Darkness at Noon

When the planes hit the towers, more than America's innocence was lost. Doug Ireland reports on the end of AIDS as a public issue.

November 1, 2001 By Doug Ireland

The heinous September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. -- and President Dubya's "war" on the terrorists who perpetrated them -- have combined to claim another casualty unmentioned in the mass media: the "war" on AIDS. At press time, a month after the attack and two days into the bombing of Afghanistan, it is clear that money to combat the epidemic will be even harder to come by. With the budget surplus a distant memory, squandered on Bush's pre-hijackings tax cut, the White House and Congress have raided Social Security revenues to finance the counter-terrorist campaign. This first $40 billion in war-related appropriation is only the beginning.

Bush will pursue the Star Wars boondoggle as he expands the war, with its troop call-ups, global operations and the purchase of allies. Don't count on the Democrats to resist bloated military spending as one-fifth of the Pentagon lies in ruins. As a result, federal social programs will be further shredded, including those for AIDS. Gregg Gonsalves, GMHC's director of treatment advocacy, speaks for many HIVers when he says that even as he is mortified by the terrorist attacks, he cannot help but be mindful that "every day 10,000 people die of AIDS around the world. That ongoing and monumental calamity is at risk of being forgotten in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), with cuts in domestic and international programs for AIDS research, care and prevention a real and present danger."

The construction of a garrison state here at home, on which Bush seems bent, will be costly. Billions will be spent on domestic intelligence, airport and airline security, border surveillance and the like. And we may pay a price in our civil liberties, too. As Catherine Hanssens, the director of Lambda's AIDS Project says, "I worry that anti-terrorist sentiment will provide a convenient cover for old opponents of privacy to advance a loosening of restrictions on law-enforcement access to personal information without a shred of evidence that such intrusions would have saved the day on September 11. On the other hand," Hanssens adds, "perhaps the WTC incident might trigger a reevaluation of priorities at agencies like the FAA, where HIV is an automatic disqualifier for a pilot's license, while terrorist ties are not."

At the same time, the economy will be driven deeper into the recession. The sharpening of the economic downturn will also dry up private contributions to nongovernmental AIDS service organizations, whose budgets are already strained. Paul DiDonato, executive director of Funders

Concerned About AIDS, says: “A lot of foundations and corporations are diverting funds from grant-making budgets to disaster relief. The economic downturn was made a lot worse by the attack, and that has a double-barrel impact: First, corporations give less to AIDS grants and special events, and second, foundations are based on investments -- when the stock market goes down, foundation assets follow.”

The outlook gets bleaker. With the nation being psychologically prepared for a perennial war that may last for years, AIDS is likely to complete its vanishing act from the national discourse. Prevention education will get no attention or momentum. Given the xenophobia that has seized the country, there will be no political will to expand the paltry $200 million U.S. contribution to global AIDS work. “Let the wogs die of AIDS” will, I think, be the prevailing sentiment in the new atmosphere of America First.

The wave of hate already unleashed stokes the fires of primitive religiosities here at home as obscurantist as those of the Taliban. Rev. Jerry Falwell’s declaration on TV’s *700 Club* -- with host Pat Robertson echoing agreement -- that “the pagans, the abortionists, the feminists and the gays actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle...helped this happen” by “throwing God out of the public square” is the harbinger of more to come [see "The Face of Terror“]. Can the revival of ”AIDS-is-God’s-punishment" be far behind?

What the barbaric September 11 terrorist attacks have set into motion, the next attack will only accelerate. For there will be more. Bush was given Congress’ carte-blanche authority for his mixed strategy of bombings, special forces raids and assassinations. If the U.S. bumps off Osama bin Laden or the current bombing causes significant civilian casualties or goes on too long, there will inevitably be ripostes. It is almost impossible to protect against attacks by fanatics willing to sacrifice their own lives as well as the lives of others. We are on the precipice of an eye-for-an-eye circle of violence with no end in sight.

You may think this is too dark a vision. But I am reminded of the old Russian proverb: An optimist is only a pessimist who has not yet heard the bad news.

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