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Until Bill Clinton finds courage, we must withhold support

August 1, 1995 By Sean Strub

“I want to provide the leadership this country needs for a loud, clear and consistent war on AIDS. AIDS will be my passion.”
—Bill Clinton, October 29, 1992, Jersey City, New Jersey

I am ashamed to admit that I worked so hard to elect Bill Clinton president in 1992. When it comes to HIV, he has disgraced his party’s ideals, disgusted his supporters and dismissed people with AIDS. To him we are little more than a political problem (or opportunity, depending on the polls).

The conventional wisdom in Washington is that people with AIDS have “nowhere else to go” in next year’s Presidential election. As such, we are being taken for granted. The conventional wisdom is wrong.

In New York City, in 1988, David Dinkins overwhelmingly won in those parts of the city most affected by AIDS. But he failed to live up to his promises and when he ran for re-election in 1992, against Rudolph Giuliani, our community stayed home in droves. The result? Dinkins lost a close re-election bid.

Clinton apologists bray incessantly about how funding has increased, but money is only part of the picture. Funding for AIDS research and care would have increased if Jesse Helms had been elected president. We have lost far more by Clinton abdicating his leadership role than we have gained from a few more dollars for handsomely paid executive directors and shiny new labs.

Besides, there is a growing realization that any number of Republicans (staring with Sen. Arlen Spector and Massachusetts Governor William Weld) would be more aggressive in fighting AIDS. And don’t yet count out Jesse Jackson.

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What we need is moral leadership from Bill Clinton, his appointees and staff that translates into action. If Clinton means business—even about his own re-election—then he will implement a "Leadership Agenda" that combines the power of presidential leadership with practical solutions we know will work: A presidential address, on national, live television, that talks to America about AIDS and establishes the quest for a cure as a national priority; implementation of the recommendations of President Bush's AIDS Commission; explicit safer-sex education programs, especially for young people; solid epidemiological data, including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data breakdowns by zip code rather than just by state, so we can tell where HIV transmission is heading; FDA approval of HIV drugs using surrogate markers rather than clinical endpoints; a requirement that states and local communities implement needle exchange programs; acceleration of research on vaginal and anal viricidal sexual lubricants that would kill HIV on contact; a requirement that self-insured companies adhere to the same laws as insurance companies concerning HIV-related coverage restrictions; a limitation that administrative charges of AIDS research organizations be no more than 10 percent of NIH-funded grant dollars.

These issues—both big and small and political—are not about funding but about moral leadership from the top. We don't need Clinton to privately feel our pain, we need him to publicly speak out.

But that would take courage. Until Clinton finds that courage, we as a community must withhold our support of Bill Clinton and the Democratic National Committee. And we must challenge and confront them every step of the way.

To paraphrase Glenda Jackson in the film *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* "sometimes nothing is better than something."

The net result of Bill Clinton's leadership on AIDS is a pathetic joke without which we would be better off. He should be ashamed of himself.

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