

Opinion

How America deals with AIDS reflects national character

When Pope John Paul II was ending his visit to the United States last month, he told an audience that America's character as a nation would be measured by the response of its citizens to the abortion issue.



Sue Krenek

I think our response to the AIDS epidemic will be a much more valid measure of our national character, and so far we don't measure up well.

It's not that we aren't aware of the disease. American institutions from Newsweek to Hollywood have addressed the AIDS issue, making it seem that we've made progress in our attitudes toward the disease. But as much as Newsweek's photo gallery of AIDS victims brought home the reality that people — people we have met, or know, or are related to — die from AIDS, it didn't reflect a fundamental attitude change. And Hollywood's preoccupation with "safe sex" in the movies represents no great change in mindset among the American public.

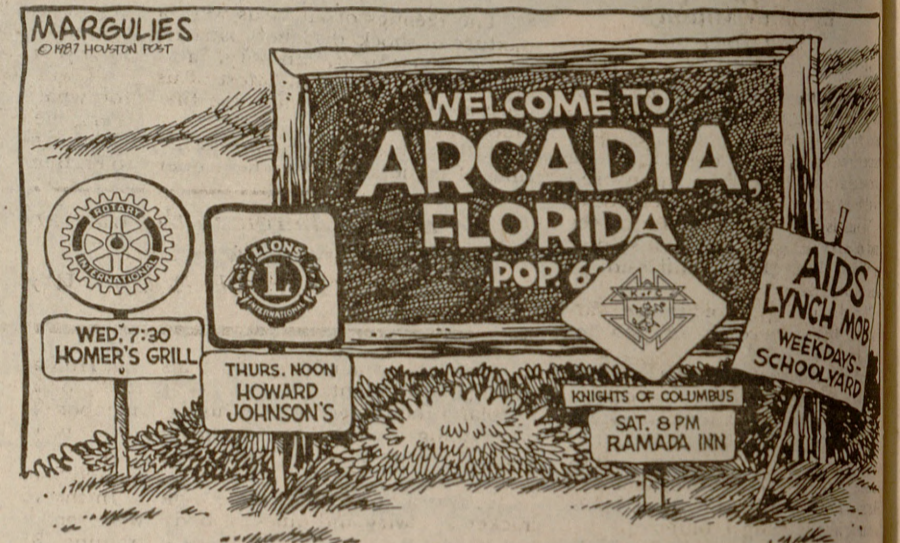
AIDS may have become part of our national mentality, making regular appearances in news stories, movies and David Letterman's monologue. But our reaction, for the most part, remains one of apathy or paranoia. No middle ground. No in between.

When it comes to our beliefs about AIDS, we are frighteningly schizophrenic, managing in one 1986 Newsweek poll to favor both confidentiality in AIDS testing and quarantines for those with the disease.

Some try to ignore the epidemic, ignore the 1.5 million Americans who are infected with the virus and ignore the estimates that 179,000 of those will die within the next five years. These are the people who believe AIDS won't reach them or anyone they know. These are the people whose eyes are closed to the reality of what AIDS can do.

The reality of AIDS is terrifying and not to be taken lightly. AIDS attacks the immune system, the body's very protection against disease. And work toward finding a cure is progressing slowly. More frightening is what remains unknown about the spread of the disease. Amazingly, there still are those who view AIDS as a "punishment" for homosexuals and intravenous drug users, the major AIDS risk groups. These people manage to ignore the plight of those who contract AIDS through blood transfusions. Worse, they are blind to the disease as it appears in other countries.

AIDS in Africa is no "homosexual"



There are 50,000 reported AIDS deaths in 11 African countries, and the World Health Organization estimates that most African AIDS victims die without ever knowing what disease they had. In Africa, AIDS is spread primarily through heterosexual contact. In some cities, such as the capital of Burundi, one in ten adults is an AIDS carrier.

But the tragedy of AIDS in Africa or among high-risk groups remains remote for most people. It is easy to ignore the disease that somehow can't strike close to home. But AIDS does strike close — one of the faces in Newsweek's gallery of AIDS victims is a man from Bryan. And still we as a nation try to ignore AIDS.

Or we overreact. We become blinded by the fear that leads to quarantines and mandatory blood tests. Those who advocate such measures in their own way avoid dealing with the disease. Segregation of victims, though it may violate morals, ethics and civil rights, is easier than the search for understanding or the search for a cure. These reactions are born of lack of knowledge, of misconception and falsehood.

There is still no evidence that AIDS can be spread through casual contact, no evidence that AIDS can be contracted from a mosquito bite. The Associated Press reports that hospital workers, even those who are directly jabbed with an AIDS-contaminated needle, have a 0.13 percent chance of contracting the disease. The Center for Disease Control has determined that the AIDS risk is so minimal that the benefit of keeping an AIDS-infected child in school almost always outweighs the potential risk to other students.

