Raising Lazio

November 1, 2000 By Doug Allen

The HIV dissident movement may prove to be an unlikely but deciding factor in the highest-profile congressional race of this year's election. In July, New York City newspapers reported that Rep. Rick Lazio (R-NY) -- in a nasty neck-and-neck with First Lady Hillary Clinton for New York's open Senate seat -- wrote a letter to the chair of the House Appropriations subcommittee requesting $2.5 million for veteran viral naysayers The Group for the Scientific Reappraisal of the HIV Hypothesis of AIDS. At a press briefing, Clinton said she was "shocked" to hear of Lazio's assistance. "It shows how out of touch he is with the mainstream of New York," she said.

For weeks afterward, the Lazio camp defended his actions, claiming that he had only wanted to help the group as constituents and "AIDS sufferers." They pointed out that even AIDS agitators Housing Works acknowledged his HOPWA advocacy. But Clinton campaign spokesperson Howard Wolfson said the damage goes deeper. "It displayed a real ignorance of the issue," he said. "It's unfortunate that Lazio's campaign doesn't just admit it's a terrible mistake and apologize for it."

Some AIDS activists, however, said accusations that Lazio actually supports the denialist position are probably unfounded, with one explaining Lazio is "not a genius -- or even a very smart guy." (The activist, who works for an agency that receives federal funds for which Lazio must vote, asked not to be identified.) Although recently slammed for voting against international pediatric AIDS funding, he got a congressional voting score of 60 percent last year from the Washington, DC-based advocacy group AIDS Action. "For a Republican, that's pretty good," said AIDS Action's Denis Dison. "But if he knew about the dissidents' beliefs and still did this, then it's complete recklessness. I think it's probably bad staff work."

A Lazio staffer confirmed this scenario, telling *POZ* that Lazio didn't even know about the group *or* the letter when it was originally sent. "Congressional staffs are small and overworked," said the source, noting that some 200 similar requests are made each year by the representative. No one from Lazio's office itself would speak on the record about the issue.

Missing the chance to diss the dissidents when they had the chance may be the most lasting result of the whole mess, one of the only times AIDS has been mentioned at all in this race. Said Dison, "Instead of saying they made a mistake -- which I think people would understand -- they're complicating matters by toeing the denialist party line, saying their voices should be heard."

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