S.O.S.—September 1999

The moral of this story? Activism still works, and needs you.

September 1, 1999 By Sean Strub

Anyone who thinks AIDS activism is either dead or no longer effective need only look at Vice President Al Gore's recent ill-fated entry into African AIDS policy-making—and the storm of media coverage around it—and think again. As documented in a leaked State Department report, Gore exerted intense pressure on South Africa over the past year to rescind legislation that would enable that AIDS-beleaguered country to get drugs to PWAs at a vastly lower cost than buying them directly from U.S. companies.

International trade agreements allow the South African government's steps, but the United States is cavalierly ignoring that fact and relying on its immense global power—as exhibited in Gore's demands last year during a meeting with South Africa's then–Deputy President (now President) Thabo Mbeki. Brutally valuing corporate profits over human lives is not a novel approach for the U.S. government, but it usually passes largely unnoticed. Call it xenophobia, racism, whatever—few Americans consider how our government's policies impact lives elsewhere around the globe.

But this is different, because a few dedicated AIDS activists have made it an issue. A political issue. A media issue. *An AIDS issue.* I doubt if Gore or his senior advisors—several of them former drug company executives or lobbyists—seriously considered the health ramifications of their bullying, let alone that there might be a political price to pay.

But there is. When the activists made their move, they did so strategically: at Gore's presidential campaign announcements in June, interrupting or picketing at least seven events in six states, including staging a 400-strong march in Philadelphia. The poobahs of the Gore campaign were apoplectic. They were angry that "this wasn't on their radar screen" and that "no one told them about this issue," as well as embarrassed by their campaign's political naiveté.

When Gore's role was first detailed in a story in *The Washington Post*, the Human Rights Campaign, the richest gay lobbying group, downplayed the issue and criticized the protesters. "To single out the vice president is not fair," said spokesperson David Smith, who should know better. Soon Daniel Zingale, director of the AIDS Action Council, another inside-the-beltway lobby group, was issuing similar go-along-to-get-along sentiments.

The Congressional Black Caucus requested an explanation from the VP. Gore responded post haste—being branded anti-PWA or anti-African isn't exactly his campaign strategy—assuring the caucus in a letter that he supports South Africa's right to establish compulsory licensing and parallel importing if the legislation is modified to meet the United States' interpretation of the trade agreements. In essence, an empty reassurance.

The issue has thrust international AIDS issues into the spotlight of a U.S. presidential campaign at a time when both observers and advocates agreed that AIDS was likely to be a nonissue in the 2000 race.The moral of this yet-unfolding episode? *AIDS activism is alive, it works, and it needs you.*

And me, too. The temptation to take a leave of absence from the frontlines of activism is, for most of us, strong and, as I wrote last month, sometimes necessary. But despite the very human need to take care of oneself, we also have an equal responsibility to take care of others and work for justice. We all owe a debt of gratitude to those who bird-dogged this issue to public attention. What PWA didn't feel a rush of pride at the news clips of the protesters waving "AIDS" signs and stealing Gore's photo-op to remind Americans that the epidemic is not over? In 1988 and especially in 1992, AIDS activists hijacked the high-profile, long-running presidential campaigns and national conventions to force the candidates to address the issue on an almost-daily basis. The race for the White House in 2000 presents the same opportunity, and these protests are a good start toward seizing it. (To help to do this, starting in the new *POZ* in November, Doug Ireland will be writing a monthly "Campaign 2000" column, asking candidates hard questions about AIDS.)

Join those calling on Gore to stop undermining South Africa's efforts to obtain inexpensive HIV meds. For more information on the Health GAP (Global Access Project) Coalition, which is coordinating the campaign for global access to HIV treatment, contact the AIDS Treatment Data Network, the website at www.healthgap.org. To the Clinton/Gore administration, this is a "trade dispute," as though it was a debate over how many pairs of Nikes to import. But the activists know that it is about life and death, about human dignity and about justice.

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