Missing in Action

Bush's new gay AIDS head is out of sight, out of mind. Doug Ireland asks, Czar No. 4, where are you?

August 1, 2001 By Doug Ireland

Just how blank is Dubya's mind when it comes to the epidemic? Consider this Los Angeles Times report: At April's trade summit in Quebec, when AIDS appeared in the prepared text of his speech, Bush did not pronounce the acronym as most sentient beings would (rhymes with blades) but spelled it out, A-I-D-S. That suggests what a tough time the new director of the White House Office of National AIDS Policy, Scott Evertz, is in for as he tries to make a dent in the presidential consciousness. Is Evertz up to the task?

Although Evertz is openly gay, he's no liberal. And as the Roman Catholic son of a Marine, Evertz is about the most conservative gay the Bushies could have unearthed for the post. His fellow Wisconsinite, GOP ex-Rep. Steve Gunderson, calls Evertz "a pro-life Republican who is as committed to faith-based institutions and conservative politics as you are going to find." Evertz has made his career as a full-time fund-raiser, primarily for religious institutions, including a stint working for Wisconsin Right to Life. But it's his deep involvement in Republican politics, not his AIDS experience, that got him his new job. Evertz had been president of the Wisconsin Log Cabin Republicans (LCR) for three years at the time of his appointment, had raised money for the party and was a stalwart supporter of GOP ex-Gov. Tommy Thompson, now Bush's Secretary of Health and Human Services.

A year ago, Evertz was one of the "Austin 12," the group of handpicked gay Bush supporters allowed an audience with Candidate Shrub, in an attempt to defuse criticism of his refusal to meet with the LCR nationals. Mark Pocan, a gay Democratic member of the Wisconsin state legislature, says his state's Log Cabins "are one of the most conservative in the country. I call them Uncle Tom Cabins. They've taken extremist positions"—such as opposing Vermont-style civil unions—and "have done more to work against gay interests than any other LCR in America."

Patrick Prudlow, a Wisconsin LCR board member, calls Evertz "very diplomatic" (an assessment echoed by several local AIDS workers), adding that Evertz and his fellow LCRs "have a tendency to work with people in power without trying to do things quickly." The staffers of Wisconsin's AIDS service organizations—dependent on HHS head Thompson and the feds for funding—say that Evertz is "compassionate and caring," and even a critic like Pocan calls Evertz "a decent person" and "well intentioned—within his worldview."

But local lip-service aside, Evertz clearly lacks the profile of an advocate likely to make waves for HIV prevention and treatment. POZ sought to ask Evertz himself about his views, but after many requests for an interview, the White House press office refused, saying Evertz wouldn't be doing any media "for at least a couple of months"—the Bushies are no doubt keeping him under wraps until they can drum the party line into his head.

Given the administration's track record on AIDS, it's hard to see Evertz's appointment as anything but tokenism and cosmetics designed to defang any criticism of Bush's AIDS policies from national gay groups. And so far, it's working. Bush's first budget essentially flat-lined domestic AIDS spending, and in response to the United Nations' call for a $4 billion global fund for AIDS (a lowball figure—most experts estimate $10 billion minimum), Bush is contributing a paltry $200 million. From the world's richest nation that just cut its taxes by the largest amount ever, that sum is scandalously small.

Andrew Natsios, Bush's head of the U.S. Agency for International Development, argues that the fund's money should go to prevention efforts only—not to provide AIDS drugs for developing nations. He told The Boston Globe, "You have to take these drugs a certain number of hours each day or they don't work. Many people in Africa have never seen a clock or a watch their entire lives. And if you say,

1 o'clock in the afternoon, they do not know what you are talking about. They know morning, they know noon, they know evening, they know the darkness at night." An unnamed Treasury official also told The New York Times that Africans lacked the necessary "concept of time." Only one word describes this sort of nonsense: racism.

Yet any expectations of effective AIDS prevention efforts from Bush will be dashed on the rocks of one of his re-election strategies—appealing to the Catholic vote, which Dubya had trouble with last year after his appearance at anti-Catholic and anti-gay Bob Jones University. (The Catholic Church's opposition to condom use is well known.)

Perhaps Evertz's conscience (there is no word on his serostatus) will lead him to surprise us as he confronts the ever-rising numbers of new HIV infections—but don't hold your breath.

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