

# President's AIDS Panel in Disarray

*The departure of the two cochairmen and a staff member have left the panel with a credibility problem and raised doubts about whether its task will be completed*

LATE in the day at the first meeting of the President's commission on AIDS, the 13 members chosen by the White House to represent the views of "average Americans" sat stoically on a dais at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., and listened as one angry person after another accused the beleaguered panel of being stocked with right-wing ideologues, homophobes, and scientific illiterates. The earnest chairman of the commission, W. Eugene Mayberry, chief executive officer of the Mayo Foundation in Rochester, Minnesota, pleaded with the public witnesses for indulgence. Said Mayberry: "Please give us a try. You may find you like us."

As it turned out, it was the commission itself which did not like its chairman. Mayberry and his co-chairman, Woodrow Myers, Jr., health commissioner of Indiana, resigned from the presidential panel on 7 October, hounded out, their supporters say, by internal bickering and political gamesmanship within the commission's ranks. With the departure of Mayberry and Myers, the commission loses two of its most credible participants, leaving behind an overwhelmingly conservative group that must grapple now with the complex medical and scientific issues surrounding AIDS without the counsel of a couple of its more informed members.

For whatever reason, the President's panel was floundering under Mayberry's hand. That much is clear. Appointed in July, the full commission has only met twice—once to watch a parade of federal officials hastily sketch the parameters of the AIDS epidemic and to listen to a long afternoon of public damnation, and once to get advice from Congress. On both occasions, members appeared overwhelmed and unprepared. Commissioners blame Mayberry for not hiring and organizing a competent staff to brief them. "Basically, there was no staff," says commission member Burton James Lee III, a physician at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. "We were not getting anywhere near the information we required. Or we were getting it too late. The leader has to take the rap for that."

Only a handful of permanent staffers has been hired, and one of them, Frank Cocker-

ill III, a Mayo physician who treats AIDS patients, threw in the towel along with Mayberry and Myers. Linda Sheaffer, the executive director who was hired by Mayberry to run the staff, was ousted in September. She has not been replaced. According to commission staffers, a new executive director will be hired any day now. "After four months, when you don't have a staff and you don't have an executive director, who's responsible for that?" says commission member William B. Walsh, president of Project HOPE, an international health-care organization. Walsh, the most vocal of Mayberry's critics, refers to the trip to Congress as



**Admiral Watkins.** Will the panel's new chairman keep a firmer hand on the tiller?

"amateur night" and adds that Mayberry "treated us commissioners as if we were village idiots."

Supporters of Mayberry and Myers contend that the two were blocked in their efforts at every turn, particularly by Walsh, and his allies, among them Lee and commission member Cory SerVaas, the editor and publisher of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Mayberry went so far as to visit White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker and ask that Walsh and SerVaas be removed from the commission.

Despite their departure, both Mayberry and Myers have made it very clear that they

hope the President fills their empty seats with persons who know something about AIDS. Whether the White House will heed their advice is uncertain. Gary Bauer, the President's assistant for policy development, called the Mayberry-Myers departure a "wise decision" and referred to the fiasco as a "short-term bump in the road," hardly a pat on the back for the departing members.

Frank Lilly, the only openly gay member of the commission and chairman of the genetics department at Albert Einstein School of Medicine in New York, agrees that Mayberry could have been a more hard-driving administrator. Lilly himself teetered on the edge of resigning, but in the end decided to wait and see what happens. As he puts it, he can always resign later. Says Lilly: "I'm very interested in who they'll be appointing to the commission. We need some real expertise, some people closely involved with AIDS who can give us a broad overview. There are lots of people out there like that." The implied threat is that Lilly will leave the commission, or issue a minority report of his own, if the newcomers know as little about AIDS as some of the present commissioners.

It is easy to understand Lilly's pitch. The commission as it stands now certainly lacks expertise about the deadly virus. Indeed, some commissioners hold views about AIDS that many in the public health and biomedical communities consider extreme. For example, Theresa Crenshaw, director of The Crenshaw Clinic in San Diego, a facility that specializes "in the evaluation and treatment of sexual dysfunction, sexual medicine, and human relationships," has at various times suggested that the AIDS virus can be passed through casual contact and that some individuals should be quarantined. Penny Pullen, the Bible-quoting minority leader in the Illinois State House of Representatives, has called for mandatory testing of hospital patients, marriage license applicants, prisoners, and those convicted of sex or drug-related crimes.