The citizens of Arcadia, Fla., might be interested in that last bit of information. Arcadia is the city where 500 citizens showed up for a "Citizens

Against AIDS" rally after Clifford Rugg got a court order allowing his three sons to attend school. The boys, who are hemophiliacs, contracted AIDS during blood transfusion. They are of the category that troubles even those who consider AIDS a plague or punishment — they are innocent victims, infected through no fault of their own.

But the citizens of Arcadia saw not innocent boys but threats to their children. Half the children boycotted school. The school received bomb threats. After the family's house was gutted by a fire, the Rays moved on, trying to start over in a new town. A family that needed understanding instead met with terrorism.

The citizens of Swansea, Mass., reacted differently. In 1985, eighth-grader Mark Hoyle found he had the disease. The school district briefly considered kicking him out of school, but decided to let him stay. A petition drive and boycott both fizzled quickly, and the community rallied in support of Mark, who was both popular and a Little League all-star.

The Mark Hoyles of the world deserve support from the community. But so do all AIDS victims, even those who aren't Little League all-stars. Shutting AIDS victims away from society is not the answer. Educating people about the disease's dangers and searching for a cure are part of the answer.

Whether they contracted the disease sexually or through a blood transfusion, whether they are drug users or the boy next door — or both — they have contracted a terrifying disease, a disease for which there is no cure. Until we find a cure, they deserve our concern. They deserve our understanding. Most of all, they deserve our help.

Sue Krenek is a senior journalism major and opinion page editor for The Battalion.

Down but not out

Judge Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court is in trouble, as is evidenced by the Senate Judiciary Committee's Tuesday recommendation that he be rejected, but now is not the time for his supporters to lose hope.

In the past week, growing numbers of senators have declared opposition to Bork, prompting some Democrats to declare the battle won and urge President Reagan to withdraw the nomination.

But Bork's supporters, while admitting their task will not be easy, insist the issue will be decided on the Senate floor, where it should be. As White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater put it, "We're disappointed, but we're pushing ahead."

Bork's supporters have not given up hope — nor should they. The debate over Bork's nomination has expanded into a debate over the role of the Supreme Court and the validity of judicial activism vs. judicial restraint. That debate will continue when Bork's nomination reaches the Senate floor later this month. Issues as vital as these must be decided not by a Senate committee or by rumors of opposition but through honest and open debate. Withdrawing Bork's nomination now would be a grave mistake for both the administration and the nation.

Mail Call

History, Cow Hop style

EDITOR:

Who did Melissa Hohlt talk to to get her information for the "Boom or Bust" article in Thursday's *At Ease*? I am referring specifically to the statement that the Cow Hop Expansion used to be the Sundance Club. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

As recently as last year, the Sunset Grill was doing business in that space. Before that, it was occupied by Backstage, a fine coffeehouse where singer Lyle Lovett got his start. A lot of fine music was played on that tiny stage. Backstage featured a mural of Rudder Auditorium as seen from the stage, with the audience composed of such notables as Humphrey Bogart, Richard Nixon, Mickey Mouse, the Beatles and many others. The mural is still there, behind the chipboard. Sadly, the connecting door between the "old" and "new" Cow Hop was cut right through that painting.

The Sundance Club is at the Hilton

Corrie Bergeron '84, '88

Editor's note: The error in *At Ease* was discovered after the issue had gone to press. A correction ran in Friday's issue of *The Battalion*.

Anti-gun hysteria

EDITOR:

Regarding Sue Krenek's anti-gun hysteria column in *The Battalion*, I must say she surely has a negative view of the future and very little faith in an armed populace.

If she had done any form of journalistic research she would have found that states that have passed similar "open carry" laws have had crime rates that dropped considerably.

Furthermore, the legislation in Florida received the endorsement of many major police organizations both in the state and nationwide. The drug culture in Florida has kept the honest citizens of Florida in fear for too long, and the law-abiding people of that state have a right to defend their lives and property against any violent threat.

In regard to Texas and our attempts to pass a permit to carry law here, legislation will be introduced again this year to provide a means by which honest citizens may obtain permits to carry firearms for protection. Furthermore, according to the Texas Uniform Crime Report, more than 11,000 Texans last year alone were arrested for carrying a firearm. These were law-abiding citizens who were afraid and exercised their right to arm themselves in defense of their lives. They made the decision that they would rather be tried by twelve than carried by six!

Mark Bateman '91

How about professional circulation?

EDITOR:

One of the many things I enjoy about attending Texas A&M is *The Battalion* newspaper. It's usually well prepared and in many respects rivals the local paper, the *Eagle*.

