Veep Show

AIDS-drugs-for-Africa protests dog Gore, divide advocates and drive issue.

October 1, 1999 By Doug Ireland

Vice president Al Gore is in trouble. Not only is Bill Bradley unexpectedly hard on his heels in the race for the 2000 Democratic presidential nomination, but he continues to take heat from some in the AIDS community over his complicity with the pharmaceutical lobbies in the high-profile debate over access to AIDS drugs in poorer countries.

Since June, Gore has been dogged by protesters calling attention to the Clinton administration's use of economic and political blackmail, including trade sanctions, to discourage South Africa and other developing countries from exercising their rights under international trade agreements to manufacture cheap, generic versions of AIDS drugs and other medications (see *POZ*, Public Eye, July 1999). Similar demonstrations by a broad range of South African AIDS, health, religious and labor groups, have taken place outside U.S. consulates in Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa's largest cities. The demonstrators' sense of urgency has been fueled by cold, hard numbers; nearly 23 million people in Africa are already infected with HIV, and UNICEF says that AIDS has now replaced armed conflict as sub-Saharan Africa's No. 1 killer, taking 1.4 million lives in 1998 alone.

Gore is targeted not only because he is the administration's second-in-command, but because since early 1997 he has been personally involved in bullying South Africa on the AIDS drugs issue as co-chair of the U.S./South Africa Binational Commission, which deals with trade and aid issues. Israel, Thailand and India are among other non-African countries that have been similarly pressured by the Clinton administration, whose position mirrors that of the drug companies' mighty Washington lobby, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA).

The ongoing zaps have done what two years of quiet lobbying and information campaigns by consumer and public health groups failed to do: get this life-and-death issue the attention it deserves, thus forcing both the administration and Congress to engage in a public debate about the wisdom and morality of U.S. policy. The demos also exposed fissures among AIDS advocates nationwide—many of whom believe that of all declared candidates for president, Gore remains the most sympathetic to AIDS and gay issues—about how to carry on the the political fight against indifference to AIDS.

Daniel Zingale, executive director of the AIDS Action Council—whose letterhead proclaims it

represents “all Americans affected by HIV/AIDS”—came quickly to Gore’s defense, telling *The Baltimore Sun* that “the vice president is not the culprit, the drug companies are.” He put out a release saying that targeting Gore was like “blaming Roosevelt for the Holocaust.” The Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest gay-rights lobby, also attacked the protests.

Many in the AIDS community were appalled by such attempts to undercut the demonstrators, however. The former chair of AIDS Action Council’s board of directors, Mario Cooper, says, “There comes a time when you have to draw the line on certain issues that transcend politics. For those who pretend to represent people with HIV, what was so insulting and demeaning was that they dismissed out-of-hand the substance of the protest without any sense of the moral questions.”

Even some Gore supporters found criticism of the demonstrators misplaced: Democratic New York State Sen. Tom Duane—the nation’s most senior openly HIV positive elected official—says, “I’m supporting Al Gore for president, but I’m also supporting the demonstrators. They should not be silenced—you don’t let elected officials off the hook just because you think they’re friends.”

What the demonstrations have achieved already is enormous. The publicity forced the administration to have its first-ever meetings with health activists on the issue, and led to an internal debate within the administration that has pitted the well-meaning but powerless Clinton AIDS czar, Sandra Thurman, against the coterie of drug-company lobbyists who surround Gore. (One of many links to the VP: Anthony Podesta, a close friend and advisor to Gore whose brother, John, is White House chief of staff, earns $160,000 a year as a chief lobbyist for PhRMA on patent issues and rakes in another $260,000 to lobby for Genentech, the biotech giant whose former in-house lobbyist, David Beier, is now Gore’s chief domestic policy adviser.)

In late June, Gore sent a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus, claiming, “I support South Africa’s efforts…to engage in compulsory licensing and parallel importing of pharmaceuticals—*so long as they are done in a way consistent with international agreements* (emphasis added).” But this is weasel language that, as Ralph Nader pointed out in his syndicated column, “leaves unclear the meaning of Gore’s statement,” since the U.S. “has argued that compulsory licensing and parallel imports are not permitted by the World Trade Organization. No serious and honest trade lawyer believes this to be the case.” As Jamie Love, the director of Nader’s Consumer Project on Technology (CPT)—the leading nongovernmental expert on drugs and trade policy—put it, “Is this a trick to fool the AIDS activists and the black caucus, or a change in policy?”

Love asked that question at a congressional hearing examining administration policy on AIDS drugs for Africa—another by-product of the demos. The hearing was convened by the chair of a subcommittee that deals with drug policy, Rep. John Mica, a conservative GOPer from Florida who, with his staff, has been sympathetic to advocates of a policy change. It was one of the rare occasions that an ACT UPer (Eric Sawyer, director of the HIV/AIDS Human Rights Project) had been invited to testify before Congress, and a host of witnesses—including Love, representatives from Public Citizen and Doctors Without Borders and African PWA Chatinkha Nkhoma—all pleaded for the United States to reverse its obstructionist course. But the administration spokesperson at the hearing, Assistant Trade Representative Joseph Popovich, echoed the trick language employed by

Gore. Pressed by congressmembers as to whether his and the VP's statements meant a change in policy, Popovich said he would supply a written reply in late August. (At press time, there had still been no explanation of what either official's statement really means.)

Under the Bayh/Dole Act of 1980, the U.S. government retains considerable licensing and pricing rights for a raft of AIDS drugs (such as ddI, d4T, 3TC and ritonavir) developed by taxpayer-funded research, and could—with the stroke of a pen—make generic versions available for developing nations tomorrow. But the administration refuses to do so. (Mica has promised to take up this issue in another hearing after Congress returns from its summer recess.)

Meanwhile, the administration continues to bludgeon developing countries. CPT's Love, back from an AIDS conference in Pakistan in July, reported that Egyptian public health officials in attendance told him that the United States is now threatening to withhold $500 million in foreign aid if Egypt follows through on its plan to join India and other Third World countries in raising the access-to-drugs issue with the World Trade Organization at its winter meeting.

That's just one more reason why the demonstrations will continue until Clinton and Gore unequivocally change U.S. policy—as well they should

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