The Right Angle

What will AIDS activists really find behind the Bushes? Doug Ireland gets the inside dope from the Right guy.

June 1, 2001 By Doug Ireland

We are entering a new conservative period in American political and cultural life, which may outlast the Bush administration -- itself already being called “more Reaganite than the Reagan administration” by the head of right-wing think-tank The Heritage Foundation. So I thought it might be illuminating to talk to a conservative *illuminatus* outside government -- and therefore more at liberty to speak frankly -- and outside the Religious Right whose noxious AIDS views are well known (see "Hate Thy Neighbor," *POZ*, June 2000). Many in the AIDS community are acutely aware that what we fear is indeed coming down the pike: in research, say, from cuts in, and controversies over, basic and applied HIV studies at the National Institutes of Health to the exclusion of treatment activists from policymaking at the Office of AIDS Research. But how do the conservatives themselves describe their AIDS agenda?

There is no savvier or better-connected conservative political strategist than Grover Norquist -- “the Lenin of the contemporary Right,” as *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne put it. As the president of the potent political action committee Americans for Tax Reform, since 1993 Norquist has convened a weekly Wednesday morning meeting of more than 100 reps from conservative social, religious and economic groups, business lobbies and key GOP congressional staffers. He’s an old buddy of W’s political mastermind, Karl Rove. When *The New York Times* ran a recent front-pager headlined “Conservatives Savor Their Role as Insiders at the White House,” Norquist was featured as the quintessential insider.

Asked if it is true that conservatives think little about AIDS (a Nexis search confirmed only rare or passing mentions of the epidemic in major journals on the Right, the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review*, over the past two years), Norquist readily agrees. “I sense what you do: It doesn’t come up in general strategy meetings these days, or in conservative writings,” he says. (Other leading conservatives such as the *Standard*’s editor, Bill Kristol, declined to be interviewed, saying that he “didn’t know much about AIDS.”) Norquist asserts that he doesn’t believe conservatives are “hostile,” adding that “the AIDS-is-God’s-punishment line isn’t a serious response” for people like him.

Is he under the impression that the domestic AIDS crisis is over? "If you’re getting your information from *Time* and *Newsweek* like I do,“ Norquist tells me, ”the answer is yes.“ When he quickly shifts the topic to the gay vote -- ”the GOP got a quarter of the gay vote for president last year and a

third of the vote for Congress, and smarter people in our coalition aren't writing it off" -- it seems apparent that he still considers HIV a disease overwhelmingly affecting white, middle-class gay men. Asked if he is aware of the changing face of AIDS -- specifically, that the latest numbers show new infections spiking among black and Latina women and black gay men -- Norquist seems genuinely surprised.

"Conservatives are not happy choosing which diseases are politically correct and which get government funding -- breast cancer, diabetes or AIDS, for example," Norquist says. A conservative approach to AIDS, he says, would be based on the free market, not government -- for example, downsizing the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), streamlining drug-approval regulations and possibly cutting back safety and side-effects studies. These measures, he claims, would lower costs for drug companies, and thus free up funds for research. "The government should get out of the R&D business altogether," he says, reciting the usual laissez-faire conservative boilerplate. If the AIDS community wants to discuss the issues with the conservative coalition, Norquist says, "You have to find free-market solutions -- talk to [conservative economics guru] Milton Friedman and those guys." In the late '80s, in fact, ACT UP and congressional conservatives made strange bedfellows in a successful revolution to cut FDA red tape and accelerate approval of experimental AIDS drugs -- a union that saved lives but in the years since has had decidedly mixed results.

Norquist's most unexpected response came on the issue of needle exchange. "Look, I wouldn't be surprised if in 10 years or so you saw the conservative coalition come out for an end to drug prohibition. You've already got guys like George Schultz [Reagan's secretary of state] and the Republican governor of New Mexico [Gary E. Johnson] taking that line. If a conservative politician who's tough on crime could take that position and get re-elected," Norquist says, he believes that there's a "50-50 chance" the dam would break. Ending drug prohibition, of course, would eliminate any need for restrictions on the sale or distribution of syringes and on medical marijuana.

Norquist had not heard of the CIA futurologists' recent report on the year 2015, which forecasts that by then HIV infection rates in Russia, the Indian subcontinent, Central America and the Caribbean basin, among others, could reach 50 percent. That "would be a minor disaster," he ventures. "We were planning on a strong planet. We'll get sucked into massive support programs. We couldn't avoid it -- we didn't after World War II." He also suggests that "we might well get a nativist response, a U.S. that was more isolationist on trade and immigration stuff, although personally I tend to be for open borders."

Finally, asked if he thinks it would be useful to have people knowledgeable about AIDS talk to his weekly coalition meetings, Norquist says, "Some people would think it was a bridge too far, but we've had the ACLU in from time to time." After a pause, he adds, "My answer is yes. Maybe."

All this suggests that the conservative elites are woefully ignorant about the epidemic. Some have been touched personally by AIDS, but they've never seen it in political terms. If Norquist-variety conservatives have no pressing AIDS agenda, that leaves a gaping hole, and the far Right and the fundamentalists are likely to rush in. AIDS angels need not fear to tread: Because the

conservatives are going to be in the saddle for the foreseeable future, this is just the moment for the AIDS community to try to educate them. We shouldn’t expect much -- and we’ll still have to storm the barricades -- but it couldn’t hurt.

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