Sleeping With the Enemy

AIDS diva Michael Petrelis and Sen. Tom Coburn—together at last

April 1, 2006 By Michael Petrelis

If you had told me before 1998 that I'd become a hard-core Republican's bedfellow, I'd have cussed you out. Picture me, little old lefty Michael Petrelis—a San Francisco AIDS activist, as gay as they come—working with someone many in the AIDS community had dubbed "Public Enemy No. 1" for his ruthless HIV initiatives. Yep, I mean Oklahoma senator Tom Coburn, MD. Our political relationship sounds like a *Penthouse Forum* letter: "I always thought your stories were made up, till I had my own mind-blowing experience last night."

An obstetrician who was elected first to the House, in 1994, Coburn has made AIDS a core issue. His nightmare agenda has favored mandatory testing of pregnant women, plus heavy-duty partner tracing and notification. Coburn has always wielded great power, too: When he served in the House, many HIV funding bills slid through his Commerce Committee.

And I adore a man with power.

I phoned his staff in '98 to push *my* core issue then: the six-figure salaries of San Francisco AIDS executives, which I believed hurt PWAs like me. Resources for services like housing subsidies and food programs shrank while management income rose.

I resorted to Coburn after calling my congresswoman, Democratic Rep. (and now minority leader) Nancy Pelosi, who brings home millions in AIDS pork. Her office told me to write the AIDS groups directly, which I'd been doing for years.

My fellow activists were aghast that I would contact Coburn. But I thought I could appeal to his hatred of wasteful spending. As I left a message at his office, I pictured the entire staff howling.

But Coburn's office called back that day. His staff was surprised to hear from a gay man and PWA, let alone one from San Francisco. I explained my discomfort at calling someone who didn't support my communities' demands for equality. They listened in silence. But Coburn soon responded personally, wanting PWAs, not bureaucrats, to get AIDS dollars. I even worked on the one-minute House speech he made on the topic in 1998. Eventually, under fire from PWAs and the local gay press, the executives took cuts.

Visiting Washington for an activist friend's funeral, I dropped in unannounced at Coburn's office to introduce myself. Open and friendly, he shook my hand and expressed sorrow at my friend's passing. I didn't feel an iota of hostility. When I got home, San Francisco activists lined up to paint me as the one with horns.

But over the past eight years, Coburn and I have teamed to improve the Ryan White CARE Act, mandating more funds to direct-care services. We've also joined forces to better track HIV infections, ensuring that funds reach the areas with the greatest current need.

Senator Coburn will be with us for at least four more years. Do we put our energy into finding issues of mutual concern and persuade him to do right by us? Or do we huff and puff and try to blow his desk down?

Sure, it's been hard reconciling my disapproval of many of Coburn's positions—such as his demanding the death penalty for doctors who perform abortions. So whenever he says stuff I find troubling, I call his staff. My opponents will say I'm naive to think that I'm educating them all. But without even knowing it, Coburn has educated me. I've come to realize that sometimes, to achieve what we want and need, activists must take a long, fearless look at "the enemy." Let's risk putting our human faces in front of the Tom Coburns of the world. Let's help them understand why they *should* improve federal AIDS programs. Let's feel the anger, then make it—and them—work for us.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Sleeping-With-the-Enemy-2787-5280