

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXVIII, Number 05, 26 January 2004 — Bush's Deadly Silence [ARTICLE]

## Bush's Deadly Silence

BY KIM SUE

AIDS activists waited anxiously for the 2004 State of the Union address. How would President George W. Bush follow up on the much-praised promises he made in last year's speech, when he unfolded his plan for "Emergency Action on AIDS"? Once again, Bush did not fail to astound his viewers: during this year's address, he managed to avoid mentioning AIDS even once.

Did he think we wouldn't notice? If his administration has supposedly achieved so much in combatting the pandemic, why was Bush so silent? The reason is that the president has not only failed to follow up on the promises made last, but he has also undermined efforts to implement a faster, more effective public health response sponsored by Congress and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.

In 2003, while Bush stalled on appointing officials to carry out the "Emergency Action on AIDS" plan, three million people died of the disease and an additional five million were infected, according to UNAIDS, one of the main agencies advocating for a global response to the pandemic.

In last year's State of the Union Address, Bush promised \$15 billion dollars to fight AIDS. He specifically delineated how this money would be spent, saying, "Tonight I propose the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. This comprehensive plan will prevent seven million new AIDS infections, treat at least two million people with life-extending drugs, and provide humane care for millions of people suffering from AIDS, and for children orphaned by AIDS."

But these words, designed to bolster his image as a "compassionate conservative," were not met with commensurate action: in fact, only 1,000 new patients are currently on the critical "life-extending" antiretroviral treatment. This is less than one percent of what Bush promised.

The president has moved with notable slowness considering that, according to White House figures, there are roughly 15,000 new HIV infections per day. His pro-



gram has been not only slow, but also unilateral, attempting to set up its own programs separately from the already established and functioning Global Fund, a financing mechanism that works in health and development issues to coordinate newly funded programs with existing ones. In fact, according to the Global AIDS Alliance, Bush's proposed funding for the Global Fund in 2005 represents a 63-percent cut in the \$550 million approved by Congress for 2004.

On World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, 2003, President Bush said, "We are committed to further support the Fund as it continues to demonstrate its success." Yet because of U.S. pressure and lack of funding, the Global Fund has been forced to turn away legitimate proposals from countries that are ravaged by AIDS.

The Bush administration seems to view the Global Fund as a threat to its credibility in dealing with the AIDS pandemic. In fact, an Oct. 2003 *Boston Globe* article stated, "Two U.S. officials described the relationship between the Global Fund and the Bush administration as tense, in part due to a wealth of positive publicity given the Global Fund, while the White House's \$15-billion, five-year plan has come under criticism for emphasizing direct distributions to other countries."

In addition, the President's initiative called for the use of brand-name AIDS antiretrovirals, instead of generic suppliers, which can provide ARVs to thousands more people for the same cost. The Bush appointee to head up this program, for which the money has neither been pledged nor appropriated, is Randall Tobias, the former CEO of the pharmaceutical powerhouse Eli Lilly and also a major donor to the Republican Party.

How can someone from a pharmaceutical company be expected to fight his own industry and push for what could be the saving grace of those affected by the virus: widespread treatment with generic drugs, which can treat five times as many people as name brands? He can't, and he won't. The pharmaceutical industry—the richest industry for the past 11 years—dangles fistfuls of cash before Bush while simultaneously coaxing him toward prohibition of generics. The 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS are in the hands of the enemy.

Now Bush has reverted to the deadly silence of President Ronald Reagan, who refused to even mention the word AIDS publicly until 1987, when 19,000 Americans had already died. Instead of fighting AIDS, Bush would like to go to the moon and to Mars, for which he would need tens of billions of dollars.

Just one billion dollars directed toward fighting AIDS would provide treatment to 400,000 people and



AIDS would provide treatment to 100,000 people and prevent an additional 1.6 million infections. Bush's dream of further space exploration is shameful and inappropriate given the current global situation. Has he harmed and neglected our own planet so much that he now has visions of outer-space imperialism?

Bush has certainly made a place for himself in history as the president whose irreverence for life has had the direct result of millions of avoidable deaths. He has done everything in his power to aid drug company monopolies at the cost of countless of lives and to slow down all attempts at speedy treatment and prevention programs. Without heeding the bipartisan appropriation from Congress, Bush cut the total amount appropriated to fight AIDS in 2004 by one billion dollar.

President Bush's silence on this question during the State of the Union masks not apathy, nor even sheer stupidity, but an insidiousness that befits a criminal, not a president.

*The author is a Columbia College sophomore*