

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### GAO auditor describes bureaucratic gridlock

A senior auditor for the Government Accounting Office, which analyzes the functioning of government bureaucracies for the Congress, told *EIR* that a paralyzing lack of leadership has left almost every federal agency adrift in a morass.

He helped to author a GAO report, released to Congress this month, on the handling of the AIDS crisis by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and was eager to get a copy of it into the hands of the *EIR* editors for evaluation.

He said the report documents the same lack of federal leadership in the AIDS program, leaving talented people trapped within the bureaucracy incapable of acting effectively.

He said even where routine testing programs for AIDS are being tried, such as in Illinois, they are failing because of lack of planning and effective leadership. Long lines in the Illinois program, for example, are killing it off there, he said.

The auditor contrasted the treatment of AIDS to the handling of past pandemics, such as tuberculosis. "I remember when I was a child," he said, "if someone in a household had the measles, there was a sign posted on the door warning all comers." He said it is hard to imagine the confused attitudes toward these questions within the government on AIDS.

He noted, for example, that all the HHS projections on funding costs to treat AIDS are skewed by 1) counting full-blown AIDS only (i.e., not "AIDS-Related Complex"), and 2) by projecting that only 30-40% of all

AIDS virus carriers will eventually come down with the disease.

However, the auditor was not optimistic that his AIDS report would shake things up in the national bureaucracy. "Congress mandates the GAO to produce these reports, but five out of six times it does nothing about them when they come out," he said.

GAO audits of the Labor, Interior, and other massive government bureaucracies produced equally grim horror stories, he said, but no one in Congress lifted an eyebrow at the documentation.

"What you have in these bureaucracies are persons who have lost all dedication to getting things done, who have become cynically demoralized, and are only putting in their time. They have seen too many cases where it seems to make no difference whether they take the trouble to do something right or not, and their attitude has created an overall paralysis," he said.

During his recent audit of the HHS, the largest single government agency next to the Defense Department, he said he would go into different sub-agencies to ask what was going on with their programs, and would be answered with cynical laughter. "It only exists on paper," he would be told.

Since appointment to the top leadership posts of these agencies is political, and often a revolving door, the leaders never provide any consistent direction. They use the posts to posture for their next political appointment, he said.

The only person who behaved differently as a leader was Elliot Richardson, who went into a number of government agencies during the Nixon administration, and completely overhauled them, he said. However, his "new directions" only dismantled whatever functioning older order was there, because the minute he left one post for another, everything he set up was torn down and thrown away.

Congress seems to care as little as many of the bureaucrats who are rotting away wasting our national resources while major crises, like AIDS, are threatening our entire society, he said.

### Gramm-Rudman monkey wrench

More recently, the Gramm-Rudman deficit reduction fixation in government has diverted the attention of every agency away from task orientation to sheer survival. The hours of the day are now dominated by figuring out how to justify the continuation of a program's funding, rather than in executing the program most effectively. Efforts at protecting job security, rather than excellence in functioning and creativity, have dominated the energies of thousands.

If the American population is demoralized by the inability of Congress to move legislation, they would be truly dismayed to find what has become of the machinery of their government, according to this veteran observer's inside look.

For example, it is frightening to think that the government's disastrous AIDS policy (refusal to test, insistence on "safe sex" education, squandering of funds, etc.) is based more on protecting bureaucratic inertia than on wisdom.

Yet the impotence of bureaucratic mediocrity has cast its spell over everyone, and the only "leaders" in town are the ones from Wall Street slamming their fists on tables demanding the budget be cut.

American voters had better keep this pathetic view of "inside Washington" in mind when they ponder the kind of leader they will send to the White House next year. Will any "pretty face" do, or somebody who can really turn the place on its head?