

FORUM

AIDS as an election issue

The disease could be an important feature of the presidential campaign in the US, says Duncan Campbell

AS THE US enters a new election year, scientific and medical professionals fear that AIDS will soon become a major election issue. If their fears are realised, the cost of continuing to play politics with people's lives will, they say, be measured in further tens of thousands of deaths during the 1990s.

The extent to which AIDS and AIDS sufferers are still stigmatised in the US has meant that many federal public health and education programmes still remain in

tion plans and pronouncements indicate that at least some of its candidates are ready to exploit AIDS against the Democrats, with a simple and bigoted populist message: the Democrats are soft on fags (homosexuals). Too much money is being spent on research into AIDS and care of patients, they will say. Despite earlier fears, the epidemic has as yet only spread significantly among gay men, drug users, and the poor blacks of New York. Homosexuals have incited a panic, they will say, and the

Meanwhile, the Reagan administration's public policy has stressed the maximum amount of mandatory testing for HIV, while locking away in government warehouses the AIDS education and prevention pamphlets already written and prepared by its own Surgeon General, Everett Koop. Some of Koop's pamphlets are now being distributed in California, but only because a local Congresswoman, Nancy Pelosi, forced the government to hand over some partly completed pamphlets for distribution at her own expense.

Another Californian Congresswoman, San Francisco Democrat Barbara Boxer, was in little doubt about the Reagan administration's values: Koop's pamphlet, she said, "offends people the White House would rather not offend. They would probably prefer to see people die..."

Knowing the facts and not giving them out, Boxer said, made the White House "guilty of murder". The White House's inability to defend its inactivity on AIDS was highlighted last November when CBS Television's prestigious *Sixty Minutes* programme reported on the government's treatment of the AIDS epidemic. No official spokesman was prepared to appear on the programme and defend the government's record.

Even more damaging to AIDS prevention and public health initiatives was a major amendment to a bill about AIDS in Congress last October. Senator Jesse Helms (North Carolina) and Congressman William Dannemeyer moved amendments to the bill prohibiting the disbursement of federal funds for AIDS education to any group which produced material that might "promote, encourage or condone homosexual sexual activities". Educational materials, Helms further insisted, should do nothing save advocate "abstinence outside of a sexually monogamous marriage".

Since October, federal funds have been denied to groups which direct advice on curbing the transmission of HIV and identify the sexual activities that carry the greatest risk. The result has been to compound the effect of the White House's inactivity. Don Francis, the state of California's adviser on AIDS, says that Helms's and Dannemeyer's activities have been "truly damaging" to his work in preventing AIDS. People are becoming frightened of being tested or treated, and remain ignorant of how to curb the spread of the virus.

In November, it was revealed in Congress that Dannemeyer and other right-wing Republicans had met two months earlier in Sacramento, California, to plan an AIDS-based campaign for 1988. Referring to the issue as potentially "paramount", a leaked memorandum then prepared by Republican consultants suggested that AIDS "could... help us to gain ground in '88". The documents show that the Republicans would not necessarily bring the issue up in a blatant



Honey Salvadori: Network

On the margins. The moralisers seem content that certain groups should continue to die

limbo, seven years after the epidemic began. The programmes have fallen victim to New-Right sensibilities over the public use of words such as "condom"—and, implicitly, the moralisers' contentment that the deaths should continue provided that they decimate only the unpopular, the inarticulate or marginal: gay men, drug users, blacks, hispanics, the poor, and far-off populations in central Africa.

More than 27 000 Americans have already died from the disease. More than 50 000 diagnosed cases of AIDS have been reported. More than a thousand new cases will be reported every month during 1988. If new and more effective antiviral agents against HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) are not developed quickly, it is now certain that more young Americans will die of AIDS than were killed during the Second World War. When the history of Ronald Reagan's administration is written at the end of the 20th century, its greatest "achievement" may well turn out to be its inaction in preventing the spread of AIDS.

The present political battle-lines are already clear. The Republican party's elec-

threat to the "ordinary" (white, heterosexual, non drug-using) person has been overstated.

The first shots in this campaign have already been fired. At the beginning of December, Otis Bowen, the White House's Secretary of Health and Human Services, confirmed earlier press leaks that estimates by the Centers for Disease Control "of the level of potential HIV infection in the US were about to be scaled down. Consequently, he announced, there would be no need to increase the federal AIDS budget in the coming years.

Since the start of the epidemic in 1981, the Centers for Disease Control, based in Atlanta, Georgia, have studied and projected its extent, forecasting until last year that up to 1.5 million Americans were likely to have been exposed to HIV. Leading AIDS epidemiologists don't now disagree that that figure is probably too high an estimate, and that the true present level of HIV infection in the US may lie between 300 000 and 600 000. However, they are in no doubt that the announcement of a reduction is a politically inspired move, paving the way for the 1988 election campaigns.

way, but would exploit it whenever it was raised elsewhere.

One such trigger will be the re-emergence in California last month of a plebiscite, formerly known as Proposition 64, which seeks to have AIDS declared a contagious disease (which, medically, it is not). The direct consequence, if the proposition had become law in 1986, would have been to permit the establishment of quarantine reservations for AIDS patients and people infected with HIV. In 1986, the proposition was soundly defeated—mainly because of the reputation of its proposer, Lyndon LaRouche, an eccentric ex-Marxist. However, nothing in Californian state law prevents a defeated proposal from being returned to the ballot; which LaRouche has now done. It is now Proposition 2 for the next ballot, to be held at the same time as the elections in November 1988.

I would have liked, during a recent trip to California, to have met one person in the medical community who was prepared to rule out the possibility that the Republican tide could lead to an AIDS pogrom, and the establishment of quarantine/concentration camps. I did not find such people. There was, some said, an unfortunate precedent in the abrupt fashion in which Japanese-Americans lost their civil rights and were interned in 1941.

To the people already engaged in the struggle to overcome the virus's unprecedented challenge, LaRouche's new initiative, the gathering Republican campaign and the White House's culpable silence on AIDS are heavy crosses to bear at a time when they would wish their efforts to be directed towards research and succour, not fending off further attacks on the suffering. □

Duncan Campbell is a writer with the *New Statesman*.