Bob Hattoy, On The Record

April 1, 1994 By Donna Minkowitz

We met in an office in New York City's EastVillage, overlooking homeless addicts' bedsteads and armies of young gay men wearing Doc Martens shoes, one of the most AIDS-ravaged communities in the nation. I'd met Bob Hattoy once before under very different circumstances, ones not particularly conducive to honest talk or, indeed, to any kind of talk about AIDS. It was at one of five glitzy gay and lesbian events held to celebrate President Clinton's inauguration in Washington and the mood was undeviatingly upbeat. The party goers were so sure that gays and lesbians would acquire major power and influence under Clinton's rule that AIDS was scarcely mentioned once during the four days of tuxedo-wearing hoopla.

Wittingly or unwittingly, Bob Hattoy had helped create the cloud of overwhelming optimism surrounding Clinton. He'd given the first-ever speech on AIDS at the 1992 Democratic convention. Only two months after being diagnosed with the disease. "Mr. President, your family has AIDS," he'd harangued George Bush in the speech. "And we are dying, and you are doing nothing about it....I don't want to die. But I don't want to live in an America where the President sees me as the enemy." Hattoy, much better known as a spokesman on environmental issues than gay ones, also told the Democratic gathering and a prime-time audience about his pride in being gay.

An old friend of the Clintons, Hattoy quit his job as regional director of the Sierra Club in Los Angeles early in the campaign to advise Clinton on the environment. In May, when he found a lump under his arm that signaled AIDS-related lymphoma, he began stumping for Clinton in front of AIDS and gay and lesbian communities all over the nation.

But Hattoy, 41, wasn't content to be Clinton's tame gay man with AIDS, not even after he was appointed White House assistant personnel director. Last March he stunned Washington colleagues by telling the New York Times, he "almost felt like crying" when Clinton proposed that gay and lesbian troops be segregated from their heterosexual counterparts. He has been no less critical of the White House's performance on AIDS, bemoaning the long time it took to fill the AIDS czar position and telling the late New York Times reporter, Jeffrey Schmalz, "I don't think they'll address AIDS until the Perot voters start getting it."

Hattoy is a man of contradictions—a savvy politician who doesn't care if he loses his job, a deliberate speaker who takes risks when he talks. In this exclusive interview, Hattoy tells POZ that his troubles at the White House began because he didn't die when expected.

POZ: Why did you leave the White House personnel office?

Bob Hattoy: That was a temporary assignment. During the campaign and the transition, I originally thought that I would like to work at the White House, in the political affairs office, the public liaison office or Congressional affairs. Having been a lobbyist and activist for 20 years, I'd be perfect on the Hill or with community groups or other political coalitions they need to maintain relationships with and keep going—I mean with the progressive community. The gay and lesbian community, peace groups, environmental groups, feminist groups—groups that I know that I have a long history with. They don't really have that as part of the Democratic Leadership Council or the New Democrats. I originally wanted to do that. That didn't happen, I think, because—well, I know why. Because many of the political advisor of the White House and some of the senior staff thought I was too hot. Too outspoken, too "unreasonable," is what I was accused of.

So Bruce Lindsey, who is an adviser to the President and director of White House personnel, said, "Well, come work with me in Personnel for six months." That was an important point when we had to fill the government with people. He said, "I'll let you work on appointing gay and lesbian people to the Interior Department, agriculture, Energy." Let's see, what else did I do? Oh, and EPA. And I did a lot of that, and it was good. We recruited good people, we assigned them, but I knew that was only going to be for six months.

And I didn't want to go to work for the AIDS czar because I didn't like how the office was set up. I thought it was underwhelming who they appointed, and I didn't want to be a part of that problem. So I said to them, "Here's what I want to do. I'll go to the Department of the Interior and get a senior job there, so I could still work on environmental stuff in my job. But I'd still have to do aids; I have to do AIDS. I don't know if there's a role for me in the Administration doing AIDS, but I'm still going to work on AIDS. I'm still going to speak out on AIDS, I'm still going to travel around the country." And Bruce Lindsey said, "Well, the President is still going to have this national AIDS commission or task force. Why don't you go to work for the Interior Department and we'll appoint you to the national AIDS task force once we get it going again." I said, "That sounds great, let's do it."

I felt also that I'd have more freedom in a way to speak out and to be a voice of hopefully some kind of integrity by not being in the White House. Because being in the White House, they wouldn't let me do that. I was told over and over again, "No press means no trouble." So, to make a long story short, because I'm friends of theirs on a personal level and somewhat of a … [hesitates] beloved adversary on a political level, they wanted to take care of me. I mean they wanted to make sure I had a job and health insurance and all that.

