Let’s Roll...Back!

Bush has stacked his AIDS council with anti-condom crusaders. Doug Ireland asks if a War on Safe Sex is the new terrorism.

April 1, 2002 By Doug Ireland

President Bush’s failure to mention the AIDS crisis in his State of the Union speech symbolizes his administration’s sickening record on the epidemic. Bush has sabotaged the UN’s global AIDS fund by pledging a pitiful $200 million. He’s also flatlined spending for the Ryan White Care Act and other AIDS programs and scuttled prevention by increasing the budget for the failed policy of abstinence-only sex education by 33 percent.

The latest outrage: Bush’s picks for the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS, or PACHA. As co-chairs, he named former Rep. Tom Coburn, R-Oklahoma, (*see middle condom, at right* [image not available]) and Louis Sullivan, MD (*see right condom* [image not available]) his father’s Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary. As a leading voice for the House GOP on health matters, Coburn, also an MD, called for firing the head of the CDC for supporting condom use, pushed for mandatory names-reporting legislation and voted to cut funds for the Housing for People With AIDS (HoPWA) program. As *The San Francisco Chronicle* editorialized, he “is the sort of hard-line ideologue whose narrow views should disqualify him from any role in designing federal policy.” Sullivan, nearly invisible as HHS head, was noted for extending the ban on entry into the country by HIVers. At the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco in 1990, Sullivan distinguished himself by making a speech urging gay men and the HIV positive to stop having sex. As the council’s executive director, Bush last November chose Patricia Ware (*see left condom* [image not available]), a backer of homophobe Alan Keyes’ presidential campaign and the ex-head of Americans for a Sound HIV/AIDS Policy, whose principle function was to support abstinence-only prevention while lobbying against including HIV in the Americans With Disabilities Act.

It took a year for Bush to fill the council vacancies, and now he’s stacked it with a bevy of docile Republican political ops and campaign contributors with little background in AIDS, Christian-right hacks and world-class bigots. This is clearly a cynical strategy to pander to the GOP’s most reactionary elements while trying, on the one hand, to co-opt an ever-larger segment of the gay community through a few symbolic but meaningless appointments and, on the other hand, to sow divisiveness between black and gay HIVers by tapping a notable number of African Americans who are outspoken in their calls to defund AIDS groups that “promote homo-sexuality.” Further, only three of the 35 Bush appointees have HIV, and none is a researcher. Consider, for example, Rashida Jolley, a college student and former Miss District of Columbia who travels with other beauty-contest winners for Project Reality; Joe McIlaney, MD, co-author of *The Myth of Safe Sex*;

and Dandrick Morton, whose AIDS expertise consists exclusively of traveling with his mother Thelma's group, Prim 'N Proper/Excel -- anti-condom crusaders all. Says ACT UP/Philadelphia's Asia Russell, "Bush has fulfilled our worst nightmares -- it's as if he's declared PWAs public enemy No. 1." Under Clinton, PACHA nearly imploded over the issue of needle exchange, with some members threatening to resign when the administration failed to lift the ban. With his new PACHA posse creating controversy out of condoms, Bush is rolling back AIDS policy to the mid-'80s.

Moreover, Bush has yet to name a leader either at the Food and Drug Administration, which approves all new AIDS drugs, or at the National Institutes of Health, which oversees the federal AIDS research agenda. Nor has he announced a replacement for departing Surgeon General David Satcher, a Clinton holdover whose safe-sex support has made him *persona non grata* in the Bush White House. As Rep. Barney Frank, the openly gay Massachusetts Democrat, told *POZ*, "What's really going on is Bush's decision to neglect the public health sector in order to finance his [$1.3 trillion] tax cuts for the wealthy." Frank argues that it's time for HIVers to join the national debate over budget priorities and build coalitions on public health issues. But the AIDS Action Council, the Capitol voice of our ASOs, has refused to challenge Bush openly. Its declaration to *The Washington Post* that Coburn was "hard to hate" because he sponsored the Ryan White bill is evidence of the narrow turf-protecting mentality that infects institutionalized AIDS leadership -- which Frank dismisses contemptuously as "AIDS Inc." Until this changes, there will be little hope of increasing government health spending so desperately needed to save lives and little chance that national AIDS policies will be driven by expertise and commitment instead of bigotry and base electoral calculations.

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