Dubya’s Debut

May 1, 2001 By Doug Ireland

When Bush comes to shove, the GOP is gunning for HIVers, so Doug Ireland advocates ACTing UP again -- and fast.The Bush administration’s initial steps on AIDS are, as one might have expected, frightening. First out of the box was Andrew Card, Bush’s chief of staff, who announced in early February that he was abolishing the White House’s Office of National AIDS Policy. Within 24 hours, after a media barrage signaled that this action would disrupt the Bush “theme of the week” press plan, the administration reversed itself. Asked at a photo-op about this hasty switch, a backpedalling Bush told reporters, “We’re concerned about AIDS inside our White House” -- remarkable simply because it was the first time Dubya said AIDS aloud in public.

Under Bill Clinton the AIDS office and its misnamed “AIDS czar” had a tiny staff and only minor influence on major AIDS issues, but it did report directly to the president and could occasionally get his attention. This won’t be the case under Bush -- famously not a detail man. Card is “streamlining” the White House staff by subordinating AIDS and all issues here at home to the Domestic Policy Council, which will report directly to him. The chief of staff thus becomes a major player on AIDS, an issue on which Card -- former transportation secretary and chief of staff under Bush père -- has no public record (beyond Daddy Bush’s dismal one). For top staffer on health issues, Card picked Anne Phelps, a senior aide to the GOP’s Bill Frist of Tennessee -- the greedy MD who bought himself a Senate seat with the fortune he’d made in managed care and who has a record of hostility to PWAs. While some in the DC-based AIDS bureaucracies say (off the record) that Phelps “is not as bad as Frist” on AIDS, Bush policies are generally skewed toward business.

That’s reflected in Bush’s aggressive pursuit of the case before the World Trade Organization (initiated under Clinton) targeting Brazil for manufacturing low-cost generic versions of AIDS drugs that it distributes free to many of the 600,000-plus Brazilians with HIV. The U.S. suit against Brazil would decimate this program. “Why hassle Brazil?” asks Jamie Love, director of the Ralph Nader-initiated Consumer Project on Technology. “Because they’re going around the world touting their model for fighting AIDS, and the big drug companies are going ballistic.”

The political center of gravity in the U.S. has shifted so far right since the early Reagan years that the new Health and Human Services Secretary, Tommy Thompson, has an undeserved reputation among the tone-deaf national press corps as a “moderate”: He doesn’t froth at the mouth. But his so-called welfare reform in Wisconsin was labeled “deeply conservative” by the *Washington Post*; 20 percent of Wisconsiners who need HAART weren’t covered for it under his policies; and he’s a states’-rights man who has consistently denounced federal social-service programs as “Disneyland East.” It gets worse: The Bush plan, reported by the *Post* and others, is to bolster Thompson and

other “moderate” cabinet members with subcabinet appointees who are hardline conservatives. It’s these deputy and assistant secretaries who really run their departments, after all. While only a handful of these positions had been filled by press time, the one assistant secretary announced at HHS comes from the office of Oklahoman Don Nickles, the homo- and AIDS-phobic ultraconservative who’s No. 2 in the Senate GOP leadership. That augurs chilly days ahead for HIVers. As for the new Attorney General, John Ashcroft’s Senate voting record was so dreadful that AIDS Action labeled him an “AIDS accelerator” -- but, with the Rehnquist Supreme Court having already eviscerated the Americans with Disabilities Act by ruling it doesn’t apply to the states, what little protection PWAs had against discrimination has been nullified. Bush’s budget proposal contains a $900 million shortfall in HHS funding, which means existing AIDS programs risk being slashed. To help finance his trillion-and-a-half-dollar tax cut, Bush is already scaling back his campaign promises to increase the defense budget. If the puissant military-industrial complex can’t prevent funding cuts, what hope is there for comparatively feeble AIDS advocates even to maintain current spending levels? To get more than smoke and mirrors out of this administration, the AIDS community will have to fight tooth and nail. This means that HIVers must return to their activist roots. There’s no time to waste.

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