

America Finds AIDS Again

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The AIDS epidemic is getting worse and no one can make America focus on it.

Maybe Magic can do it. When Magic Johnson played basketball, America watched. Now that he has HIV, maybe America will listen. He has said he wants to be a spokesman about this disease, and there hasn't been a national spokesman since Dr. Koop left office.

As a Nation, we have gone through a roller coaster of public attention. When I held the first Congressional hearing in 1982, there was almost no press coverage. But when Rock Hudson was diagnosed, it was front-page news.

When the Presidential Commission on AIDS outlined a National response, few people noticed. But when Ryan White was kept out of school, the television cameras were there.

When the National Commission on AIDS outlined an even more comprehensive report, some newspapers didn't even cover it. But when Kimberly Bergalis came to Washington, there was satellite coverage.

We shouldn't depend on such a roller coaster to respond to an epidemic. We shouldn't wait for the political polls to show us what to do about AIDS and HIV. We have blue prints from two bipartisan

commissions for what we should do in research, education, treatment, and care. Every medical and health group in the U.S. has recommended essentially the same actions.

What we're missing is leadership from the top.

In eight years in office President Reagan mentioned AIDS only two or three times. He never even met with his Surgeon General to talk about it. In his hands-off style, he left AIDS policy to his staff and only responded directly when Elizabeth Taylor asked him to.

In three years in office, President Bush has been no better. He says nice things about people who are sick, but his policies are still driven by preaching, not teaching. Mr. Bush has had his pictures taken with people with AIDS, but his budgets are as business-as-usual as Reagan's.

And while the Presidents have remained passive, ideologues from the right have trotted out one ridiculous idea after another to polarize the debate. First there were quarantine proposals, then mandatory testing, then government-sanctioned discrimination. There have been attempts to separate the "good" people with AIDS from the "bad" people with AIDS. There are proposals to lock up health care workers and to gather the names of everyone with HIV who is infected. Some have even advised tattooing the infected.

The cry of the right is that AIDS is the first politically protected disease. The truth is that it is the first Presidentially ignored plague.

We've had ten years of Congressional hearings, but at every opportunity, both President Reagan and President Bush have opposed constructive legislation to respond to the epidemic. Congress acted anyway, but to make these acts effective requires Presidential leadership.

And even worse, the Administration is forcing the Nation to ignore the disease. Education programs have been hamstrung. Public health programs have been cut. Even preventive research is held back: Just this summer, the Administration cancelled an NIH-approved study of sexual behavior that might have produced information about when and how to reach young people before they became infected. And without Dr. Koop, the Administration has no one who speaks candidly about the disease to an increasingly frightened public.

Now is the time for Magic. Perhaps he can reach the Nation. He can tell young people, "It happened to me and it can happen to you." He can tell frightened people, "You can't get it from shaking my hand." He can tell AIDS bigots, "This is an equal opportunity disease." And he can tell people living with this infection, "We're going to keep going."

Others have had the chance. Some very well known people have died quietly from AIDS, afraid of public reaction to their disease, reluctant to take the opportunity to lead by hard example.

But Mr. Johnson has taken the courageous step of candor. He wants to talk to kids, to players, and to the public. If he does this well—as I'm sure he will—he can save thousands of lives and millions of

health care dollars. He has brought us back to top of the AIDS publicity roller coaster, but he might be able to sustain attention, to teach, and to lead.