Security Risk

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Four months after a CIA study of the impact of the global AIDS epidemic was released, The Washington Post broke the story in late April that the White House had classified HIV a threat to U.S. national security. A new inter-administration task force has been launched to begin to coordinate international relief efforts as a response, though it appears that federal agencies are feuding over which will lead the charge.

This may be a first in U.S. history, but with the doomsday projections of the CIA report (available at www.cia.gov), it's not a surprise. According to the CIA, the staggering levels of infection and high death rates in developing countries could destabilize governments, impoverish military, stunt economic growth, slash life expectancy and shatter family structures—potentially triggering civil wars and revolutions. By their reckoning, without substantial U.S. aid, the situation will likely worsen in the next decade before the death rate begins to "decrease fitfully."

Though the National Security Council (NSC)—which acts on CIA information—has been studying AIDS' impact for more than two years, White House spokesperson Joe Lockhart said that it was only after a first-ever UN assembly on the topic and the release of the CIA report, both in January, that a request was made to double the agency's AIDS budget to $254 million. That figure is "at or above the entire budget" of some countries that will be helped, Lockhart said.

Still, the Post called it "a sum surpassed…by drone aircraft in the Pentagon budget," and quoted senior administration officials who argued for $2 billion. Lockhart said the allocation was meant to spur other countries to up their contributions.

Still unclear in early May was just who would be the administration's point person. Likely candidates include a rep from the NSC or AIDS czar Sandra Thurman, who, said the Post, was so unused to dealing with intelligence officials that she got lost trying to find the Situation Room for a task-force meeting. Larry Kessler, head of Boston's AIDS Action, expressed concern that the NSC was exactly the wrong place to lay power: "Many of the early 'solutions' to the epidemic proposed in this country were flagrantly abusive of human rights. The job is too important and delicate to be put in the hands of military strategists." Many Hill watchers said that only direct presidential involvement would give the task force legs.

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