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MATTERS OF OPINION

10 World AIDS Days later

A windfall profits tax would deter oil companies from exploring for new sources

By Phill Wilson

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"There's only us.
There's only this,
No other road,
no other way,
no day but today."
Jonathan Larson

February 4, 1960-January 25, 1996

I just saw "Rent," the much anticipated movie adaptation of Jonathan Larson's 1996 Tony and Pulitzer Prize-winning rock opera about a year — "525,600 minutes" — in the life of a group of mostly HIV-positive friends living on the lower east side of New York six years — 3,153,600 minutes — before the arrival of the life-extending triple combination AIDS regimens used today.

I first saw "Rent" on Broadway with the original cast in 1996, the year protease inhibitors came on the market. It was a time in my life when my own mortality clock was ticking very fast. I had nearly died a few months earlier, and no one expected me to live beyond the end of the year.

So much has happened since the play opened that I expected the movie to be dated. After all, World AIDS Day has rolled around 10 times since Rent debuted. Many of us with AIDS are living longer. I have been living with HIV for more than 25 years and full blown AIDS for 15 years. But, more than that, the unimaginable has happened. We are making HIV/AIDS therapies available in the worst hit parts of Sub-Sahara Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia.

So I was surprised when, after the opening verse of the first real AIDS song, I found myself in tears. The scene was of an AIDS support group. A few of my tears were a response to the memories that came flooding back. The faces of Chris, Rory, Craig, Roger, Lynn, Stephen, Bylinda, LeRoy and all my friends who are now dead suddenly filled my head. The grief and the fear that we all felt back then thrust me back into those support groups, those hospital rooms, those memorial services. But even with all of that, most of the tears were not about my yesterdays. As I fought my way back from the memories, I realized the immense sadness and terror I was feeling was about what is going on with regard to black America and AIDS today.

You see, even with the new drugs, we are still dying in droves and most of us don't seem to care. What makes me so sad and so terrified is that I just don't know what else to do to get black folks to make ending the AIDS epidemic a top priority. The statistics don't seem to do the job — AIDS continues to be the leading cause of death for black women between the ages of 24 and 34, black youth represent more than 56 percent of the new HIV/AIDS cases among youth in America, and nearly 50 percent of black gay men in the U.S. may already be infected. Knowing someone who is living with HIV/AIDS does not appear to be the answer, either. I estimate roughly 90 percent of black people in America know someone who either is living with HIV/AIDS or has died from the disease. Yet, we are still complacent.

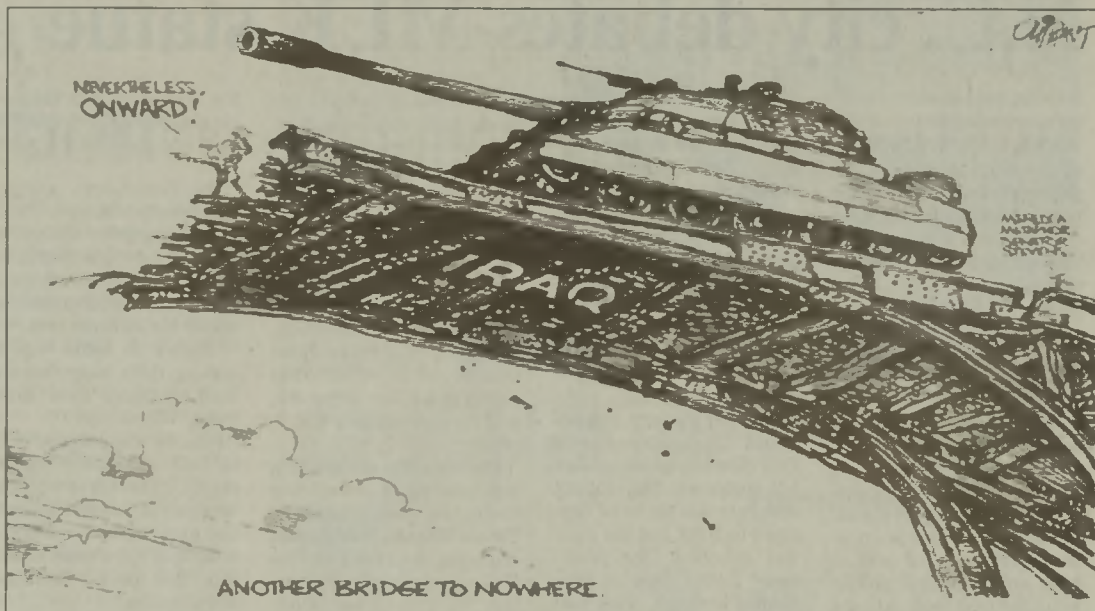
Sure, there have been some successes. The CDC recently reported a 5 percent annual decline in the rate of diagnosis over the past five years. The black media has responded in tremendous ways. Despite only lip service on the part of most, some black groups and churches have made real commitments towards stopping AIDS in the black community. But these attempts are diddling around the edges of a massive health catastrophe, a viral Katrina. According to the CDC, "Despite the decline, the rate of HIV diagnosis among blacks remained 8.4 times higher than the rate among whites." More than half of all HIV diagnoses in America are among blacks.

