

Krishna Prabhu
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“Spat on the Face”

“Broken Promises Kill! Fund Global AIDS!” This was the chant I started at the top of my lungs alongside thirty Harvard and Yale students. Like most chanters, we were yelling inside of a rally. Unlike most chanters, the rally was technically our own. We were in Bridgeport Connecticut, inside a rally of 10,000 who had come to see one man, President Obama. The crowd was not pleased with our chants, to say the least. First, they started to boo. Our signs, which said “Keep the Promise: \$50 billion for Global AIDS” were ripped from our hands. As we were escorted out of the rally by the Secret Service, I felt someone else’s saliva slide down my face. Despite the fact that Obama had broken his campaign promises and flat-funded global AIDS programs, I couldn’t help but feel bad for organizing students to go through this traumatic experience. But as fellow AIDS activists checked the internet on their iPhones and Blackberries, we realized that the spattering of spit was worth it. Our brief discomfort generated headlines in *The New York Times* and gain coverage on most major news networks. During the rally we put President Obama on the defensive, prompting him to take three minutes from his speech to try to respond to our criticisms of his AIDS policies. By disrupting his speeches not only in Connecticut, but also in Philadelphia, and Boston, we effectively put political pressure on the President, whose flat-funding of AIDS programs had led to many HIV positive people being denied effective treatment in sub-Saharan Africa.

I was not always so willing to disrupt the speech of the man I had cast my first vote for. As my legs shook with nervousness before I started that chant in a crowd of 10,000, I reflected on why I was in the global AIDS movement. I thought back to a high school service trip I took to Uganda, where I met an 8-year-old who was taking care of her 2-year-old brother because both of their parents had died from HIV. I remembered the summer I had worked in a South African public hospital during a nurses’ strike, watching a law student who was our age die of HIV and TB in an area where nearly four in ten people were infected with the virus. I recalled my initial involvement in the AIDS movement during my freshman year. That year, along with fellow AIDS activists, I would spend my weekends in town halls in New Hampshire to politely ask presidential primary candidates to promise \$50 billion for global AIDS programs. And I remembered my initial joy when, as a movement, we successfully pressured Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama to all sign the \$50 billion pledge.

Sitting in Bridgeport, Connecticut, I realized that what ultimately drove me was the sense that the people I met in Uganda or South Africa did nothing to deserve their suffering. The inequality between me and them was and still is offensive. And what is even more intolerable is that their suffering is completely preventable. These life-saving drugs not only exist, but were promised to the poor by leaders like President Obama. But perhaps unsurprisingly, promises to the poor don't mean very much unless those leaders are held to account for them. And that is why, in Bridgeport Connecticut, with my legs shaking and my heart pounding, I sounded out a chant to disrupt the President of the United States.

But it gets even worse than broken promises by a President. Right now, the Republicans are much worse than President Obama on global health. They have proposed to cut global health funding by over \$780 million this year, and even more next year. They're willing to pull the plug on people who are *currently* on life-saving treatment. They're willing to balance the budget on the backs of the global poor.

Now, I wouldn't be a good organizer if I didn't leave you with an opportunity to act. Next Thursday, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor will be at Harvard. He is the second most powerful Republican in the world. Specifically, he will be at the IOP. More specifically, he will be giving a speech. And if my speech has been compelling to you in any way, I would like to encourage members of the Lowell community to join the Harvard Global Health and AIDS Coalition to voice our dissent. We're not going to disrupt his speech like we did for President Obama. But we will stand up to him. We will make our voices heard, and will make the media pay attention to this pattern fiscal and moral *irresponsibility*. And if you want to hold the people who represent you morally accountable, stand with us. And though I don't think you'll take a luge to the face at the IOP, if you're willing, I implore you to join us. Thank you to Lowell, to Sandy, and to Van for being a mentor, a tutor, an adviser, and a friend.