

## AIDS: A medical reality, a political crisis

by David Scondras

Failure to recognize the political threat AIDS represents is potentially just as dangerous as the disease itself. Already, it has become politically possible to discuss and advocate attacks on the gay community which have no basis in sound public health policy.

Quarantine is advocated by successful candidates for state office in Illinois, and here in Boston a colleague of mine has introduced legislation calling for "mandatory isolation" measures for people with AIDS. Morality in Media, with funding from the folks at Coors,

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has called for using an old leper colony in Boston Harbor to house people with AIDS.

Quarantine has no medical recommendation, but we recognize that our government can rationalize despicable social control goals. "national security" was used to rationalize sending thousands of Japanese-American citizens to concentration camps during World War II. "Public health" rationalizations threaten to do the same to gay American men today.

Nazi Germany taught us that efforts to segregate and destroy groups within the gen-

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eral population begin with the compilation of lists. Any socially despised group should be alarmed when an Administration begins collecting personal data on them that has no legitimate use. Such efforts against the gay community are well underway.

Mandatory contact tracing (requiring people with AIDS to report the names of all their sexual partners to the government) has been proposed in several states and cities and has been established as a criteria for evaluating federal AIDS grant applications. Such tracing, which would be a waste of critical funds, will inhibit people from seeking the testing and treatment they need because they fear being forced to reveal their sexual partners. More frightening, though, is what future government action may await those who are on The List.

Given that most of our local, state, and federal governments and agencies refuse even to say that they will not discriminate against gay and lesbian people, we would be foolish not to be concerned about issues of confidentiality around antibody testing and general medical records. A disease that means death for thousands could be used to justify job loss, eviction, coercion, and even state sanctioned reprisals for hundreds of thousands more.

We are allowing society to pressure us into other medically invalid, and politically dangerous, symbolic gestures such as closing the bath houses, one of the best places to conduct safe sex education. A virus seems to cause AIDS, not a place. A behavior seems to increase risk, not a violation of someone's moral code.

Those in our community who support bath house closure in an effort to appease the homophobes seeking even stronger measures to control us are woefully mistaken. Experience in New York shows us that attacks on guest houses, bars, hotels, and bookstores soon follow assaults on the baths. Roundups at gay "gathering places" and private homes need not be far off.

All of history has taught us that compromising our freedoms to accommodate others' bigotries will lead to further and more serious erosion of our rights.

While AIDS has the potential to be used malevolently by the Administration, another clear political reality is that AIDS has been ignored, underplayed, and mishandled by the government agencies charged with promoting public health because of the groups it primarily affects.

Legionnaires' Disease, affecting several dozen middle-class, white men, received more federal funding in a few weeks than AIDS did after four years of ravaging thousands of people in this country.

AIDS among Central Africans, IV drug users, Haitians, or Florida's poor has been easy for our government to ignore because these groups are perceived of as politically powerless. And, of course, when gay men were

identified as a high risk group homophobes like President Reagan's Chief of Communications Patrick Buchanan termed the disease "God's awful retribution," undeserving of a dedicated and compassionate response.

After the AIDS epidemic became too large for the Reagan Administration to pretend it did not exist, their response was slow and inadequate, and this year the President wants to spend \$31 million less than the amount Congress appropriated last year.

"You have to understand," Donald MacDonald at the Public Health Service told a delegation of gay elected officials in Washington, "that AIDS funding must be adjusted to accommodate the Administration's military priorities."

Erotophobia and homophobia, political tools of The Right, weaken the one weapon we do have against AIDS: education. The Center for Disease Control has held up fund-

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ing for safe sex education because they do not want to appear to condone homosexuality, and school curriculum reform to teach our kids what they need to know to survive is blocked by right-wing hypocrites who cloak their anti-gay and anti-sex actions as "concern for the children's morals."

The lack of political leadership has also meant that there has not been pressure to create a coordinated drug testing program which speeds up the turn around time for new drugs and allows drugs in combination testing. There is inappropriate concern for "who will profit?" rather than, "will this improve public health efforts?"

Even when AIDS is not being consciously exploited by those in power for their own political agendas, pervasive homophobia means policy formed "neutrally" will be inevitably anti-gay.

The lessons we have learned from AIDS dictate a strong political response. To remain "apolitical" as policy which effects your very survival is being formulated is self-destructive.

Alone, the gay community will never have enough political power to fend off all the

homophobia which permeates our society. AIDS offers a chance to help people realize the political necessity of creating a "majority of minorities."

All gay men threatened by sex police in New York understand what women are talking about when they speak of the right to control their own bodies.

White gay men understand the outrage black people feel as we see increasing black infant mortality rates ignored, or remember the experiments our government conducted by purposely allowing hundreds of poor, rural black men to go untreated for syphilis to study how they died.

Well-to-do gay men, now being denied insurance, understand the injustice our poor and elderly neighbors endure when they cannot afford the medical care they need to relieve their pain, improve their health, or save their lives.

In building coalitions with other groups that need us for reciprocal political support, we must empower and elect ourselves, not our "liberal friends."

All across the country I hear stories of liberal politicians explaining why they cannot stand with us on tough issues, why mandatory list making is in our interest, why voting to allow the surgeon general to order closing gay meeting places was politically expedient, why we should share sensitive medical information because "we can trust them."

In the age of AIDS tolerating politicians who take our time, our money, our creativity, our vision, our energy, our commitment, and our votes but ultimately reject us and our needs and concerns is not only politically foolish but also a deadly mistake.

AIDS action groups throughout the country should consider forming political action arms to solicit contributions to leverage more money out of city councils, state legislatures, and the Congress. You can bet insurance companies and doctors know how to play this game; our interests should be represented as well.

And finally, we must make it more difficult for homophobes to continue to oppress us than to live with us as equals.

Those who are drowning have every right to rock the boat. We should be angry at what is happening, and we must make sure we channel that anger at those who oppress us, not each other.

Gay and lesbian leadership should be agitating, galvanizing, and organizing our community to recognize and resist what is happening to us. Accommodationism and "being nice" have always been politically stupid — now they are [literally] lethal.

As history reviews the gay movement, the question that may be asked of all of us is, "What did we do during the epidemic and the witch hunt that followed?" We must be politically astute enough to make sure that as many of us as possible are around to answer that question.

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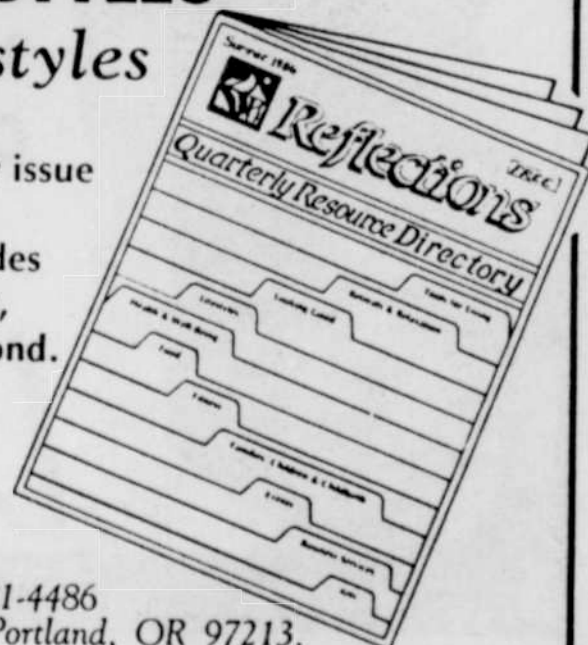
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