Party Politics

AIDS Leaders Toast Bush's Anti-Condom Advisors While Foiling Community Offe*nsive*

June 1, 2002 By Benjamin Ryan

Mounting their first offensive against President Bush's perceived rollback of PWA-friendly policies, the nation's top AIDS service organizations (ASOs) recently released a joint report criticizing his administration's actions, or lack thereof. Delivered March 13, the day before the first meeting of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS, or PACHA (see "PACHA Gotcha"), the press release-*cum*-report card echoed the strong-arm rhetoric of Reagan-era AIDS advocacy, pointing out that 59 percent of HIVers remain untreated and pointedly calling AIDS "an issue of homeland security." But given that the next day beltway-biggies AIDS Action Council (AAC) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) threw a party (see photo, above [image not available]) to welcome the new PACHA appointees -- most of whom are anti-condom, and some of whom have homophobic rhetoric -- is where the resemblance likely ends. For while in 1987, 64 leaders of the nation's top ASOs and gay groups went so far as to commit civil disobedience at the White House, 15 years later their successors are unable even to organize a joint press conference.

The coalition's e-mail thread, leaked to *POZ* by one participant, reveals a planning process nearly crippled by disagreements between regional organizations pushing for a pull-no-punches report and AAC and HRC, which stepped in at the 11th hour in an attempt to blunt, even sabotage, the coalition's show of strength. The "Dear President" letter rebuked Bush for underfunding such key programs as the Ryan White CARE Act and the UN's Global Fund to Fight AIDS; for undermining HIV prevention; and for failing to show leadership and fill key posts at federal health agencies. The accompanying report card awarded W. a slew of Cs and Ds (plus a safe-sex F), and the media a handy headline: "Bush Administration Not Making the Grade on AIDS." With 33 co-signing groups (a virtual *Who's Who* of AIDS advocacy), glaringly absent were AAC, the HRC and the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR).

The idea to project a "united front" was launched in February in response to Bush's PACHA co-chair appointment of Tom Coburn, the ex-congressman whose AIDS platform famously includes names reporting and mandatory testing and excludes distribution of condoms and clean needles. amfAR, engaged early on, ducked out before things got ugly. (The organization declined to comment for this story.) Then, less than a week before the planned press conference, the previously uninvolved AAC and HRC stepped in to try to negotiate a less confrontational approach. On March 12, AAC sent a joint e-mail with the National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC) proposing to delay the letter, purportedly to gain time to iron out differences.

But Terje Anderson, ED of the National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA), called their bluff. Writing that he was "very troubled" by their intervention, he not-so-subtly insinuated that the two groups were fabricating a lack of consensus in order to abort the coalition's offensive. "Being frozen in inaction when the administration is pursuing deadly AIDS policies is not an appropriate strategy," Anderson e-mailed. "I am especially appalled at this attempt to pull the plug on this activity... the day before a 10 a.m. press conference." Anderson, along with the majority, felt that timing the report with PACHA's meeting was essential. "My T cells continue to fall and I simply don't have the patience for playing games with the lives of my friends and myself," he concluded. "We all know what needs to be done. Let's have the backbone to do it!"

An e-mail response from HRC Senior Policy Analyst Christopher Labonte explained that his organization was backing out because it feared that the report would "close off any potential communications with the White House... [and] severely damage relationships that we have built up with congressional Republicans." This retreat was met, in turn, by e-mails accusing HRC and AAC of kissing up to the powerful rather than promoting effective AIDS policies. Demoralized and in disarray, the coalition had already nixed the DC press conference. As a result, media coverage of their faxed offensive was minimal.

While NMAC did, in the end, sign on to the letter, AAC, which repeatedly refused to comment for this article, did not. HRC then released its own, decidedly more polite press release on March 14. That night, HRC and AAC co-hosted a DC cocktail reception for the new PACHA board, raising in some minds the obvious question of whether the two groups had been negotiating in bad faith all along. While some of the local constituencies attended, many had no knowledge of the event.

Labonte insisted that planning the party did not play into HRC's decision not to sign the letter. "A critical part of getting an advocate's message out is talking to the people who are making the decisions," he said. "It's not that we're kow-towing to Republicans or not calling a spade a spade.... We just have different approaches." HRC has to strike a careful balance with both Democrats and Republicans, Labonte noted.

Indeed, many ASO reps made a point of telling *POZ* that the AIDS movement has always depended on a range of strategies, from militancy to meet-and-greets. However, when pressed, a number gave voice to the rancor so apparent in the e-mail exchanges.

At the very least, AAC and HRC's sudden defection left other AIDS leaders grumbling that the community's biggest, richest reps are more indebted to Republicans than to their own constituents. Most glaring is AAC, whose mission is to serve as the national lobbyist for regional ASOs. At issue is the stability and effectiveness of an agency plagued by financial and organizational turmoil, and on its third ED in the past 12 months.

The lost opportunity for a "united front" was especially distressing to organizers, given that they view Bush as pressing his AIDS agenda into the service of his Christian-right constituency. ASO reps who enjoyed rubbing elbows with Clinton insiders complain of a remarkable lack of access to high-level Bushies. Even worse, said David Munar, associate director of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, the White House is "not friendly to the [ideological] diversity that is the HIV/AIDS

community.” “We are having to realign and do something we didn’t do for eight years,” Munar said. “And we’re starting to appreciate that it looks like we’re undermining each other. For me [the process] was a wake-up call about how we need to change the way we communicate to the administration.”

Nothing summarizes more starkly the sad state of AIDS Inc. than an e-mail from Ronald Johnson, the HIV positive associate executive director at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, which led the “rock the boat” flank. “This process says volumes as to where we are as a ’community,’” the typically tight-lipped administrator wrote. “Given the urgency…we need to address how we work together. The stakes are way too high for us to ever be in this situation again. Our enemies (and yes, we have enemies) won’t need to walk over us, we’re doing it ourselves.”

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