Party Games

Should people living with HIV pin all their political and personal hopes on the newly Democratic congressional majority?

February 1, 2007 By Bob Ickes

To many people living with HIV, it may seem the stuff of fantasy—a New Year's wish coming blazingly true. By the time you read this, the 110th Congress will have convened, led—for the first time—by a female speaker. She is none other than Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic representative from California's 8th Congressional District, which encompasses San Francisco's most HIV-savvy neighborhoods. Think of it: Just two heartbeats from the presidency—Pelosi would assume office should President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney be declared officially incompetent or dead—sits one of the most PWA-friendly public servants in history. Pelosi is famous—her Republican opponents might say notorious—for attaching San Francisco AIDS program budgets to the larger bills she supports. And when enumerating her leadership priorities, she puts HIV treatment and prevention funding at the top of the list.

We all know that beginning with the Reagan administration's exhaustively documented willful neglect of those suffering with AIDS, Republican efforts to fight the disease domestically have often been shown to be lacking in, well, commitment. What's more, they have been historically tied to a fundamentalist Christian-conservative ideology pushing abstinence and monogamy at the expense of a sane prevention (condom) policy. So many HIV positive people may rightly feel that any other presiding party would be preferable. But we wonder: Is merely having a Democratic speaker from San Francisco enough?

Pelosi's statement on World AIDS Day did not disappoint those living with HIV, but its glittering generality might have suggested Republican authorship. It read: "Five years of failed Bush Republican leadership has taken America in the wrong direction, and the country is ready for a change.... Each year, World AIDS Day provides us with an opportunity to generate new awareness and build support for efforts to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in our local communities and around the world. We must redouble our efforts to meet our responsibilities to the millions of people affected by HIV/AIDS." (Meanwhile, the president's World AIDS Day message was atypically specific, directing the State Department, albeit in a well-hidden clause, to revise the ban on HIV positive immigration, permitting short-term visas.)

Pelosi's annual message may not have been intended as the ultimate outline for any hard-numbers plan that might indicate how she will, say, lead the new House majority to boster the

Ryan White Care Act. But it might be time for us to ask to hear that plan. And, while we're at it, why don't we ask the new Democratic senators and representatives how they will effect substantive change for the more than 1 million people living with HIV in the United States.

Two years ago in this magazine, *POZ* founding editor Sean Strub issued a sweeping—and chilling—manifesto. Just before the 2004 presidential election, he urged all people living with HIV to evict Bush from the White House. "This election," Strub wrote, "all [people living with HIV] and [AIDS service organizations] alike must have the guts to make change and revive science-based prevention, expand health care access and create a future geared toward ending the global pandemic. Otherwise, we will—literally and lethally—get what we deserve." But now, for the first time since 1994, the Democrats will run the Congressional show. Since we have a few more supposedly sympathetic leaders, let's not forget to remind them of what we still so desperately deserve.

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