S.O.S.—November 2000

November 1, 2000 By Sean Strub

People with AIDS face a quandary when voting for the next president November 7. Our very survival over the next four years is inextricably linked to the national politics of funding research, protecting civil liberties and delivering health care. We are literally held hostage by a system that has more often been a hindrance than a help. I deeply resent the shallowness of the debate around the issues, particularly AIDS. And I despise those who promise leadership and hope to HIVers and then, once elected, cast us aside as an embarrassing irritation. This is why it will be tough for me to drag myself to the polls.

Four years ago in this space I wrote: "I will cast my ballot to re-elect President Clinton. But I will do so in disgust, mourning the Bill Clinton I used to know. The Clinton I campaigned for and believed in was a man whose commitment to fight AIDS was unquestioned. He was driven to save lives and reverse 12 years of Reagan-Bush neglect. Instead he has shamefully compartmentalized AIDS as simply another constituency to be manipulated, pandered to and exploited as necessary for his political gain."

But once again I will vote for the Democratic candidate, because the alternatives are either unrealistic, symbolic campaigns (the Green Party's Ralph Nader) or unacceptable (the Republican party's George W. Bush and the Reform Party's Patrick Buchanan). The greatest threat to PWAs is a Bush presidency—an opinion supported by all 25 of the national AIDS leaders interviewed by Doug Ireland for "Grin and Cast It", the HIVer voter's guide in this issue.

The least of it is that George W. has never uttered the word AIDS publicly. Beneath his "compassionate conservatism" rhetoric is a five-year AIDS record as governor of Texas that's worse than abysmal; it is murderous. As Ireland reports, under Bush's watch, Texas' AIDS cases rose to become the fourth-largest in the nation while spending for prevention and treatment remained measly. Bush appointed a Christian Right state health commissioner who instituted names reporting, backed abstinence-only HIV prevention and slammed condom use as un-Godly. Worse, the Texas prison system became one of the nation's most dangerous viral breeding grounds; many HIVers got sick and died unnecessarily, and many more have been released infected with resistant strains of the virus, courtesy of Gov. Bush's careless and inhumane policies.

As president, Bush certainly would be a leader on AIDS: a leader in silence and indifference, a leader whose actions would only hasten our deaths. This isn't rhetoric. Right now our drugs are failing, our AIDS service organizations are folding, our activists are burning or selling out, and many of our allies have moved on to other causes. The only movement on AIDS is the backlash

against “special treatment” for HIVers. In a Bush administration, initiatives to forcibly test, track down and list—not to mention criminalize—people with HIV will become more likely, more aggressive and more difficult to fight. He will protect the profit margins of drug companies and HMOs, derailing any chance of national health care, meaningful price controls, patient rights protections, developing countries’ access to treatment and other reforms.

But what is there to say in support of Al Gore other than that he is a much lesser evil? I believe that Gore is personally not homophobic and not uncomfortable with people with AIDS or in addressing AIDS issues. I believe that if it were easy, Gore would do the right thing. What I want, though, is a candidate who will do the right thing when it is difficult, when the power of moral action overcomes the appeal of political manipulation. In this regard, Gore’s record is not encouraging. At moments during the Clinton presidency, the VP’s office moved to improve the administration’s response to the epidemic, with only limited success. But on certain moral decisions—for example, the firing of former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, which set back safer sex efforts; the signing of the welfare reform bill, which threw needy HIVers off Medicaid; the formalizing of the ban on federal funding of needle exchanges, which condemned many drug users to infection—Gore stood by silently.

Starting as a teenager, I worked in partisan politics. In 1990 I even ran for Congress as an openly gay, HIV positive Democrat. But I left the arena when I found myself more interested in defeating my enemies than in electing my friends. I wanted to vote for candidates who inspired me rather than against those who frightened me. But crisis breeds compromise, and action based in fear is often critical to survival. In the early days of the epidemic, my activism was driven by a fear of dying. I spent several years in an inspiration void—without the joy and hope that most people expect of the future. It was bleak and dark. And it sustained me—for a while.

Even if you do it only because Gore, like his boss, “feels your pain,” and you’re terrified that Bush will restore a Reagan-era AIDS neglect, get to the polls and cast your vote. My mind tells me to pull the lever for Al Gore, even though my heart is somewhere else.

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