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Woulda! Coulda! Shoulda!

May 1, 1996 By Sean Strub

In the recently published White House report, *Youth and HIV/AIDS: An American Agenda*, the word "should" is ubiquitous: "The Department of Health and Human Services *should...*, the Centers for Disease Control *should...*, the National Institutes of Health *should...*, the Public Health Service *should...*On a single page, this auxiliary verb appears no less than ten times.

This well-intended report underscores the staggering fact that a quarter of new HIV infections are among teenagers and the trend is increasing at a frightening rate. But until this report is accompanied by Presidential action, it is another big waste of time, another of the "faux actions" the Clinton Presidency has made famous.

Those who view this report, and the White House AIDS Conference last December, as important steps in the fight against AIDS, are, at best, naive dupes of a Clinton reelection strategy. At worst, they are co-conspirators engaged in anesthetizing the AIDS community into believing media manipulation is action.

Do not accept as your friends those who claim to "feel your pain" when, in fact, they are inflicting it. Saying Clinton is the "best President we've ever had on AIDS" is like saying Richard Nixon was the "best President we've ever had on Vietnam."

Would peace activists have settled for only *half* as many bombs dropped on Vietnam? Never. The war was wrong. And so is discrimination against and political exploitation of people with HIV. There is no middle ground.

Without recognition of lines that simply cannot be crossed by decent political leaders, relative performance is hardly a measure of either statesmanship or moral virtue. To Bill Clinton, there is no moral line in the sand; AIDS is simply an issue to exploit for his campaigns and ignore the rest of the time.

Half of the people with HIV in the U.S. get their healthcare through Medicaid and, because of the Republican drive to cut Medicaid even further than the cuts proposed by Clinton, that will probably be reason enough to vote for Bill Clinton over any of the Republican alternatives.

But I will never forget the profound gap between Bill Clinton's AIDS promises and his performance.

I will never forget that it is he, under the fig leaf of claimed moral indignation, who signed the most heinously discriminatory legislation ever passed against people with HIV -- the bill that purges PWA soldiers from the military.

Bill Clinton's exploitation of AIDS is a politically opportunistic infection. Far more than President Bush's or Reagan's not-so-benign neglect, the supposed sincerity of the Clinton promises and subsequent inaction and manipulation has left him with a shameful AIDS legacy that no election year public relations scheme can erase.

If Clinton had wanted action, he could have made things happen. With a stroke of the pen, all of the "shoulds" in this pretty report could have been Presidential orders. It is long past time for Clinton to stop "shoulding" all over us and start exercising Presidential leadership and authority.

As people with HIV live longer, we are increasingly despised by a political system designed around the expectation of our deaths rather than driven by a desire to save our lives. One of the more subtle pleasures of survival is the realization of the immense personal power we each have when we learn to tell the truth.

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