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It’s time to go back to creative, nonviolent protest

December 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

Another World AIDS Day, on December 1, guarantees another round of hypocritical back-patting, carefully crafted sound-bites and anesthetizing rhetoric.

AIDS is old news. Fewer people care. Those most at risk of acquiring the disease – young people of color (especially women), drug-users, their sex partners and men who have sex with men – are those whom our society cares least.

But you and I don’t have to join this mass indifference. We have voices, we have value, and we have power. But sometimes we need to be reminded of all three.

The treatment honeymoon of the past two years is over. Triple combination therapy fails for at least half the people taking it. Our friends are still dying. Government policies continue to create thousands of infections.

In recent years, the rap on street activism has been that “it doesn’t work anymore.” But right now, the activism we’ve got isn’t working either.

I believe it is time to go back to creative, nonviolent protest. Crowd the streets. Put our bodies on the line. That’s where many of us began our AIDS activism, and how we know we can force change.

That’s why *POZ* is joining the National Coalition to Save Lives by calling on people of conscience to fast for 24 hours on World AIDS Day, protesting the Clinton administration’s continuing racist and genocidal failure to fund needle-exchange programs and provide real leadership on AIODS.

A fast, in and of itself, isn’t going to save lives. But it will send a message that AIDS activism isn’t going away. For many of us, it can mark a return to the activist tools that worked before, when we were desperate, when no one was listening to us, and people were dying needlessly.

Today we’ve got a huge AIDS bureaucracy paid to listen to us, but the desperation is greater than ever for most people with HIV. Especially prisoners, IV drug-users, their sex partners, young people of color and other “throw away” segments of society.

Needle exchange *will* save lives. Condom distribution in schools and prisons *will* save lives. Targeted prevention programs *will* save lives.

Don't let anyone tell you this is just about politics. It isn't. it is about morality. About good and evil. About human lives. It is about a nearly incomprehensible presidential and congressional indifference to pain. About an unwillingness to exercise the small fragments of political leadership required to save lives.

If you have ever wondered how great atrocities in the history of governance could happen – from the Holocaust to slavery, from massacres of the Khmer Rouge to the Tuskegee study – wonder no longer, as you're living in the midst of one.

With the clarity the passage of time is sure to provide, we will someday understand that those with the power to save lives today behaved instead with malicious and cruel disregard. Their drive for personal ambition and power obscures any underlying responsibility to the public health.

We will also see attempts to rewrite history. Those of influence whose obeisant silence facilitated Clinton and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala's inaction – including prominent gay politicos, members of Congress, AIDS and public-health policy leaders – will, when writing their memoirs, undoubtedly and self-servingly remember themselves to have been lone voices of courage on these same issues.

The truth is that too many of these leaders have traded what is right for people with HIV for what is useful to their own egos, careers and organizations.

Too many members of Clinton's AIDS Council are obsessed with not "embarrassing" the President rather than demanding leadership. The Human Rights Campaign is "honoring" President Clinton. Why do we honor one whose cowardice is killing people?

Imagine the impact if the members of Clinton's AIDS Council resigned, en masse, in protest of his failed AIDS leadership? Imagine the impact if the board members of AmFAR, GMHC, San Francisco AIDS Foundation, Whitman-Walker Clinic and APLA joined a hunger strike in front of the White House?

These agencies are full of sincere, dedicated, motivated and caring individuals. I hope they will light a fire under the less-dedicated AIDS fat-cats and careerist and encourage them to risk a few political calories by joining the World AIDS Day protest fast. It's not much, but it's a start.

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