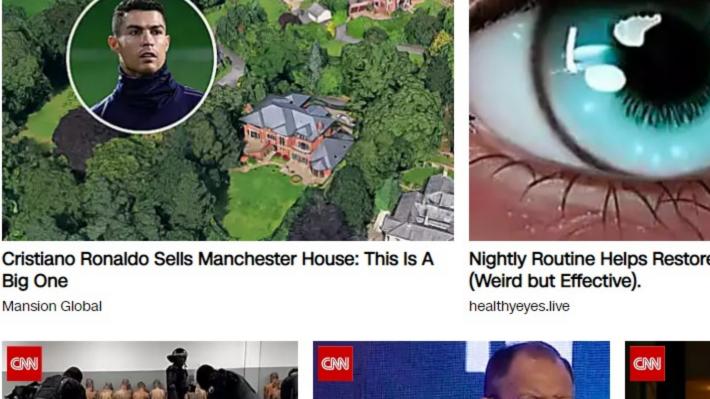
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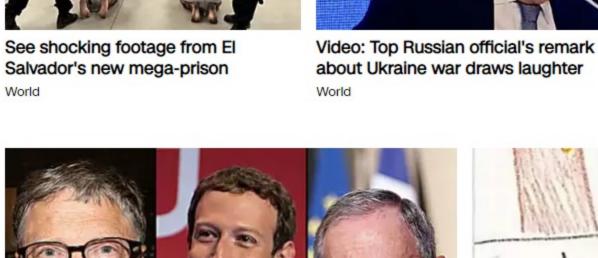
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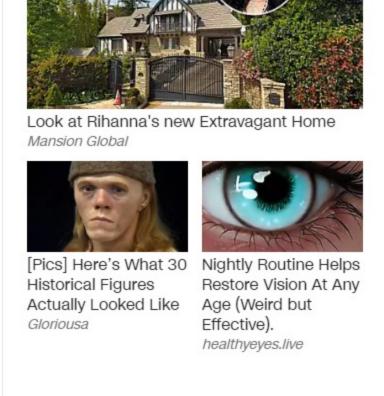
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