Nothing less than a full community-wide mobilization will do, but, tragically, there has never been a mass Black response to the AIDS epidemic in America. To help try to ignite one, actors and humanitarians Danny Glover and Sheryl Lee Ralph, have recently launched a national celebrity spokesperson campaign to stop AIDS in black America. Astonishingly, AIDS in black America has never benefited from the power of celebrity in the way other communities have recruited celebrities to help raise awareness and resources for their community; there have not been any star-studded telethons or concerts to fight AIDS in black America. Armies of black leaders have not participated in AIDS walks to benefit people with AIDS in our community. There is not a "We are the World" or even "That's What Friends Are For" to raise awareness about AIDS and black people in America. I, for one, anxiously wait to see what kind of response Danny and Sheryl Lee will get from their call to action.

We won't be able to execute the kind of response we need to stop AIDS in our community unless and until each one of us does two things:

- 1) Decide we deserve to live, a decision I fear not enough of us have made.
- 2) Commit to joining or starting a community response in each of our neighborhoods

PHILL WILSON is founder and Executive Director of the Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles. He has participated in numerous international conferences on AIDS and was selected by the Ford Foundation in 2001 as one of "Twenty Leaders for a Changing World."



True American education reform

This country likes to celebrate anniversaries. Last year, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. This weekend will mark the 50th anniversary of Rosa Parks' decision not to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Ala. What many people don't realize is that there were two major *Brown* decisions in the mid-1950s. The landmark ruling outlawing "separate but equal" schools was handed down in 1954. A companion ruling was issued in 1955 calling for schools to be desegregated "with all deliberate speed," which essentially meant no speed at all.



GEORGE E. CURRY

Perhaps it is fitting, given this propensity for celebrating the past, that this week is 50 years after the second *Brown* ruling — that the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University has issued a report titled, "With All Deliberate Speed: Achievement, Citizenship and Diversity in American Education." The 44-page report, available online, does more than revisit the 1950s; it outlines a series of steps to improve public education.

After pointing out that the U.S. is undergoing one of the most profound demographic transitions in history, the report

observes: "Unfortunately, the United States continues to have an unequal and two-tiered system of public education. Even as the United States becomes increasingly diverse, our nation's K-12 education system remains unequal and increasingly segregated by race and income."

The report says the country has a mixed record on eradicating the last vestiges of its Jim Crow public education system.

"We are a nation ambivalent," it observes. "We are both for integration and against it. We are for equality, but we are unwilling to create and sustain policies that ensure equal opportunity. We are for academic success for all children, but we allow millions of them to remain isolated in inferior schools."

We have traditionally shifted too much of the burden to the schools.

"Desegregation failed in some communities because almost the entire burden of integrating our society was placed on our public schools," the study says. "That was a mistake we cannot afford to repeat."

"We, therefore, recommend a fundamental change in the relationship between schools and the community, where both are seen as having a shared responsibility in the education of all children."

To do its part, the community should take over responsibility for providing the schools' support services, freeing teachers to concen-

trate on what they do best — teach.

The schools must also change.

"Even today, too many of our schools still are being used as sorting machines — sorting children into those who are college bound, those who will use basic skills and those who will be left behind," the report said.

