Patriot Games

Star Wars eclipses war on AIDS in Clinton's 2000 budget

June 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

Is military spending an AIDS issue? You bet. That's the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the federal budget proposed by Bill Clinton for fiscal year 2000. The president's plan in essence flattened domestic spending on most AIDS programs and made serious cuts in international aid programs for HIV—while calling for huge new increases in Pentagon pork. (At press time, the administration and GOP-controlled House were working on a compromise budget deal; the House's plan ultimately differed little from Clinton's.)

The Clinton budget proposed only a token increase of $9 million in the $666 million spent on HIV prevention in fiscal 1999 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an increase below the rate of inflation. Any doubt that funding for prevention is woefully inadequate should have been removed by a recent CDC study showing a 30 percent jump in unprotected anal intercourse among men over the past three years in San Francisco, arguably the AIDS-education capital of the world. With people younger than 25 making up half of the 40,000 new HIV infections each year, AIDS Action Council's executive director, Daniel Zingale, growls that "continued prevention paralysis puts the younger, 'Chelsea' generation at risk for a new AIDS epidemic."

Other domestic AIDS programs didn't fare much better under Clinton's proposal. The $1.4 billion Ryan White CARE pot got a measly $100 million increase, far less than the $261 million in new spending that even the Republican-controlled Congress provided last year. The $225 million HOPWA (Housing for People With AIDS) program got only $15 million more, an amount insufficient to cover the growing needs of big cities like New York, not only because people with AIDS are living longer and thus requiring more housing, but also because the epidemic is increasingly hitting poor people whose housing options are few.

Clinton's pledge on World AIDS Day to increase U.S. support for the international fight against HIV turned out to be just one more lie from the Prevaricator-in-Chief: The paltry $679 million that the world's richest country currently spends on AIDS in developing nations—where 90 percent of the world's HIV population lives—got cut by almost 8 percent in the new Clinton budget.

At the same time, Clinton asked for the biggest dollar increase in Pentagon spending since the Reagan years. Although Defense Secretary William Cohen and the other administration shills for the brass hats have been trying to sell this hypo of cash as necessary to boost the pay of those in

uniform, that, too, is a whopper. As Bill Hartung, a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute, notes: “Spending on military procurement from now to 2005 will increase by 53 percent, while the boost in salaries and benefits for personnel is only 22 percent. Readiness and troops are the bait, but the administration is slipping the bulk of the funds to the military contractors. This increase is not a response to threats in the world—it’s a response to perceived political threats to Clinton and Al Gore.” No wonder military-industrial stocks posted dramatic increases on Wall Street after Clinton announced his budget.

In the post–Cold War era, there’s plenty of room for cuts in the $260 billion already spent annually by the Pentagon. That amount was more than double the combined military budgets of every conceivable U.S. adversary, *before* Clinton’s proposed $110 billion, five-year increase. The administration even wanted to spend $6.6 billion on the illusory Star Wars missile defense program, championed by Reagan, on which we’ve already wasted $60 billion without producing a single weapon. Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank, a Democrat, is one of those who sees Pentagon boondoggling as an AIDS issue. “I’ve been very disappointed in the attitude of many AIDS groups who won’t help us on budget priorities. They want to buy out of the overall fight,” says the openly gay congressman, adding that it’s unrealistic to expect any increase in AIDS spending commensurate with the crisis as long as the defense budget remains untouchable. California Democrat Ron Dellums, a former rep and House Armed Services Committee chairman, has called for a “Marshall Plan for AIDS” to fight the explosion of HIV in Africa and minority communities. That, too, will go nowhere if arms spending stays at current levels.

It’s time for the AIDS community to become politically mature, recognize that all successful coalitions are based on mutual self-interest and join the Progressive Caucus in Congress on the budget priorities debate. Cutting just one nuclear submarine from the unneeded new fleet proposed by Clinton would free up enough money to nearly double all AIDS spending. Put another way, we can have a real war on AIDS, or we can have Star Wars. The choice, for us, is crystal clear.

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