War of the Worlds

Who’s to blame for the global AIDS catastrophe? USA! USA!

July 1, 2004 By Jeff Hoover

In two recent books, authors Greg Behrman and Anne-Christine d’Adesky, both outraged by the lack of attention and resources paid to the global AIDS epidemic, find a common villain: the U.S. government. Each blames it for the millions in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union who have died or will likely die from AIDS unless extensive treatment and prevention services are provided.

Behrman’s well-researched *The Invisible People* (Free Press, 368 pages, $25) focuses on the supply side of AIDS resources. U.S. administrations from Ronald Reagan’s through George W. Bush’s avoided any realistic global response to the epidemic. Officials have continually ignored advocacy and treatment visionaries or, worse, placated them with empty promises. The book’s unsparing account of Clinton’s all-talk-and-no-action attitude suggests that the former president’s recent efforts (through his foundation) to reduce AIDS-drug prices are penance for having dithered from 1993 to 2001.

In *Moving Mountains: The Race to Treat Global AIDS* (Verso, 350 pages, $30), D’Adesky focuses on the demand side. Over the past three years, she visited countries where innovative programs and policies offer models for providing treatment in resource-poor settings. The positive examples range from Brazil’s national AIDS program to Paul Farmer’s tiny clinic in the mountains of Haiti; in other nations, such as Russia, she shows that hope remains illusory due to widespread discrimination and suspicion.

Neither book is nuanced: Anger simmers at the surface, often bubbling over at the expense of measured discussion. However, righteous indignation may be needed to remind the world, and future policymakers, what’s at stake as the epidemic enters decade number three. The United States, its fellow rich nations and smug international organizations ignore lessons of the past at their peril.

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