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Sex, guns and television -- symptoms of illness in the land of the free

July 1, 1997 By Sean Strub

Consider what is going on in America right now: The community of Valdosta, Georgia is having a fit over whether *POZ* should be sold in public view, on the newsstand, with other magazines. Some call it pornographic and are determined to "protect the children" by trying to force the Books-a-Million store to place *POZ* behind the counter, to be available by request only. U.S. Rep. Tom Coburn (R-OK) -- the author of an insidious piece of legislation (see article) that I believe will further stigmatize and facilitate bias against people with AIDS -- complains about NBC's airing of the Steven Spielberg epic, *Schindler's List*. He asserts that its depiction of Nazi brutalities -- specifically, naked victims of the concentration camps being forced into the gas chambers -- is harmful to his Christian Coalition family values.

The POZ Life Expo in Houston a few weeks ago shared the George R. Brown Convention Center with a gun show, where Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, anti-PWA and anti-gay stickers, publications and ephemera were sold. Much of it was simply racist, anti-Semitic or horribly hurtful (with slogans like *The Miracle of AIDS: It Turns Fruits Into Vegetables*). But most frightening were items with messages specifically promoting violence, including suggestions to use various groups for target practice or as "crash dummies." Sadly, all of this is connected. Sicko slogans and hate-speech invective are the seamy underside of much, not all, of the self-righteous, sanctimonious, family-values rhetoric.

When *POZ* complained to the convention-center management, they said, "It's only some KKK stuff." Then they told us their legal counsel advised them to do nothing -- it's "free speech," they claimed -- not even to ask the show's organizers to voluntarily remove the offensive material.

Freedom of speech -- and press -- is critically important, especially to a publishing concern such as *POZ*. But so, too, is protection from violence. And so, too, is standing up to bias and intolerance. Freedom of speech is not the same as ignoring or tolerating prejudice and violence.

Too many individuals and institutions (including government) are willing to ignore the outright promotion of violence as soon as someone waves the sacred specter of the First Amendment. Even more just turn away in resignation at many expressions of hatred, accepting it as an inevitability, even though hate speech is illegal when it is deemed to incite violence.

What on earth is happening? Why have so many of us lost our indignation, anger and willingness

to challenge intolerance?

I’m terrified of the increasing polarization of American society, and not such in Texas. It’s everywhere, even right here in PWA-friendly Greenwich Village. I’m particularly terrified of the growing “otherness” of those facing health challenges, exemplified by a bumper sticker at the aforementioned Houston gun show that stated: *It is Better to be Rich and Healthy than to be Poor and Sick*.

What this sticker really says is, *I’ve Got Mine and I Don’t Care About Anybody Else*. In a way, it is the same message sent by people who call themselves progressives, civil libertarians or humanists who refuse to fight bigotry. They’ve got theirs; they don’t care about others.

Given a choice, I would definitely take rich and healthy over poor and sick. But no health or wealth could be worth the shallow soul that would deem such a divisive, hurtful and arrogant message worthy of promotion, on one’s bumper or anywhere else.

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