PACHA Gotcha

June 1, 2002 By Kai Wright

Be careful what you wish for. A year ago, when Bush was poised to disband his Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS (PACHA), advocates made angry noises. So the administration demurred -- and began quietly ushering foxes into the hen house. Now, HIVers are nervously waiting for the feathers to fly and their worst fears to be confirmed.

Yet at PACHA's March 14 inaugural meeting, love was in the air. Co-chair Tom Coburn, MD, held his typically reactionary tongue for two days, and the nine Clinton-era reappointments -- led by the rabble-rousing former chair Ron Dellums -- were on their best behavior, too. White House AIDS czar Scott Evertz served up his now-rote "we're such good friends" speech. Pfizer CEO Hank McKinnell (one of Bush's 25 new appointees) even made a point of bemoaning the dearth of treatment activists. Co-chair Louis Sullivan, MD, meanwhile, appeared ready to play good cop to Coburn's bad, eagerly endorsing a Clinton holdover's request that former Surgeon General David Satcher's "controversial" recent sex-ed report be distributed to members.

But Dellums and his crew's presentation of the previous council's closing report foreshadowed divisive battles ahead. The Clintonites declared their intention to put the brakes on the new council's rush to re-open long-settled debates -- such as whether or not condoms have a role in prevention. Coburn politely welcomed the report, pausing only to note that "the vast majority [of it], I wouldn't concur with personally." The new members, who sat quietly throughout the meeting, likely wouldn't, either. As the former Miss District of Columbia said when introducing herself, "I'm Rashida Jolley, and I'm here to talk about abstinence."

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