

Trying to put out a fire with gasoline

Trying to solve complex social problems by government force is often like trying to put out a fire with gasoline.

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It not only doesn't work—it can blow up in your face.

For a classic example, consider two recent bills sponsored by State Rep. Billy McKinney (D-Atlanta) aimed at dealing with the AIDS crisis.

One would have required state health officials to collect the names of anyone whose blood test showed exposure to the AIDS virus. The other would empower state health officials to shut down gay bathhouses.

The name collection proposal—the subject of much heated lobbying and public

debate—was first passed, then finally rejected by the House Health and Ecology Committee. The bathhouse bill is still under discussion.

These bills reflect a growing national concern about AIDS. Similar legislation has been introduced—and sometimes passed—elsewhere in the country.

As AIDS concern grows, these and similar measures may be increasingly advocated. It is important, then, to understand why they are misguided—why they would almost certainly lead to an actual increase in the spread of AIDS if adopted.

Ordering the government to collect the names of those exposed to the AIDS virus (only a small percentage of whom, incidentally, will actually contract AIDS) makes no sense. There is nothing of value the state can do with the names. There is no cure at present for AIDS, and no way to render carriers non-infectious.

However, destroying the confidentiality of AIDS testing would undoubtedly frighten away members of AIDS high-risk groups—male homosexuals, intravenous drug users, and

prostitutes—from taking the blood test that indicates exposure to the virus.

This would be disastrous. It would mean far fewer AIDS carriers would be identified and encouraged to take precautions to prevent further transmission of the disease.

The end result: an increase in the spreading of the AIDS virus.

Promises from government officials that names of AIDS car-

riers would be kept confidential are hardly reassuring to members of these high-risk groups. After all, homosexuals, drug users, and prostitutes are among the most heavily (and unfairly) persecuted individuals in our society.

himself has publicly spoken of homosexuals in disparaging terms, and that quarantines and incarceration have been discussed in connection with his bills, only increases fear among high-risk groups that the proposed government lists might one day be used against them.

In fact, they'd be foolish not to worry. History shows that "confidential" government records have a way of becoming more widely available—sometimes to be used against unpopular minorities.

Consider, too, that various religious nuts and rightwing crackpots have publicly called for severe punishment—even death—for homosexuals. Listen to former Moral Majority National Secretary Greg Dixon:

"Fry 'em (homosexuals) or put them in the pen. God's word would uphold that. They who commit such things are worthy of death."

Dixon goes further than most of his ilk. But with the raw-meat New Right gaining political power, and public concern over AIDS mounting, is it any wonder

Right words

"Our cause is noble, it is the cause of mankind! And the danger to it is to be apprehended from ourselves."—George Washington, 1779.

The fact that Rep. McKinney

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Gasoline

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that high-risk AIDS groups are frightened of having the government compile their names?

Closing down Atlanta's lone gay bathhouse is similarly misguided. Such a move would not halt the unsafe sexual practices that spread AIDS. It would simply shift them elsewhere.

Instead, the baths should be enlisted as a positive tool to combat AIDS. In New York, gay bathhouses dispense condoms, AIDS treatment information, and details on how to prevent transmission of the disease.

It would be far better to encourage such efforts here, instead of simply legislating the problem further underground.

Georgia can best meet the AIDS crisis through education, research, and compassion. Hysteria and senseless persecution can only make an already frightening problem far worse.