

## SOCIETY

“are young black males.”

However well intended, government policies such as affirmative action in hiring and noncompetitive “set-aside” contracts for minority businesses mostly benefit middle- and upper-class blacks. These citizens, Zinsmeister believes, could provide more *effective* help to the underclass than could an expansion of government welfare programs. Black Americans, he argues, “must ask themselves what they can do . . . for their brothers.”

### *An AIDS Analog*

“The Syphilis Epidemic and Its Relation to AIDS” by Allan M. Brandt, in *Science* (Jan. 22, 1988), 1333 H St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, which has so far afflicted about one in 4,200 Americans, is not the first sexually transmitted disease to become a major national worry. During the late 1800s, about one in 10 citizens had syphilis. Its story, says Brandt, associate professor of social medicine at Harvard, offers an “important analog” to the AIDS drama.

Syphilis was feared both as a disease (often causing paralysis and death) and as an affront to Victorian values. Doctors exaggerated the ease with which such “vipers of venery” could be contracted. Calls arose for curbs on immigrants, who in fact did not show a high incidence of syphilis.

The early response was shaped by the Progressive-era “social hygiene movement.” It preached containment: sexual abstinence, police curbs on prostitution. Then, in 1909, came the hoped-for “magic bullet,” the arsenic-based drug Salvarsan. But only a fourth of syphilitics—outcasts, like AIDS patients—would complete the arduous injections.

World War I brought a new weapon: shame. Draftees with the disease (13 percent were afflicted with either syphilis or gonorrhea) were dishonorably discharged. On the home front, some 20,000 prostitutes were quarantined; 110 red-light districts (e.g., San Francisco’s Barbary Coast) were closed. Soldiers were given slogans (“A German bullet is cleaner than a whore”) but not condoms, which might *encourage* casual sex.

Persuaded that a “conspiracy of silence” about the disease aided its persistence, Surgeon General Thomas Parran wrote a 1937 best seller about syphilis, *Shadow on the Land*. Congress passed a 1938 law providing \$15 million for education and blood tests. By that year, 26 states were requiring such tests for marriage-license applicants. Many people *sought* tests: Chicago’s “Wassermann Dragnet” drew up to 12,000 examinees a day. Yet, not until World War II—which brought penicillin (1943) and free condoms for G.I.’s—was syphilis curbed. From 72 per 100,000 people in 1943, the new-case incidence fell to four per 100,000 in 1956.

One moral of the story, says Brandt: Mandatory blood testing is no answer for AIDS. Such tests could raise both hysteria about the disease and a sizeable problem of misdiagnoses. (A fourth of syphilis tests yielded “false positive” results; many states have dropped premarital exam requirements.) Unless and until a magic AIDS bullet appears, Brandt believes the new “carnal scourge” is best fought with education.