But the paper has a serious problem with regards to circulation. Simply stated, it stinks! I used to be impressed when you published figures indicating a daily readership of 30,000 to 35,000. Perhaps you print that many, but not nearly that number are distributed around campus. I realize the paper is free, but I thought you were trying to run it like a professional newspaper.

Who distributes the papers anyway, people on crutches? I can see the list of qualifications for delivery personnel now: must be very disoriented and have short memory (this prevents papers being consistently distributed to set locations), must have uncontrollable fear of sharp instruments (this ensures delivery people won't carry anything with which to cut bundle strings), and lastly must be completely unfamiliar with A&M campus (this ensures papers won't make it to all buildings).

At best, your paper is available in larger buildings around campus such as Blocker, Zachry, and the vet school about twice a week. Just where do all those papers go anyway? Is *The Battalion* being run like a newspaper or like a volunteer community newsletter? How about organizing circulation a little better? You've got a good paper, now how about making it available to its readers?

Mike Jaffe
graduate student, computer science

Letters to the editor should not exceed 300 words in length. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must be signed and must include the classification, address and telephone number of the writer.

Dog days without Catfish

I was out of town for a few days, so I took my dog, Catfish, the black Lab, over to a friend's house.

Lewis Grizzard

I came back home Tuesday night. Wednesday I got a call. Catfish and Vader had broken out of my friend's fenced yard sometime Sunday. My friend called the pound Monday and found his dog.

"I hate to tell you this," he said, "but there's been no sign of Catfish." He'd been missing for 48 hours. I figured that dog.

I love that dog. He's been with me nearly four years. He ate the house I

had before the one I'm in now. The dog chewed up my house and ate it, along with numerous pairs of eyeglasses, remote controls for the television, shoes, books and anything else he could get his teeth into.

He got over a lot of that as he got older. He still does a few annoying things from time to time, such as barking at me an inch away from my ear at 5 in the morning to tell me someone is stealing our garbage.

But he's basically a good dog with a sweet nature about him, unless you happen to be a squirrel.

His lifetime ambition is to catch a squirrel. It's something he'll probably never be able to do, but he presses onward, despite the fact the squirrels in my yard get his attention and then leap into a tree where they look down at him and laugh.

I've had some bad luck with dogs in the past. My first dog was a little white puff named, appropriately, Snowball.

Snowball caught pneumonia and died.

When I was 8, I had a dog named Edna Butch. Edna Butch ran after cars. One day she caught one.

I lost a basset hound in a divorce and then lost another one in a similar circumstance. I vowed never to own a dog again, until I saw Catfish.

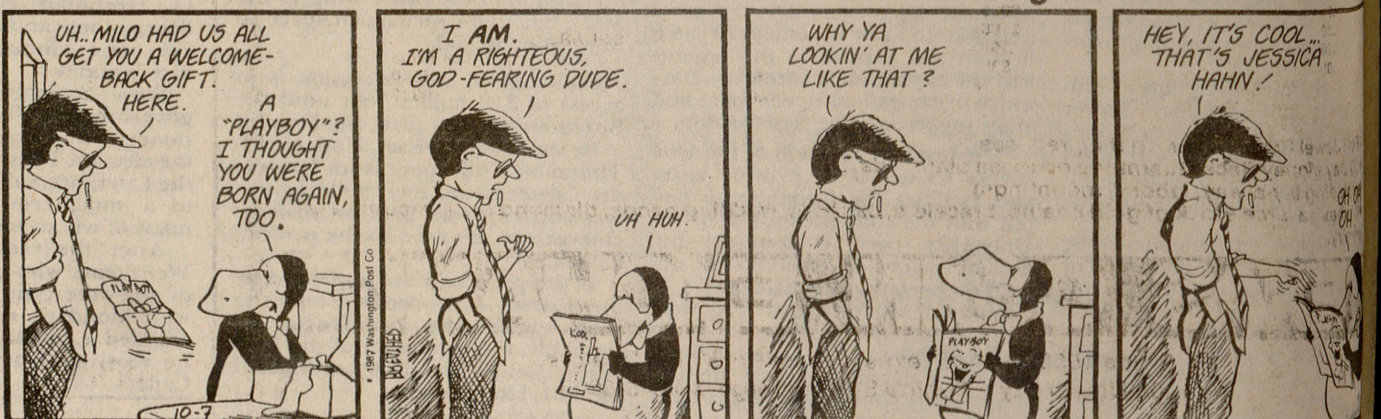
I decided to try the pound again. Catfish was at the pound. He had lost his ID tag. I drove him home, hugged him, scratched him and talked to him like he was a child.

I said, "You scared me to death."

He barked and licked my hand. I love that dog.

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BLOOM COUNTY



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