Cheap Veep

At the United Nations, Al Gore scores a PR winner with his walk-on commitment to the global AIDS crisis. According to Doug Ireland, the vice prez is more mouth than money.

April 1, 2000 By Doug Ireland

When U.S. ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke used his January term as the rotating president of the UN Security Council to organize a debate on AIDS, it marked an historic first—never before had the body taken up a public health issue, let alone the HIV pandemic. Speaker after speaker underscored that in Africa, where AIDS causes 20 percent of all deaths and has already killed more people than all the wars on the continent put together, the disease has become a security issue that the world body must urgently address. That was the good news.

However, the council adjourned without taking any specific action on AIDS. When POZ tried to find out what follow-up would implement the impressive rhetoric, Holbrooke declined to be interviewed—but his spokesperson admitted, “We don’t know yet.” So it’s hard not to believe that Holbrooke was motivated more by a desire to boost Al Gore’s presidential fortunes than by concern about AIDS.

Gore’s reputation was tarnished last year by AIDS activists, whose demonstrations called attention to the vice president’s role as a spear-carrier for the pharmaceutical industry when he took the lead in the administration’s use of economic and political blackmail to prevent poor countries from producing cheap versions of medicines on which U.S. drug companies hold patents. The UN Security Council provided Gore with a major forum to refurbish his image in time for the crucial California and New York primaries this March—Gore staffers admitted as much to CNN, noting that they expected the gay vote would constitute 10 to 15 percent of the turnout in those states.

Gore’s speech was impressive on paper, but he read it in a wooden monotone as if seeing it for the first time. His one concrete measure was to announce that the administration will seek another $100 million for the global fight against AIDS. Now, at the same council meeting, UNAIDS director Peter Piot argued that it would take closer to $3 billion to prevent and treat AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa alone. The unconscionably puny nature of the new U.S. aid proposal—especially given the gigantic U.S. budget surplus and Clinton’s proposed $350 billion tax cut—was also underscored the very next day when the administration announced that another $1.6 billion would be allocated to the drug war’s failed policy of military interdiction in Colombia, with most of the money going to that country’s brutal armed forces for use in its civil war.

In fact, little has changed since Gore announced last September that the United States would stop pressuring South Africa to repeal a law authorizing the manufacture and importation of cheap, generic drugs. The administration has continued to work with drug companies to pressure the Philippines, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, among other countries, to abandon similar proposals.

A good example is Pfizer, manufacturer of fluconazole (Diflucan), a treatment for cryptococcal meningitis. The company is one of 40 that are continuing their lawsuit—although it's been "suspended"—against South Africa's government to stop its perfectly legal efforts to make generic drugs available. Why? Pfizer now sells fluconazole in that country (and others where it has exclusive marketing rights) for $14 to $25 per daily dose; in countries with generic versions, such as India and Thailand, doses cost as little as 30 cents a day.

If the Clinton-Gore administration was serious about getting drugs to the dying, it could issue an executive order barring Pfizer and other drug monopolies from getting government grants or procurement contracts unless they stop throwing up barriers to access to meds; it could take drugs developed by government-employed scientists (such as paclitaxel [Taxol], which is used to treat Kaposi's sarcoma) and make them available cheaply through the World Health Organization to poor countries, at no cost to U.S. taxpayers; and it could openly encourage, rather than sneakily frustrate, those countries' efforts to exercise their legitimate national sovereignty through compulsory licensing and parallel importing of low-cost AIDS drugs. Until it does, Gore's PR show at the UN will remain the purest and meanest of hypocrisies.

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