POZ: You mean you're a friend of the Clintons?

Hattoy: I mean [there are] friends of mine at the White House, including the President. Bruce Lindsey said to me, "The President wants you taken care of." He said, "You're on a list of people we have to take care of." And, by the way, the environment is still very crucial. I'm not discounting that, but as far as working at the White House, I was too hot. I was 'off-message'. I don't know how I became 'off-message' because this is all the stuff the President said he wanted to do. I never heard from him that he changed his mind. I only heard from the straight white boys who said, "Oh

my God, ”Hattoy, calm down, shut up, go work on grazing fee."

POZ: I remember when you were quoted in the New York Times saying you “almost felt like crying” because of something Clinton had said about the military ban.

Hattoy: Yeah, when he said we should segregate. I felt like crying at that point just because I realized well …hmmm…. So much of that gets into the gays and lesbians in the military issue.

POZ: But my question is: You’d be quoted saying something like that and what would be the reaction from the White House?

Hattoy: I would go every day to friends of mine at the White House and say, “This isn’t working, there’s trouble. I’m hearing this. The community is saying this.” I thought it was my responsibility to continue pushing that message, and they would in a way pat me on the head and say, “We know, but too bad, we’re doing tit this way.” So I would try to communicate. And, you know, during the campaign I would see Bill Clinton every day. We traveled together. You could say, “This is right, wrong.” You could debate, you could engage—he’s a very intellectual guy. But once he became President, you couldn’t just do that. It would be impossible to stop him in the hallway and say, “What about that?” You just can’t you know. So you’d pass things on through Dee Dee Myers, George Stphanopoulos, Rahm Emmanuel, Bruce Lindsey, and I kept thinking that a lot of things weren’t getting to the President. So when the New York Times called me about attitudes that I thought were being put forward, I was no fool about speaking to the New York Times. I knew that criticizing what the Administration was doing in the New York Times would get me in hot water. But I also thought, well, if you can’t get through by talking to the senior advisors, the only other way the President is going to hear you is by reading it at breakfast.

When the President said, “Maybe we should segregate troops based on sexual orientation,” I made a joke. I said, “If we applied that to civilian life, that means we’d all have to be hairdressers or florists.” I thought that through pointing out that humorous kind of prejudice people would say, “That makes sense!” It’s just so stupid to say, “Segregate people by sexual orientation.” Come on! So I said that quote, [which brought] a total firestorm of trouble. The phone range at 5:30 in the morning. It was Dee Dee Myers. She’s my friend. I’ve known her for 20 years. She said, “Oh, my God, you’re in trouble. Wait until you get to the White House today. Everybody’s going to be angry with you. You criticized the President on the front page of the paper.” Now I don’t think I criticized the President. I didn’t say the President is a horrible person. I said doing this policy—and by the way, we were still in the six-month period where we were developing policy—and I thought it was perfectly loyal and patriotic and factual as the openly gay person in the White House to let the staff of the President know what the community thought about this. I thought I was being a good staff member by telling the truth. Instead, I as told, “You’re off-message. You bumped our story off the paper regarding some budgetary thing we wanted to put on.” That was George’s thing. George was angry—he said, "Every other paper had this front page story, except for the New York Times." I made them be off-message.

The President was angry at me because I also in that story criticized Sam Nunn, and he had said

that he'd made a pact with Sam Nunn during that six months that they wouldn't criticized each other. And you know, Sam Nunn didn't keep the pact. The President wanted to keep his word. So he never said anything about—actually, friends of mine said he thought it was very funny what I said, the actual quote about hairdressers and florists. But he was angry that I, as a senior White House staff person, criticized Sam Nunn, beca8use that made him not keep his word with Sam Nunn.

POZ: Did President Clinton tell you directly that he was mad at you?

Hattoy: Yeah. I remember the conversation. He said, "What you're in trouble for is criticizing Sam Nunn" And I said, "Oops. One of my problems is that so many of my friends and political colleagues both in the House, the Senate and in the community are thinking you're the problem on this issue and Sam Nunn is the problem on this issue, and I want them to know that." And he said, "That might be true, but I told Sam Nunn non one would criticize him, and this has put me in a bad situation." And I said, "I'm sorry about that." I did. But I said, "Obviously, I didn't mean to break your word. I was just trying to defend you." And he said, "That's why you should say nothing." And I said, "OK."

