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AIDS Activism and Reagan's Revenge.
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It is easy now to forget that the Bush Administration recessionary and repressive politics began before September 11th. One of *The New York Times* editorials on the morning of September 11, 2001 was "The Politics of Panic." The recession was going nowhere, and with his agenda inspiring somnolism nationwide, Bush was pushing for another tax cut. Earlier that year he'd successfully rammed a trillion dollar tax cut through Congress. With a tax cut in place during a recession, the Bush administration had ample cover to justify cuts in so-called big government.

Within months of the tax cut, two planes flew into the World Trade Center igniting a conflict that justified increased military expenditures. With budget reserves exhausted on the tax cut and the War on Terrorism, domestic expenditures would have to be slashed. This post-attack environment of crisis became an opportunity to blur the line between the Republican's own budget priorities and the justification of September 11th to tighten the budget. The military-corporate-entertainment-police-prison-industrial-complex shifted into high gear as immigrants were detained and war coverage entered a 24-hour news rotation. If ever there was an example of a regime wrapping its agenda around a crisis, it is the Bush Administration and 9/11.

For AIDS activists, the pattern was nothing new. AIDS and budget deficits both emerged unchecked from the Reagan years. For those who ideologically hated big government, budget deficits provided the ideal cover for spending cuts. After the specter of ongoing deficits eviscerated the political likelihood of expansion of government programs such as health care in the mid 1990's, observers began to describe the process as "Reagan's Revenge" (see Skocpol, 1995). The plight of today's AIDS advocacy – with its core philosophical charge that health care is a right - is difficult to assess outside of this context, especially as the budgetary *deja vu* after 9/11.

In the months after the bombing, 9/11 became the catchall justification for any government inaction. Increases in monies for HIV prevention for people of color in New York State's budget had been promised throughout the summer of 2001. There was a growing acceptance of the simple fact that money spent on preventive services for AIDS care reduced costly emergency room visits and new waves of infection, and funding had been provided in the state budget for preventive services – yes, its true But after September 11, AIDS activists found themselves facing funding cuts, not increases, and were told patronizingly to be patient.

Yet, other health care funding expenditures—especially those that were politically expedient in an election year—were met. In January, Dennis Rivera, the president of the independent New York hospital workers union, 1199, was able to successfully lobby for the passage of a \$1 billion health care bill that helped his union. Within days of the bill's passage, Rivera had thrown his support and endorsement at Republican Governor George

Pataki, effectively splitting the Democratic union vote, and helping to ensure Pataki's reelection. But throughout January, while AIDS activists continued to push for the money that had already been promised in the budget, they were told that there was no money left.

Being under attack from an unknown or hostile enemy was not unfamiliar territory for AIDS/ queer activists. AIDS and its representations - be it political or physical violence - create an aura of permanent siege to the self and psyche. It becomes part of a schema. Life is fragile; none of us are ever really assured that violence will not be part of our day. AIDS, incarceration, rape - they are all ground zeros lurking beneath the surface of a culture doing its best to tell everyone all is OK. In days after 9/11, the Mayor suggested everyone get back to normal by going back to shopping again, after all.

"Now, I don't want to be un-p.c. or to minimize the losses. My mother worked down there, but..." a facilitator commented during a strategy session over the state budget in February 2002, after a long pause, he continued, "...life goes on." Sighs of relief could be felt through the room of AIDS advocates. "Filling in cuts is necessary, but it's not enough," another activist explained. "We have an explosion of people of color living with this thing." According to preliminary figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, AIDS cases in New York were up 58% in the last year, with an even higher increase of 125% outside of New York City. And their plight was lost in the hysteria. HIV prevention was still hampered by Jesse Helms' Comstock like federal guidelines. In 1990, David Moffett's public art work, a light box photo text work, had urged views to "Call the White House... Tell Bush we're not all dead yet..." With a different Bush in the White House, Moffett reinstalled the work last February (Crimp, 2002).

A coalition of AIDS advocates made a decision to push negotiations for budget restorations by using their bodies, rather than money to lobby. An insider in Albany suggested that old style AIDS protest would be the only thing that would turn the momentum of the actions. In the following months, countless advocates for AIDS services for communities of color planned the action. Few of us assumed negotiations would go anywhere without the push only civil disobedience can provide.

The State budget CD [explain] was planned for April. I went down with members of \ACT UP New York. Armed with makeshift somba drums/ paint buckets and the passion of the global justice movements, we introduced the "This is What Democracy Looks Like" chant to a protest and fight for local poverty. Members of the New York State Legislature, Black Clergy, a Bhuddist nun, hundreds of people with HIV/AIDS, mostly people of color, and countless poverty bureaucrats chanted "AIDS Won't Wait for the Budget Debate, AIDS Funding Now!" and "Health Care is a Right, Health Care is a Right!" as we took over the steps of the Legislative Office Building and blocked the entrances (Kink, 2002).

More than anything, the calls for a renewed democracy proved the most urgent of cries. While the action was specifically targeted to monies for AIDS and Homeless services, the subtext was its no longer time to wait, be patient or polite until the military "crisis" is over. The subtext of the action's militancy was the day in day out evisceration of the social safety net for all Americans witnessed over the previous decade. By fall, most of us were aware that the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill creating time limits for grants without any

sort of necessary child or health care extensions would place even more poor people in jeopardy. It had been eight years since the last generational push for national health care had died at the hands of a Democratic-controlled Congress. Health care is still a disaster for Americans of all walks of life – whether they supported the War on Terror or Poverty.

We read "Letter from a Birmingham Jail on the way to the action. The question of patience with a segregationist status quo permeates the essay. Finally, Martin Luther King, Jr. states, " My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily... We know painfully through experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed"... For years now I have heard "wait." This "Wait" has almost always meant 'Never.'"

From calls for abstinence only sex education, to censorship of international development language calling for "reproductive health services" connoting abortion, to bans on the use of American aid to overseas organizations that provide any information about abortions (see Kristof, 2002), Bush's imitation of Reagan gave AIDS activists the feeling that we've been here before. Just this summer, AIDS activists stormed the stage and shouted down Bush Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson at the International AIDS Conference in Spain. Activists screamed "Shame, shame," while carrying signs accusing the U.S. of the "murder and neglect" of people with AIDS. The whole scene not unlike their shouts at the first Bush's HHS Secretary Louis Sullivan, who was similarly booed and taunted during the International AIDS Conference in San Francisco in 1990 (Shoofs and Zimmera, 2002).

While the AIDS activists call for universal access to health care and treatments, the Bush administration calls for universal military coverage. When the administration called for outlawing dissent while funding a permanent war economy, it was just more of the same routine of hurling deviant labels at protestors. What worried many was that the Bush Administration's push to repeal the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act barring federal troops from law enforcement against protest (Mitchell, 2002; Quillen, 2002).

By late May, the State budget would contain most all of the increases in AIDS prevention monies we'd asked for. While none of us knew if the monies would stick, we had still made a dent. The next spring's negotiations looked even trickier. In the meantime, direct action was what was necessary have to get the goods--War on Terrorism or no War on Terrorism, Reagan's Revenge or no Reagan's Revenge.

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I am indebted to Paul Guerin for this nifty phrase.