Hate Thy Neighbor

The Christian right's attack on HIVers has gone from splashy media blitzes to quiet state-level lobbying -- but its effects are still deadly.

June 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

From the beginning of the AIDS crisis, demagogues of the Christian right have made the epidemic a staple of their propaganda, joining Jerry Falwell in declaring it "the wrath of God upon homosexuals." Political theocrats such as Falwell, Pat Robertson, Tim LaHaye, Lou Sheldon, Donald Wildmon and the like all supported the quarantining of HIV positive folks. Falwell called that policy no more unreasonable than quarantining cows with brucellosis, but unlikely to happen because "homosexuals constitute a potent voting bloc and cows do not."

This was not mere Neanderthal, Gantryish moralizing, but a conscious political strategy designed to increase the appeal of the far right's organizing. Thus, the influential 1987 book Gays, AIDS and You, which became the bible of the antihomosexual campaigns by those I prefer to call the Christers, was conceived and funded by Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation, which served as the Christian right's strategic think tank. And at a late 1980s conference organized by LaHaye's American Coalition for Traditional Values on "How to Win an Election," no less than Newt Gingrich proclaimed AIDS "a great rallying cry" for the ultras' political work. The effects of this anti-AIDS crusading in the epidemic's first decade were devastating: Not only did it help to demonize gay people and divide them from the AIDS-ignorant working- and lower-middle classes who were the Christers' target constituencies, it enforced a deadly silence on AIDS in the Reagan years when the disease might have been contained, and effectively undermined the AIDS-awareness and condom-use campaigning by then-Surgeon General C. Everett Koop (himself a religious conservative). AIDS also served as a powerfully effective scare tactic relentlessly deployed in the Christers' search for cash, as when Falwell sent out fundraising letters claiming homosexuals "know they are going to die and they are going to take as many people with them as they can."

As soaring global infection rates among heterosexuals made it impossible for Christian right leaders to rant about the "gay plague," they dropped some of their more ghoulish rhetoric. And although coded messages about AIDS permeated the Christers' gays-can-be-cured ad campaign last year, the Human Rights Campaign's David Smith says, "This year we haven't noticed any Christian right activity around Congressional legislation on AIDS." But as Chip Berlet of Political Research Associates, a nonprofit that monitors the far right, points out, "A theological shift does not always represent a political shift." In the 1990s, as the Republicans gained control of all or part of two-thirds of the state legislatures, much of the Christers' most pernicious anti-AIDS organizing shifted to the states and is now off the national radar screen.

According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the volume of AIDSphobic legislation has sharply increased in recent years: A majority of states have now criminalized sexual activity by HIVers in one way or another, often even if a condom is used. Christian right organizations locally have supported these measures. Moreover, at least 99 AIDSphobic bills are now pending in 29 state legislatures, as opposed to 51 helpful bills in 21 legislatures. Most of the bad bills make HIV testing mandatory for prospective married couples, prisoners, pregnant women or people charged with sex crimes; set criminal penalties for failure to warn a sexual or needle-sharing partner of one's HIV status; require HIV names reporting and partner notification; or ban needle exchange or medical marijuana (for state-by-state details and updates, click on http://www.ngltf.org/statelocal/leg2000.htm)

Christian right anti-AIDS crusading in years past has helped create a favorable climate for this kind of legislation. As Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund's Catherine Hanssens points out, "These bills pass now more easily than they did 10 years ago, especially those on criminalization. Most of our Democratic friends have been willing to throw us into the ovens on this one."

Moreover, Christers remain hyperactive in fighting safe-sex education at the local school board level. And, as Jim Anderson of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reports, "They use talk about a 'gay deathstyle' to derail the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in the schools as well as safe-sex ed programs. In our fight against the ban on a GSA at Almadena High School in Orange County, we heard a lot about 'health hazards' associated with gay people, and there were Christian right picketers with signs reading 'Grades not AIDS!'"

All of which goes to show that the ultraright theocrats' newfound "compassion" is nothing more than a sham.

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