

Panic over AIDS seizes United States

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Last fall, leading medical officials, top politicians, and the major media joined forces to defeat Proposition 64, a California ballot measure that would have required the use of standard public-health measures to stem the spread of the AIDS pandemic, charging that it would spark needless "panic" about a disease, which, they claimed, could be brought under control through "safe sex."

Now, some of the same people who fought the Prevent AIDS Now Initiative Committee (PANIC), and heaped scurrilous abuse on its most famous endorser, Lyndon LaRouche, are ringing the alarm themselves. Since mid-January, the media has begun to admit that AIDS has careened out of control, and that the measures employed thus far to counter its spread have failed utterly.

Three months ago, the *Baltimore Evening Sun* editorialized against Proposition 64 as a "fascistic" measure. But on Jan. 23, the newspaper ran a lead editorial, headlined "Let's Panic!" responding to a report by the Governor's Task Force on AIDS, which showed that 1 out of every 20 people in Baltimore is infected with AIDS.

"Increasingly, in Baltimore and elsewhere, epidemiologists and those involved in directly treating AIDS are forsaking the traditional 'don't panic' posture and saying, in effect, let's panic," the editorial said. "A state task force tells us as many as one out of every 20 persons in Maryland is already infected . . . as the debate focuses on such issues as 'right of privacy' and whether condoms should be advertised on television. Such issues pale into insignificance in light of the peril, which is perhaps surpassed in its calamitous potential only by all-out nuclear war. The least we can do is to immediately activate emergency mechanisms to cope with the coming catastrophe."

The editorial pointed to the recent announcement by Johns Hopkins Hospital that it will accept no new AIDS patients, because the 600 it is now treating is the maximum it can accommodate, as "the kind of jolting news that we can expect with increasing frequency as the magnitude of this worldwide epidemic becomes apparent."

Six days later, the *Sun* ran another editorial calling for expanded AIDS testing, terming existing efforts to slow the fatal virus "pathetically inadequate."

On Jan. 18, the *Washington Post* carried a column entitled "Time to Panic About AIDS." The article began: "An editorial appeared in the *New York Times* on Nov. 7 headlined 'Don't Panic, Yet, Over AIDS.' . . . One could almost see

the editors congratulating each other on their level-headedness, on avoiding the sensationalism of lower-class journals and anti-AIDS fringe groups like the LaRouchies. But as a result of such levelheadedness, thousands, perhaps millions of Americans may die."

On Jan. 27 and 28, respectively, the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* ran lengthy features reporting that an intense debate has broken out over the ethics of AIDS testing and tracing. "The epidemic spread of AIDS, now estimated to infect more than one million Americans, is raising a public policy debate on whether to embark on a large-scale testing and tracing of sexual and drug contacts," the *Times* reported, noting that New York State's initial decision not to declare AIDS a communicable disease is subject to revision. "Right now there is an ongoing groping for the best way of controlling what is one of the worst epidemics of the 20th century," Dr. Kevin Cahill, a member of the New York City Board of Health, told the paper.

According to the *Times*, critics of the current do-nothing policy "assert that the existing policy [of no testing] is a misguided reaction to pressure from civil libertarians and homosexual advocates, with the tragic result of spreading the disease." The article quoted Joseph Lisa, chairman of the New York City Council's AIDS subcommittee, attributing current policy to "the political ramifications of the fact that, unfortunately, AIDS manifested itself here first and foremost in the male homosexual community." To delay testing, Lisa told the *Times*, "is to delay the inevitable and cause many more innocent people to be infected."

The *Journal* prominently featured Robert Redfield, a top federal AIDS researcher, charging that the ethical debate over AIDS tracing is wasting precious time. AIDS is "the public health threat of the century. . . . We can't allow political sensitivities to prevent public-health policy," the paper quoted Jerome Groopman of New England Deaconess Hospital.

These tiny glimmers of sanity reflect the fact that reality is finally forcing the medical community to acknowledge that AIDS is a species-threatening disease.

New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Stephen Joseph revealed Jan. 16, in an interview broadcast over local television, that there are "500,000 people in this city [New York] who are infected" with the killer disease, meaning that 1 in every 10 New Yorkers is capable of infecting others. The projected rise in AIDS cases, he said, "will change everything about the city, its demography, the political and economic life of the city."

On Jan. 29, Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Otis Bowen told the National Press Club, "If we can't make progress" in fighting AIDS, we face "the dreadful prospect of a worldwide death toll in the tens of millions a decade from now." The AIDS pandemic is so serious that it will make earlier disasters such as the Bubonic Plague, smallpox, and typhoid "pale by comparison."