Enigma of the People

Prez wannabe Bill Bradley dropped the ball on AIDS

August 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

Former New Jersey Sen. Bill Bradley is the only Democrat left who's challenging Al Gore in next year's presidential primaries, and recently he has become a media darling, receiving powder-puff coverage of his record. But with Gore sinking like a stone in polls when pitted against likely Republican opponents, it's time to take a closer look at how the ex–basketball star and Princeton-educated egghead has acted on AIDS and gay issues since entering public life.

This is easier said than done. Check out his website (www.billbradley.com)—there's not a single word about AIDS. Ask Bradley's press secretary, Eric Houser, about Dollar Bill's positions on any of the current hot issues—from needle exchange and medical marijuana to Jesse Jackson Jr.'s HOPE for Africa bill or Ron Dellums' "Marshall Plan" for AIDS in Africa—and he'll tell you the candidate "is not taking positions on specific legislation" at this time. Ask if Bradley has ever met with community leaders on AIDS or gay issues, and Houser says yes—but follow up with "When?" and "With whom?" and the answer is that those were "private meetings," so no names can be provided. Has Bradley ever had an openly gay or HIV positive staff member? Houser replies in shocked tones that he doesn't know because "we don't ask about people's sex lives in order to protect them." Ask who advises Bradley on AIDS issues, or whether he has any prominent openly gay supporters, and his campaign spokesperson again draws a blank. (He does have at least one, according to *The Seattle Gay News*: Washington's only openly gay state legislator, liberal Democrat Ed Murray.)

Although Bradley has been mostly silent on AIDS issues, in the Senate he did consistently vote for AIDS funding. But that's about it (and a relatively passive act at that): He dropped the ball on other occasions. In 1991, he voted for a Jesse Helms amendment criminalizing HIV positive health care providers who perform invasive medical procedures, and he refrained from cosponsoring reauthorization of the Ryan White Act in 1996. (He voted for it eventually.)

New Jerseyans, who know Bradley best, are decidedly lukewarm. "We had much more contact with [New Jersey Democratic Sen. Frank] Lautenberg's office," says Ricki Jacobs of the Hyacinth Foundation, a major Jersey AIDS service provider. "Bradley and his office just didn't reach out and touch someone on our issues." At the AIDS Coalition of Southern New Jersey, no one can remember dealing with either Bradley or his office. Gina Reise, executive director of the New Jersey Gay and Lesbian Coalition, says, "I don't think we ever had a relationship with Bradley. We

put out a voters' guide each year with responses to our questionnaire, and we have nothing on record from him at all."

Connie Gilbert, a veteran activist who spearheaded the successful campaign for New Jersey's gay civil rights bill, says, "I don't have a whole lot of good to say about Bradley. I don't have a whole lot of bad, either," noting that Bradley never endorsed the state bill. "He's a master at ducking a statement of absolute commitment."

And Ed Martone, who ran the New Jersey branch of the American Civil Liberties Union from 1984 to 1998, says, "It bothers me that for years after the introduction of the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act [ENDA]—even after most Democrats in New Jersey had cosponsored it, and both Republicans and Democrats voted to protect gay civil rights on a state level, and it was proven safe to take a position without political damage—he refused to cosponsor ENDA until after he announced in 1994 that he would not seek reelection. And each time I asked him, repeatedly, he'd say, 'I've never heard about that bill before.'"

In fairness to Bradley, his campaign is just beginning, and as his press secretary points out, Gore has the whole federal government churning out positions and research for him. Still, it's remarkable that after two weeks of digging for anything Bradley has ever said publicly on AIDS, all his campaign could supply were two three-paragraph statements from *The Congressional Record* endorsing AIDS funding—one from 1983 and one from 1990. That's a meager harvest after 18 years in the Senate. (Bradley's campaign promises that he'll release policy positions, including one on AIDS, "in the fall.")

But, whatever capacity for real leadership the ex-senator possesses, he has not yet deployed it on our behalf—and it's clear from this record that the education of Bill Bradley on AIDS and gay issues has hardly even begun.

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