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## blackworld



The money comes too late for some: a woman sits beside a coffin at Leopards Hill Cemetery in Lusaka, Zambia in 1999. Joel Stettenheim/Corbis

### The ABC's of Bush's Africa AIDS Policy

Bush's \$15 billion pledge to fight AIDS in Africa was hailed by some, but others worry it may be a political ploy or cynical reminder of the President's "compassionate conservatism" as his rhetoric grows more warlike.

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During his 2003 State of the Union address, delivered late last month, President George W. Bush surprised many when he urged Congress to approve \$15 billion in spending for AIDS relief in some of the hardest-hit countries in Africa and the Caribbean. The program, called the Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, has been hailed by some lawmakers and AIDS activists worldwide as a bold, generous commitment from an administration that had previously given scant attention to AIDS, but others are less sanguine about the president's proposal, seeing it as a political ploy to gain black votes, launch a moral crusade long favored by the far right, to mobilize international support for the war on terror, and to remind all of his "compassionate conservatism" at a time when his economic and foreign policies are increasingly seen as hard right.

Commentators across the political spectrum concede that Bush's plan marks a dramatic break with the policies of former President Clinton, and even of Bush a year ago. In 1999, Clinton had overseen an increase from \$125 million to just \$225 million in international AIDS funds. And when Bush took office he confirmed the fears of many by recommending abstinence-only programs and cutting off aid to international health agencies that provided information about abortion. In June 2002, he allocated \$500 million

to a program to prevent mother-to-child AIDS transmission, a package that did not mention the disease's sexual transmission. Yet the current package earmarks money for both abstinence education and condom distribution. What changed?

The proposal is the result of lobbying by different groups, from the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), to AIDS relief groups to organizations on the Christian Right — and powerful individuals, including Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and U2 star Bono. For months the CBC has been calling for more attention to AIDS; in a letter to Bush last month, the CBC stated: "it would be impossible to overstate the devastation caused to date by the global AIDS pandemic or the need for a greater response from the United States."

For the most part CBC leaders have reacted positively to Bush's announcement. But Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D, CA) expressed concern about the provenance of the \$15 billion, worried that it would be taken from domestic programs, such as children's health. "We cannot rob Peter to pay Paul," she said, questioning where \$15 billion could come from, especially considering the epic tax cuts the President has proposed.

Representative John Conyers of Michigan expressed the sentiments of many when he said he had received the news with "new hope" and "some skepticism" — the skepticism involves whether Bush's proposal is the beginning and end of his courtship of black voters — a constituency that already has rejected the GOP in droves (8% of black voters backed Bush in 2000) and is especially disenchanted following former majority leader Trent Lott's pro-segregation gaffe of last year.

Others criticize the list of countries included in the Bush plan. Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institutes of Health, told the Washington Post that the plan targets Africa's hardest hit countries, and some argue the money is going to countries with sufficient institutional capacity to deliver aid (how did Ivory Coast make the list?), yet the notion that political favors are being meted out is hard to shake. Among Caribbean countries included in the plan is Guyana, for instance, but not the Dominican Republic, which has a higher rate of infection. Plan. And what else to make of plan that pointedly excludes Angola and Zimbabwe?

The very fact of so much AIDS money going abroad rankles some advocates for US AIDS communities. Marsha Martin of AIDS Action denounced what she characterizes as Bush's selective compassion, bemoaning the fact that he did not highlight the impact of the disease at home, and noted that conservatives were more likely to be sympathetic to AIDS victims in Africa than at home. "People look at the epidemic in Africa of women and children and families. In this country, the concern is that people living with HIV are populations we don't talk about, like people who use drugs and people who engage in risky sexual behavior. When you can focus on women, children and orphans, you can move the focus away from the sexual nature of the disease and toward compassion. Our message is you need to speak the truth about AIDS, regardless of the circumstances."

Another question that has been raised, particularly by UN officials, is why Bush allocated only \$1 billion (to be disbursed over five years) to the UN-affiliated Global Fund, which is arguably the best mechanism for large-scale treatment and prevention campaigns. Should that be taken as another indicator of the Bush Administration's tortured relationship with the world governing body?

"The Global Fund is the most important vehicle in the effort to fight the pandemic and the US should contribute a far greater share," said Africa Action head Salih Booker. "The new commitment of only \$1 billion to the Fund, over a period of five years, would actually undermine Africa's greatest hope."

And then there's the God talk. The Bush plan seems to come with some very religious strings attached. It was even introduced in an evangelical context: "We have a chance to achieve a more compassionate world for every citizen," President Bush recently said apropos his plan. "America believes deeply that everyone has worth, everybody matters, everybody was created by the Almighty, and we're going to act on that belief and we'll act on that passion."

Defenders point out that the program is hardly a sop to the Christian Right, who will most probably be incensed by the plan's provision for condom distribution, and the its endorsement of education campaigns that mention both gay sex and multiple partners. (Of the plan's \$10 billion in new money — another \$5 million is a carryover from already existing programs — about half is slated for anti-retroviral drugs to treat an estimated two million people, with a third going toward prevention efforts and 15% to provide for hospitalized patients and AIDS orphans).

But the Christian lobby has been one of the most powerful advocates for AIDS relief. Many conservative politicians who traveled to Africa to visit their constituents' missions abroad have returned convinced of the overarching moral cause of the AIDS crisis. In part as a side effect of the relentless proselytizing of the fundamentalist Christian churches, these normally conservative, isolationist groups have made African AIDS a cause celebre.

In his plan, Bush seems to have split the difference between the black lobby and his evangelical friends. He is allowing for condom distribution and sex education, as the CBC has recommended, but the money will be distributed to religious groups and churches, in accordance with his faith-based approach to social policy. Moreover, his education campaign will follow what some have called the ABC approach: "First, abstain. If you can't abstain, be faithful. If you can't be faithful, use a condom."

Another concern involves access to generic drugs. As recently as November, the Bush administration has opposed exporting generic drugs in deference to big business's patent rights. Although Dr. Fauci announced that generic AIDS drugs manufactured by Cipla (an Indian company) will be made available via the new plan, others are unconvinced. "I will be intrigued to see the conditions [under which] medicines will be made available," said Leon P. Spencer, of the Washington Office on Africa. "The Bush administration is determined to serve the interests of drug companies."

Still, it is hard to look such a large gift in the mouth. And overall, pro-Africa commentators and advocacy organizations have reacted positively to Bush's \$15 billion pledge, celebrating the administration's change of perspective from one that stresses abstinence to one that underscores treatment and prevention. The concern now is to get the money rolling. It would be "the height of cynicism," says Salih Booker, "if the President does not now request at least \$3.5 billion of his new total for funding this year. This is the US's share of what is urgently needed to fight HIV/AIDS now!"

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