But that started the political fall from grace, if you will. Because anything else I had ever said was always so supportive. For 25 years I've been an outspoken activist, outspoken about what I've believed in and cared about. And for a while that fit perfectly into helping to identify who Bill Clinton was as a human being, to show that he meant it when he talked about how there's no such thing as Them and US in America. I was a symbol in this campaign of how human he was and how concerned he was about all of America. And as long as I was speaking out on that, that was great.

When I continued to speak out on it after the election and it became off-message, I think a lot of people in the White House didn't know what to do with me. And I think what happened to me on a political level was that I didn't die. I didn't die! And a year ago, it was sort of like, [gingerly voice] "He has AIDS and cancer, let him say anything he wants." No one probably ever maliciously or vocally expressed that but I know that was there. Quite frankly, in the early diagnosis of the disease, I felt the same way: "I should say anything about anything he does." Now, it's a year and a half later, I've gained weight, my T-cells are good, I'm still speaking out, I'm not dead, and what the hell do you do with somebody like that, you know?

Who'd they think I was? This is exactly who I've always been, and now they're shocked and surprised by it. So I'm working at the Department of the Interior, rewriting regulations affecting grazing fees and mining law. That's all critical but quite frankly I don't care [about this work}.

POZ: You were just supposed to be a sympathetic victim and then die?

Hattoy: I don't think anybody that I know at the White House is that crude or heartless. But it probably would have been a lot easier politically if I had just become a folk hero and could have been referred to rather than have it be dealt with on a day-to-day basis. That's why I'm sad today about Jeffery Schmalz' story [published posthumously in the New York Times]. Jeffrey Schmalz was the first person to die of AIDS that was visible as part of the Clinton Administration. He became

sort of buddies with the President and interviewed the President a lot about AIDS. He knew most of the White House staff. Lots of other people besides Jeff have died from AIDS, and I'm not discounting that. But, I mean, Schmalz was one of the first people in their circle who were involved in the campaign, who actually died of AIDS. But, it just doesn't feel any different than when someone died during the Bush and Reagan years.

POZ: It doesn't?

Hattoy: [Winces} It doesn't feel like there's any more outrage; it doesn't seem like there's any more action. And I know the budget's been increased, and I know the President's giving speeches. I just feels really sad still. I relate to the battle against AIDS as a war, and I know other people in Washington relate to it like an educational process—that's what AIDS czar Kris Gebbie keeps calling it. And I thought that maybe when people fall from AIDS, now it was going to be as if a comrade on the front line falls, and all of us would continue to march and scream and yell, but it would be an embraced moment. And a profound… flash, if you will. And instead, it's like someone slipping away on the back lines, and someone has to run forward to the general and say, "Oh, by the way, we lost someone back there." That just feels so unsatisfying.

POZ: What do you think of Hillary Clinton's health plan?

Hattoy: Oh, well, my God, this is a very complicated plan and so what do I think about it? On a No. 1 level, it's fabulous that we're going to reform health insurance. Because that's what the plan's about—it's about reforming insurance, it's not really about reforming health care. It doesn't guarantee quality; it doesn't guarantee the integrity of the health care we're getting. Sot that still needs a lot of work. I think it's 80 percent there. I like it a lot for people with AIDS. It has the pre-existing condition issue dealt with, and that's so important for so many people. Because when you compare no health care to whatever they can get outside of this national plan, it's going to be substantially better for the IV-drug using mother who has nothing right now. SO that's good. But as far as pushing for more when it affects people who have chronic illnesses, I think we need to do that. Absolutely. And it's my new crusade personally to try to put together PWAs, breast cancer survivors, Alzheimer's activists, and we have to really work together in the next year to push for better care and better quality assurances, for access assurances for chronic disease sufferers and survivors.

POZ: How are you going to put that together? Are you going to call some kind of summit?

Hattoy: Well, I don't know; that's what we need to work on. Just lately I've been thinking there's not enough chronic disease political lobbying being done in Washington on a professional level. There's a lot of good grass-roots activities, but it's not kick-ass enough, and it's not focused, and it's not professionally organized. We don't really have an AIDS lobby effort in Washington DC, that's advocating action. We thought that was going to come out of the AIDS czar's office, and that's not—she obviously decided that's not her role.

I always thought she was the one who was going to be going to Hillary and saying, "We need this." Instead, she'll come out and say, "This is what it does. This is all we're going to get and we have to

be happy with it.” I think the AIDS community is going to have to do things on their own.