SerVaas, who in addition to her duties at the *Saturday Evening Post*, serves as president or research director for a number of medical societies she has founded, has gained notoriety for driving around the

country in her "AIDS Mobile," a 34-foot-long mobile home that pulls up in shopping malls and church parking lots to test individuals for antibodies to HIV. The AIDS mobile team, however, is not interested in testing homosexuals, whom SerVaas considers "deviants" who need to be "forgiven." Instead, the AIDS Mobile tests people who have had blood transfusions and women who are, or hope to become, pregnant. SerVaas' efforts have been criticized because those who are tested are informed of their antibody status through the mail. Those who are negative get a letter from SerVaas that begins: "Good news!" According to SerVaas, those less fortunate souls who test positive are informed of their status by the doctor they named on their registration form.

With the jettison of the commission's two leaders, it is unclear exactly how the panel will fulfill its extremely broad mandate, which requires the group to make recommendations to the President about virtually all aspects of the AIDS epidemic, including such sticky items as mandatory testing and confidentiality of those infected with the AIDS virus. The President appointed Admiral James Watkins, former chief of naval operations, as new chairman. Since he is retired, it is presumed that Watkins will have plenty of free time to organize the commission's offices and hire staff. Even a skeptical Lilly says that "if anybody can pull this group together and get it moving, the admiral can." Other panel members who were polled appeared to agree that Watkins will be a gung-ho leader.

It may not matter. It may be an impossible task. Sheldon Wolff, who co-chaired the Institute of Medicine-National Academy of Sciences panel's oft-quoted 1986 report on AIDS, said in an earlier interview: "We had a lot of really bright people serving on our panel. Not all of us worked on AIDS, but if we didn't, we were in areas that were damn close, that applied to the problem. We were public health people, virologists, immunologists, epidemiologists. We were people who could understand the science. And we had to work incredibly hard to produce our report."

The President's commission is due to release a preliminary report on 7 December. It will not say much, according to commission members, but will simply note the areas that will be covered by the panel in its full and final report that is due next summer. Whether President Reagan, in the waning months of his term, would, or could, do much with the report is to be seen. So far, the President's commission on AIDS has produced a lot of headlines, and little else. ■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**

# Bumps and Falls on the Road to Stockholm

*According to the archives of the Nobel Foundation, those who did not win this year's prizes are in illustrious company*

**W**HAT do French mathematician Henri Poincaré, German physicist Arnold Sommerfeld, and George Ellery Hale—the founder of the Mount Wilson Observatory and of the National Research Council—have in common?

Each narrowly failed to win the Nobel Prize, despite enthusiastic support and considerable lobbying from their scientific colleagues.

Every year, about 500 scientists worldwide (including all the members of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences) are entitled to suggest who should receive the awards in physics and chemistry. Before World War II, an average of 50 scientists a year sent in nominations.

Generally, those with the greatest support would sooner or later win the prize; but this was not always the case. Hale was nominated 33 times. Poincaré, after a campaign by French scientists, received 51 nominations. Sommerfeld is said to have been left a bitter man after he had been nominated every year except one between 1917 and 1937; he received 73 official nominations—nine more than Albert Einstein, who was nominated for ten successive years before receiving the physics prize in 1922.

Furthermore, in each case, the scientist's failure to win the Nobel Prize was not as much a comment on his scientific achievement as it was a reflection of the makeup of

the award committees and of the changing dynamics of his discipline. Hale's time ran out, for example, when the physics committee, having been unable to find an appropriate slot for him in the period immediately before World War I, subsequently shifted its main interests to the burgeoning field of atomic physics.

The fact that Poincaré was not recognized by the prize committee is often said to be purely the result of his being a mathematician. But historian of science Elisabeth Crawford disagrees. "He might well have qualified as a physicist if the lineup on the award committee had been different," she says. "One more mathematical physicist on the committee would have pulled it off."

Ever since the awards were established in 1901 under the 1895 will of Swedish chemicals magnate Alfred Nobel, there has been a wealth of anecdotal information about the way the prizes have been awarded, in particular about why some scientists have been chosen and others, sometimes equally deserving, have not.

Now the anecdotes can be placed on a more solid footing. A few years ago, the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm agreed to open up its archives and to allow the publication of any material more than 50 years old. This included all the material collected by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which is responsible for overseeing the physics and chemistry prizes.

## Henri Poincare

*Was nominated 51 times but never won the prize. One more mathematical physicist on the awards committee might have made the difference.*



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