

The Age (Melbourne) February 10, 2003 Monday  
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February 10, 2003 Monday  
SECTION: News; Opinion; Pg. 13

LENGTH: 976 words

HEADLINE: The Truth About George Bush's Anti-AIDS Push

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BODY:

The President is returning a favour from the big US drug companies.

Those who pay the piper, call the tune. In campaigning for the 2002 US Congressional elections, the Republicans spent \$US527 million (compared with \$US343 million for the Democrats) and \$US145 million of the total was raised personally by President George Bush.

According to Public Campaign, a non-profit, non-partisan group campaigning for electoral reform in the US, many of Bush's State of the Union messages to Congress last month were designed to satisfy the desires of his largest campaign contributors. Thus, more than half the benefits of the \$US3350 billion income tax cuts will go to Americans earning more than \$US104,000 a year. And they make the bulk of personal contributions of \$US1000 or more, which have totalled \$US1.8 billion since 1999.

Bush said in his address that social security funds for younger workers are to be shifted into "retirement accounts that they will control and they will own", which will generate billions in new commissions for Wall Street, whether the market goes up or down.

He proposes \$US33 billion in tax breaks to resource-extraction industries; to shield utilities from mandatory steps to reduce air pollution; and to open more federal land to logging.

These concessions, all of which have dubious economic or social benefits, provide a handsome return on donations to federal parties and candidates since 1989 which, according to Public Campaign, total: \$US81 million from securities and investment firms;

\$US319 million from extraction industries; \$US71 million from utilities; and \$US31 million from the timber industry.

Missing from the list of rewards was the \$US15 billion AIDS relief program for Africa, which seems to have received a good press, even from Bush's traditional opponents.

The proposal caught everyone by surprise. According to the Planned Parent Federation of America, on his first day in office, Bush restored the Reagan-era "global gag rule" on international family planning assistance.

In May 2002, Bush Administration representatives at the UN Children's Summit opposed the use of condoms for HIV/AIDS prevention.

In July, Bush withheld from the UN Population Fund \$US34 million in funding for birth control, maternal and child care and HIV/AIDS prevention. In August, he withheld more than \$US200 million in funding programs to support women and tackle HIV/AIDS in Afghanistan.

Last month, the US killed a deal agreed to by 143 World Trade Organisation members to allow developing countries without the ability to produce cheaper generic drugs for HIV/AIDS and other diseases to import generic drugs at lower prices from countries such as India, rather than the more expensive patented drugs from the US and Europe.

The US pharmaceutical manufacturing industry is one of the top 10 industry contributors to federal US political campaigns. Prescription drugs cost twice as much in the US as in other developed countries, and the industry makes three times the profit of other industries.

The question is, will the money proposed for the AIDS relief program benefit Africa by being used to buy the drugs from the cheapest source - or, as is more likely, will the money be used to subsidise production by the American pharmaceutical manufacturers, to protect their markets in developing countries?

Bush could do far more to minimise the AIDS epidemic now sweeping the Third World by reversing

the infamous “global gag rule”, which promotes needless deaths by discouraging safe sex, and unwanted pregnancies, which lead to unsafe abortions.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation calls the policy “Bush’s secret war” and says his actions “are a testament to the Bush Administration’s war against women and his overall contempt for their fundamental civil and human rights”.

Bush’s war against women has regional as well as global security implications, implications that the Clinton administration recognised.

At a UN Population Fund meeting in Auckland last week, the New Zealand Health Minister said 40 per cent of the Pacific Islands’ contraceptives previously came from donors such as the fund, but that by 2000, partly because of the success of the safe-sex awareness programs, donors met only 27 per cent of the region’s estimated needs.

US bullying in international forums and its effort to gut international reproductive health programs was in evidence yet again at the UN Asian and Pacific Regional Population Conference, held last December in Bangkok (and at which the US was represented because of its ownership of the island of Guam).

According to Dr Martha Campbell from the Berkeley School of Public Health, “the Bush delegation was young, pro-life, bright, well trained, legally savvy, deceptive and threatening . . . In the corridor we witnessed the US delegation threatening at least one high-level Asian delegate with his country’s loss of US foreign aid and the loss of his own career”.

In the wash-up, every country represented at the meeting defied the US, but all their time was taken up, according to Campbell, in “preventing damage by a 500-pound gorilla from Guam”.

The US delegation demanded the deletion of a recommendation for “consistent condom use” to fight AIDS, even though a Berkeley study found condom distribution to be astonishingly cost-effective, at \$US3.50 a year of life saved. In contrast, antiretroviral therapy costs more than \$US1000.

This expensive option is obviously more acceptable

to the religious fundamentalists who give the Bush Administration its moral dimension, and to the pharmaceutical manufacturers who want an even bigger return on their political investment in Washington.

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