Where We Are, Where We're Going

One man's opinion on the troubled state of AIDS

December 1, 1994 By Mario Cooper

OK, take a deep breath, let it out slowly. Here comes another imperial opinion about what's wrong with the AIDS movement. But before you turn the page, be warned that this time there's a difference. I'm actually going to suggest some remedies for what's ailing us.

As a youngster I always wanted to be Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary. By the time I reached high school, civil rights leader Julian Bond had become my hero. In college I was in awe of a lesbian activist who could deliver a speech with a ferocity no one could match. But I could never be a public figure -- it's just not me. So I strove early on in my professional career to become indispensable to those at the podium. Over the last 16 years I have rolled up my sleeves with President Jimmy Carter, Jesse Jackson and Ron Brown, organizing, motivating and managing grass-roots movements. I've developed strategic media campaigns and moved public policy forward in Washington. So I can't help but bring my style to the AIDS movement: Pure, practical politics.

For the past few weeks, I've been visiting community-based organizations in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. It was a remarkable trip on two fronts. Not one person I met regretted being on the frontline of the epidemic despite the overwhelming nature of the jobs. But other aspects of the trip reminded me that we as a community are exhausted and may be backing away from the challenge. Now is not a time for retreat. We must continue to donate, volunteer and creatively promote sane public health policy.

Treatment advocacy is similarly enervated. ACT UP and many of its countless progeny are threatened by dwindling ranks and deepening cynicism. I recently attended an ACT UP meeting in New York City during which the writer [and *POZ* contributor] David B. Feinberg, barely out of his hospital bed and suddenly missing 25 pounds, expressed his profound anger and frustration over ACT UP's loss of energy. Feinberg's echo had barely died before Larry Kramer snatched up the microphone and implored ACT UP to refocus. After being voted "out of order," Kramer stormed off with a shout: "ACT UP is dead."

Nationally, AIDS donations are down, media coverage lacks consistency and context and new volunteers aren't coming through the door. Even in the face of potentially sweeping electoral victories by the radical right, the AIDS community was bored by the fall 1994 campaign.

What has gone wrong?

Well, not surprisingly, we are all angry and frustrated. Despite our effort, there are more infections, more deaths, no cure (or even a promise of one) and no vaccine on the horizon. We are baffled that while almost every public-health specialist agrees that strong, targeted and honest safer sex education dramatically decreases infections, a few radical right organizers have been able to prevent federal, state and local health officials from implementing appropriate education programs. And our community, in a deep state of shock over thousands of deaths, lacks a collective avenue for expressing grief. With such a pall over us, it is difficult to maintain the emotional intensity that made our initial efforts so powerful.

The current state of affairs is best understood when our emotional exhaustion is put into a political context.

Here's an example. The Democratic Party's embrace of gay, lesbian and AIDS issues during the victorious 1992 Presidential campaign sent our expectations and sense of opportunity soaring. Unfortunately, neither Clinton nor gay political leaders really understood the shifting societal forces that produced the Democrats' victory. A focus on basic domestic needs -- clean and safe streets, schools that educate and government programs that assist rather than hinder. Equal rights for gays, lesbians, people of color or immigrants simply do not register on mainstream America's radar right now. Yes, in large part it may be homophobic and racist but it is also the nature of our times. The intense focus on basic security undercuts any communal predisposition to seriously address social issues. Thus, Clinton's first Presidential act, allowing gays into the military, directly contradicted the basic message of the Clinton campaign: "It's the economy, stupid."

Meanwhile the real shift in power is taking place in Congress. The 1990 census shifted more congressional seats to the suburbs and to the South and Midwest. Our longtime allies, such as Senator Kennedy and Representatives Pelosi, Waxman and Studds, recognize that historic support for AIDS funding is now precarious. The 1994 elections moved Congress further to the right. The steady increases in federal funding of the last several years will likely come to a halt in the next session of Congress.

The Clinton effort to integrate the military played directly into the hands of the radical right. The President did exactly what the zealots were hoping he would do. The "scandal" virtually ended any honeymoon period the President desperately needed. The lasting effect of the gays in the military issue has been to chill most efforts by those in the administration who support our causes.

In a sense, we are the victims of our success. With Reagan/Bush pushed aside, who becomes the enemy? Is it a friendly but impotent administration? Is it a self-imploding Congress? Could it be a public so preoccupied with O.J. that they cannot muster the unity to tackle social problems? Could it be the AIDS movement itself?

Try all of the above.

Let’s not focus on an enemy but on what to do next. Each of us, in our own way, must rise to this challenge.

We lack the mutual understanding that creates an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. Martin Luther King did not particularly like the Black Panthers but he intrinsically recognized that moving a nation sometimes requires direct action. While many in the AIDS world reject the tactics of ACT UP, we need to appreciate the various and differing talents that each of us brings to the table. Fourteen years of successes could not have been accomplished without ACT UP’s brilliant ability to bring attention and clarity to the pressing issues.

Once again we need to restate our goals, which helps make room for us to work through disagreements in how to implement policies. So here are a few goals, plain and simple: Full government commitment to finding a cure, to implementing sound safer sex educational programs, to providing the necessary care to people with HIV. We cannot accept less.

Finally, we fail to recognize that the manner in which America responds to AIDS is an indicator of its value of our lives. The converse is also true: How we respond as a community is an indication of how we value ourselves.

Now what? My prescription begins with the mounting of a comprehensive coordinated campaign that targets our political leaders. This multi-year effort would allow us to develop a strong base for challenging radical right attempts to end government AIDS efforts.

A national grassroots effort should include a coordinated drive undertaken by major AIDS organizations and organized like a political campaign. Our campaign should utilize modern polling and targeting techniques that will allow us to create a savvy communications effort to remind Americans and their representatives in Washington of the importance of this issue.

Based upon the above polling, we should create a flexible media strategy that reflects the different audiences we need to reach. Our messages to middle America must be different from those broadcast in urban areas. Our spokespersons also need to be different. For example, one of the most underutilized resources in our midst is the organization Mother’s Voices. They speak with a moral and emotional authority that few can resist.

We need to re-engage the mainstream media. The waning of coverage by major networks and newspapers undercuts our ability to keep the pandemic in the public eye. Included should be target media markets and perpetual guest editorials in papers around the country.

We must develop a grassroots computer network to enhance our ability to communicate with each other in a rapid and clear manner and which both organizations and individuals can use.

We must bring new allies into the battle. For example, AIDS is increasing among the elderly. Their power to influence education is well-known. Unions, with traditionally strong interest in progressive health policy, should not be written off as allies.

A grassroots organization that can motivate and focus on our community is long overdue. This can only be created by building, at the local level, an organizational structure that allows for broad and informed participation. Such local groups could focus on their respective representatives in Congress, meeting with them in the congressional district, arranging for them to visit AIDS service organizations and keeping the representative and his or her staff briefed.

We must become more proactive in dealing with hatemongers such as Fred Phelps, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Having a small team of smart researchers and sophisticated spin doctors available would make it possible for us to counterattack in the Congress and in the media.

Of course, as anyone who's ever gone to the pharmacy knows, prescriptions are expensive. We have to recommit our energies and personal resources to raising money. Let's not look back in a few years and realize that we did not meet the challenge before us. Let's be clear that our efforts today will save lives tomorrow. It is that basic.

We are all frustrated and impatient. But as civil rights and women's leaders can attest, winning one's rightful place in American society does not come easily or overnight. We can not be diverted from seeking a cure, providing care and preventing further infections if we keep our eyes on the prize. Let's stop looking away and focus.

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