POZ: Is anyone else in the Administration openly HIV positive?

Hattoy: No. Not that I know of. Nor is anybody else in the Administration that I know of—I mean, in the White House—openly aware of these issues. For instance, I remember having a conversation with Dee Dee Myers, who’s a very good person and friend of mine. I told her what I said in the Jeffrey Schmalz article about people at the White House not caring about AIDS until the Ross Perot voters start getting AIDS. And she gasped and said, “Oh, a log of people will be angry at you for saying that.”

ACT UP had one advantage in dealing with the Reagan and Bush administrations and that was that anger totally freaked those people out. They were so shut down emotionally. But in this Administration that changed. Kris Gebbie, Donna Shalala, the President will all say, “I feel your pain. I embrace your anger.” And I want to say to them, “No, you don’t feel my pain. You don’t embrace my anger.” I want to say to Gebbie, "If you think AIDS is and educational process, then educate yourself, honey! It’s a war, and my side’s dying.

This feeling your pain business, there’s something evil about it. It doesn’t sit well with me—it’s the banal evil. Until these people change their behavior, words don’t count. It’s behavior that counts.

I feel a though for so long the community—the gay and lesbian community, the AIDS community, which are different communities, I’ve learned, that just sometimes overlap—was just lulled into a false sense of dream-like, utopian hope.

POZ: About the Clinton Administration?

Hattoy: Yes, about the Clinton Administration. I’ll tell you what we did. We changed the White House, and we do have people, both in Bill and Hillary Clinton, who care profoundly about people with AIDS. But nothing’s really going to change until we change the attitudes of every other house in America.

POZ: When you say the Clintons care profoundly about people with AIDS, what specifically do you mean?

Hattoy: On a personal level, they know people with AIDS, including myself and Jeffrey Schmalz and Mary Fisher. They come from a generation where friends die of AIDS. So of course they care. But making that into something more is a political challenge and what’s obviously going to need political action and work and speaking out and organizing and fund-raising and all of that. I mean, they care but then there’s still NAFTA and welfare reform and health care reform and Somalia and Bosnia and that’s their lives. AIDS is ours.

POZ: What do you think would make them care enough to do what needs to be done?

Hattoy: Well, I don’t even know what they can do! I don’t even know any more what to ask for. Of

course we need money. Of course we need moral leadership. Of course we need political capital spent on prevention programs, treatment programs. We need a cure! A funny interesting thing happened. The other day someone faxed me something from the White House. They were writing a brochure on the health care plan. I think it was one of the media offices. It doesn't matter. They wanted to check something out with me. They were going to have a little paragraph on AIDS; self promoting, of course. It started out by saying, "The President's health care plan is the best thing that could happen for people with AIDS in America." And I circled it. I wrote, "What about a cure?" and I faxed it back. And they were all apologetic and freaked out. They said, "Oh, of course! Oh, we meant that!" But they get so insulated into the issues that matter to them—which is the health care plan—they forget that it's so condescending to say that. So, they rewrote the sentence, "Until there's a cure, the President's health care plan…" Now, that feels better, you know.

POZ: What about Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala?

Hattoy: Donna is running a health bureaucracy. She's another person who cares, but she should have released Kris Gebbie's office from her control and let it report directly to the White House. I was disappointed in her for not letting it be a separate agency. It was all about power. Absolutely.

POZ: Is AIDS a sellable concept to the Clintons?

Hattoy: It probably won't sell. It'll be considered by the suburban voter to be maybe something that too much money is spent on already. You know, what about measles and chicken pox and will my kids get free medicine if they get whooping cough? That's what has resonance to most Americans when it comes to needing health care. How does it affect their lives and their children's?

There's no intent to not take care of us, but there's an intent to quietly take care of us.

POZ: Do you know people in the Administration and the White House who are HIV positive and closeted about it?

Hattoy: Let me just think. In the Administration. Um…No, I don't. I mean, I know lots of people in Washington DC, who are on the Hill or are activists and are HIV positive.

POZ: Have you gotten grossly AIDS-phobic behavior from anyone in the Administration?

Hattoy: No. I get sometimes grossly unaware behavior. For instance: Nice yuppie kids who work there will come up to me and say, "it's so great what's happened to you!" And I'll say, "What? What's happened to me?" And they'll say, "Oh, well you became sort of famous from giving speeches and speaking out. And there's stories done about you and everything, it's just great!" And I'll say, "But there's a down side, you know." And they'll say, "What?" And I'll say, "Well, this all happened because I have AIDS." And they'll say, "Oh, that." And it's almost like they're so ambitious they would take AIDS as something that would get them ahead. Where I would rather not have AIDS and work in a bakery if I could make that choice.

