Primary Concerns

Clinton’s history. Who will disappoint us now?

March 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

It’s none too soon for the AIDS community to begin thinking about presidential politics for the year 2000: For a variety of reasons, it’s going to be even more difficult than usual for HIV-related issues to get a serious airing in the millennial contest for Bill Clinton’s successor.

For one thing, in the wake of the impeachment process our timid political nabobs are certain to be very chary about taking on issues even tangentially related to sexual conduct, and both major political parties will continue to try to outdo each other in “family values” rhetoric.

But it is the impending changes in the political calendar—which will likely compress dates of presidential primaries and make the later ones virtually meaningless—that now command urgent attention. Not only has California moved its presidential primary to the beginning of March, but the creation of a Western states Super Tuesday primary in the same time frame is (as of this writing) almost a done deal. Add in the Delaware and the New York primaries, and the contest for presidential nominations in both parties will effectively be over by mid-March.

This abbreviated primary season means that the process becomes more money-intensive than ever. Unlike in small early-voting states like New Hampshire and Iowa—where people-to-people retail campaigning allowed little-known candidates like Eugene McCarthy, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton to make breakthroughs in the past—television is the only real way to campaign in the Big Enchilada of California, and across the vast expanses of the Western states. Thus, to be a serious player in this truncated process, a candidate must be able to raise a minimum of $22 million, or $50,000 a day, between now and the first selection of convention delegates for 2000 in the Iowa caucuses. So if activists want to flush out the candidates’ positions on AIDS, let alone attempt to influence those positions, they need to jump into the process this year, and as early as possible.

None of the potential GOP candidates will be remotely acceptable on AIDS. On the Democratic side, there are currently three options for those looking for an alternative to the abysmal record of the Clinton/Gore administration on AIDS issues [See September 1998 Public Eye, “Spin and Needles”]. One, Minnesota Sen. Paul Wellstone, an engaging populist, has a decent voting record regarding AIDS, but he turned off many in the gay community when he voted for the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) to give himself cover in his ’96 reelection campaign. Moreover, he’s relying on direct-mail contributions to finance his effort, and the response so far has been woefully

inadequate, so it’s unlikely he’ll be a factor in the primaries. Then there’s former Sen. Bill Bradley from New Jersey: Intelligent but aloof, he’s another DOMA supporter. His family-oriented campaign rhetoric makes it improbable that he’ll say anything bold on AIDS issues, and most party insiders think he’ll have a tough time raising money (at the beginning of the year, he still didn’t have a finance chairman). Bradley’s chances of wresting the Democratic nomination from the hypocritical Al Gore—who has raised loads of money from the gay community but has done precious little for it—are quite slim.

At this point, the one real potential hope for the AIDS community is Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, who has already made campaign forays into neighboring New Hampshire and is seriously considering a race. Kerry’s wife, Teresa—the widow of the late Pennsylvania GOP Sen. John Heinz, the ketchup heir—is worth nearly $1 billion, so money wouldn’t be a problem if he runs. A social liberal and an economic moderate, Kerry often comes across as stiff and pompous. But he has been a real leader in the Senate on both AIDS-related and gay issues. Not only has he played a key role (with Ted Kennedy) in securing more funding for AIDS programs such as the Ryan White grants than Clinton/Gore requested, he has spoken out regularly against Christian right initiatives in the House, like the assaults on the Housing for People with AIDS programs. In addition, Kerry has openly gay staff in both his Washington and home-state offices. His voting record on AIDS and gay issues (anti-DOMA, for example) is impeccable. Pushing Kerry to run may be the AIDS community’s best opportunity to break into the 2000 debate.

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