In order to do better, the report argues, diversity must be part of the equation long before students enter the first grade.

"If we expect all of our children to go on to college and have diverse learning experiences and then go on to work with people from diverse ethnic, racial, social and economic backgrounds, surely it makes sense to prepare our children for these new experiences as early as possible," the study says.

"We are losing ground and jobs to other countries — for example, China and India," the report states. "Our nation's ability to sustain our long-term economic success increasingly depends on the very children we are not educating now."

Put another way: Each year, 1.2 million children do not graduate from high school. Of those, 348,427 are African-American and 296,555 are Latino.

At the college level, almost a quarter of first-year students do not stay around for their second year.

Figures show that only 31 percent of Latinos compete some college and 48 percent

of African-Americans, compared to 62 percent of Whites and 80 percent of Asian Americans.

"According to the National Center on Education and the Economy, by the year 2020, the U.S. will need 14 million more college-trained workers than it will produce," the report states. "Nowhere is college participation lower than among African-American and Hispanic youth; no where is the potential to meet our nation's need for college graduates greater."

Among the report's recommendations:

- Push state legislatures to provide essential and quality educational opportunities, regardless of where the child attends public school;
- Make sure all students have access to a high-quality education and the opportunity for diverse learning experiences;

- Provide additional opportunities, including after-school programs, for students to improve academic skills;
- Create greater regional equity and
- Support and stabilize integrated residential communities

Whether we accomplish those goals will impact our national security, our ability to compete globally and field an able military, the report says. That alone should be incentive to take on these tough issues.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service. He appears on National Public Radio's "News and Notes with Ed Gordon."

America's widening blind spot for Egypt

The Egyptian regime of President Hosni Mubarak presents a problem for Bush administration foreign policy. Mubarak, a long time ally of the U.S., refuses to permit actual political democracy in his country. Given the administration's vitriolic rhetoric against various world leaders who actually or supposedly frustrate democracy, whether Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein or Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, one must ask, why does the administration seem to look away when it comes to Egypt?



BILL FLETCHER

Though Mubarak periodically squawks about particular actions of the United States, he has generally been highly supportive and in some cases influential in advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives. While there have been periodic tensions with Israel since the commencement of the decades old Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Egypt has done precious little to strengthen Arab support for the Palestinian national movement. While Mubarak uttered words of opposition to

the US invasion of Iraq, he displayed a lack of leadership in the Arab World in response to the outright aggression. Thus, while his words may periodically speak of Arab unity and in defense of various causes, there is actually little to show for it.

At home, Mubarak, one of the longest sitting rulers in Africa, has taken few significant steps at democratization. While the Bush administration has encouraged the expansion of democracy in Egypt, their words have been particularly mild; particularly, that is, when considering that a very broad spectrum of Egyptian opinion is calling for free and fair elections and a climate of tolerance of differences of opinion.

Mubarak has been very shrewd in dealing with opposition. When opposition emerges on the political Left, Mubarak finds a way of uniting with Islamic right-wingers, forces that are often supportive or at least tolerant of extremism, in order to crush the political Left. When the Islamic right-wingers become too strong, he then finds a way of cracking down on them.

Yet, there is nothing in this behavior that the Bush administration seems to find particularly objectionable. As long as Mubarak toes the

Bush administration line it appears that he can have a very long leash, a leash originating in Washington, D.C., of course. Contrast this with the situation in Zimbabwe. As any reader of my columns knows, that public policy organization that I direct, TransAfrica Forum, has been very critical of President Mugabe for his undermining political democracy and for his economic policies, that have, more often than not, served the interests of international financial institutions rather than the people of Zimbabwe.

That said, what is Mugabe doing that should raise the wrath of the Bush administration, while when it comes to Mubarak there is cautious diplomacy, cajoling and, at best, mild criticisms?

The hypocritical behavior of the Bush administration speaks, once again, to a large part of the reason that the U.S. has so little moral

authority when it comes to international affairs. The cynicism in the administration's behavior makes it impossible for any country to ever know what ground it stands on, but it is equally impossible for any supporters of democracy, human rights and national self-determination to believe an iota of the Bush rhetoric.

What, then, makes it so difficult for so many people in the USA to fail to see the repeated evidence of this hypocrisy?

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