

RECORD TYPE: PRESIDENTIAL (TRP NOTES MAIL)

CREATOR: PlanetOut NewsPlanet ( PlanetOut NewsPlanet <newsplanet@planetout.com> [ UNKNOWN ] )

CREATION DATE/TIME: 5-JUN-1998 23:20:22.00

SUBJECT: [GLBT-NEWS:PNO] Last Rage Against Dying Light

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Last Rage Against Dying Light

NewsPlanet Staff

Friday, June 5, 1998 / 02:54 PM

SUMMARY: Long-time AIDS warrior Steve Michael had his coffin carried to the White House - no going gentle into that good night when there's work yet to be done!

ACT UP/Washington, DC founder Steve Michael lived the slogan that "Silence = Death," but death didn't silence his own protest of government inaction on AIDS. His wish that his funeral be a political event was carried out June 4, as 100 - 200 activists marched a half-mile down Pennsylvania Avenue to Lafayette Park across from the White House, silent except for a single drum, with pallbearers wearing black armbands carrying Michael in his wood coffin.

The procession was led by Michael's partner of seven years, Wayne Turner, carrying a photo of President Bill Clinton with an elongated Pinocchio nose, walking arm-in-arm with his mother, Barbara Michael, who carried a photo of her son as a baby. The procession also featured a 6-foot Clintonesque puppet of the Grim Reaper. In front of the White House, Reverend George Stallings of the Imani Church presided at a ceremony that featured a series of speakers who both eulogized Michael and denounced Clinton. In the open coffin, Michael, who died as a result of AIDS on May 25 at the age of 42, was dressed in a new ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) T-shirt, frayed jeans and a rainbow friendship bracelet. He'll be cremated June 6.

Turner had reported Michael telling him at the beginning of his final hospital stay, "If I die, take my body to the White House. Show the world that Bill Clinton has lied to and betrayed people with AIDS." The couple had spent the last seven years trying in every way possible to hold Clinton accountable for the promises of his 1992 Presidential

campaign.

Turner said at the ceremony, "This president committed to this man lying here right now that he would launch an all-out research effort to find a cure for AIDS [and promised] universal health care. The man who lives in the White House made those promises and did not keep them. If we had had a Manhattan Project to cure AIDS, launched in Bill Clinton's first 100 days, I would not be here now with Steve." He said, "Shame on you, Bill Clinton. You say you feel my pain? Bill Clinton, you have caused my pain."

ACT UP/New York activist Ann Northrup, who ran for Vice President in Michael's two campaigns for President which provided a media platform for AIDS education, said, "Bill Clinton is a murderer, and this death, and tens of thousands of others, must be laid at his doorstep. He is a liar, and he is letting people with AIDS die on purpose. We will not rest until this crisis is over."

Bill Freeman, former executive director of the National Association of People with AIDS, said, "In 1992, the occupant of that [White] house made very clear and specific promises, commitments, to people living with HIV disease ... and where are we now?"

Banners at the event included, "Steve Michaels, 1956 - 1998, dead from AIDS, killed by Clinton's broken promises," "Clinton lies, we die," "Hey Bill, thanks for the AIDS," and "Fund needle exchange now." Michael and other activists had also been consistently disappointed

that Clinton installed relatively powerless bureaucrats instead of a true "AIDS Czar" to direct federal efforts against AIDS and to implement the recommendations of the National Advisory Council for research, prevention, education, and treatment.

White House press secretary Mike McCurry called the funeral "a dramatic action," but defended Clinton's AIDS efforts as better than those of Presidents George Bush or Ronald Reagan. He cited research towards developing a vaccine (including this week's Food and Drug Administration approval of a large-scale trial), increased spending on AIDS research more generally, and administration support for maintaining medical and other support programs for people with AIDS. While the administration recently declined to extend federal funding to needle exchange programs, despite endorsing their effectiveness in preventing HIV transmission without increasing drug use, McCurry said the White House was pleased that local communities were finding funds to establish needle exchange programs of their own.

Michael's final project was a Washington, DC ballot initiative to legalize medical use of marijuana, which has been designated as Measure 59 and is currently in the signature-gathering phase. He had asked that in lieu of flowers, people join that campaign, or contribute to ACT UP Washington at 409 "H" Street Northeast, Washington, DC 20002.

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