POZ: But never anything like people not wanting to share your plate?

Hattoy: Never that I've ever known. Who knows? Somebody who's grossly AIDS-phobic I'm probably not going to run into. But I don't know that. Actually people have been pretty wonderful. I mean, there are hate letters I get every day. That has nothing to do with the Administration.

POZ: What do they say?

Hattoy: Everything from "Die, faggot," to, there's one group that keeps sending me letters, some military group from Georgia that send me these letters saying, "We have an office pool. We've all chipped in $5 trying to bet what day you're going to die on. Pleas die on October 20, because then I'll win the 50 bucks." Then someone else from the pool will write in, "I chose February 8, will you…." And that one sort of unnerves me. Most of them I just know are evil, toxic people and I don't let it poison me. They're sick. I'm ill, but they're sick. That's how I see it.

On a spiritual level, being outspoken about having AIDS has been profound. My life has been filled with love over this, not hate, and I think I'm very blessed for that. I know that's not the experience of many other people, and I'm very aware of that and don't try to have my experience color the fact that we have so much work to do in America. There's three folks dealing with AIDS in Oklahoma. There's two fabulous women running around rural Arkansas trying to educate people about AIDS. And they don't have and ACT UP, they don't have a GMHC, they don't have an APLA.

You know, usually when someone sets up an AIDS service organization the first thing they need is a hotline, so people can call in and get questions answered. And then, maybe an educational outreach program. Then you deal with the complicated issues of delivery of services and AIDS housing. And one guy says "Oh! I'm really glad you mentioned AIDS housing issues." And I'm thinking of Housing works or one of the things you have here [in New York City]. He says, "The other day, when people in my town found out I was HIV positive, they burned my house down." And I thought to myself, Ahh! That is an AIDS housing issue, but it's also not anything I was really even thinking about. And I just realized, yeah, I might be loved and embraced, but people are still having their houses burned down in small towns in America.

We can't skip though this plague, those of us who have some celebrity, based on the fact that we have access to the President or to cocktail parties or to reporters and forget that people are being bombed, beaten to death, losing their jobs, their houses, their families, their children, because they have this virus. And I don't know those people, but I know they're out there, and I have to fight for them. Because nobody else is. And they're not the ones who have the political connections or the power. My house isn't going to get burned down! The President would show up at a press conference and denounce it. But others are. SO there's still so much that needs to be done.

I know so many people in New York City are burned out. They say, "We've worked on this, we've done this," Well, let them go to Wheeling, West Virginia for a week, and they'll say, "Bob, we're inspired! Folks here still don't know how to set up a hot-line. We know how to do that." So even though we might be burned out on more sophisticated political strategies, God, look at the basic

stuff. Condom distribution! Needle distribution! Food banks! Go work on a food bank.

POZ: You said earlier, so much needs to be done on the state and local level, forget Washington.

Hattoy: No, don't forget Washington. There needs to be a really kick-ass lobbying group in Washington that focuses on moving that agenda. But the educational work, the cutting-edge AIDS service providing needs, the taking care of people with AIDS, is out in the streets and the towns and the counties and the cities and the states. It's not in Washington DC. I mean, of course DC has its own AIDS problems, but that's a local issue for DC folks.

You know the religious right is organizing pew by pew by pew, and we're going to cocktail parties in Washington trying to get a picture with Hillary. That's fine, but it's not going to move the agenda at all.

POZ: Who did you want for the AIDS czar job?

Hattoy: I didn't really have any individual candidates, my issue was more what the job was going to be. I wanted it to be answerable to the President. And originally, the AIDS czar was supposed to answer directly to him.

There's some in the community who think we should spend time organizing against Gebbie. But I don't have the time for that. We need to fill in around her. What infuriates me is that those of us with the disease have to become even more creative, even more active. Though, in a way, Kris Gebbie is really an irrelevancy, unless she does something really stupid or destructive.

I feel she doesn't have a sense of vision or an action plan. What she said about AIDS being an educational process what such a wimpy response on her part.

I called her up once about some language she was using. It was something like, "quarantine sexually promiscuous people." I said, "You have to quit talking that way." And she said, "Bob, I know you have a passionate interest in this issue, but it is my job." And I said, "Kristine, I have more than a passing interest in it I may pass away from it."

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