



## AIDS funding problematic despite increases

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The fight against global AIDS experienced a three-fold increase in cash after conservative U.S. leaders embraced the disease as a “moral” issue early in the decade, Susan Peterson, professor of government and dean for educational policy for arts and sciences, told the audience at a World AIDS Day forum hosted by the student group Activism in the Fight Against AIDS (AFYA) on Dec. 1. While applauding the result, which is manifested in the \$15 billion pledged for overseas distribution through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief initiated by President George W. Bush in 2003, Peterson told the group that a proclivity among conservatives to treat the sick at the expense of investing in prevention threatens to limit the impact of the funds, to create a virus resistant to the current anti-viral regimens and to cost millions of lives over the long term.

Peterson, who has become nationally recognized for her scholarship concerning the national-security threat of AIDS, detailed the toll the disease is exacting in Africa and argued that for African nations hardest hit by AIDS, national security has been jeopardized. Many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are stressed to maintain national defense forces in a region where between 20 percent and 40 percent of troops are HIV-positive. At the same time, AIDS has lowered life expectancies from highs of, for instance, 70 years in Botswana before AIDS to 32 years today. Life expectancies in Zambia (30 years), Zimbabwe (33 years) and South Africa (44 years) likewise have fallen. Since AIDS primarily is transmitted through sexual activity, it removes the most productive members of society, she added. The combination, she said, threatens the existence of those nations, and in a post-9/11 world where there is greater concern about the exploitation by non-state actors of unstable governments, poses an indirect threat to the security of Western nations.

It was that threat, in part, Peterson explained, that had been used by AIDS activists in the United States and abroad, as well as by public health officials, by members of the presidential administration of William Clinton and by Al Gore during his 2000 presidential campaign, to raise awareness of the global impact of AIDS and to raise funds to combat it. The effort, however, failed to resonate with the public. “The United States didn’t act until the religious right embraced AIDS as a humanitarian crisis,” Peterson said. She cited a 2002 conference sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse, an organization led by noted evangelist Franklin Graham, that helped reshape conservative policy toward AIDS while grabbing the attention of President Bush.

One result of the increased funding has been a “culture war on the ground between ASOs (AIDS service organizations),” Peterson said. Religiously inspired groups, for example, spurn such prevention efforts as condom distribution, needle-exchange programs and information sessions for prostitutes. She suggested that 70 percent of funds are geared toward treatment efforts, while only 20 percent are directed toward prevention programs.

Peterson concluded her lecture by calling HIV/AIDS “possibly the worst plague in human history” but expressing hope that continuing dialogue among AIDS activists will lead toward the most effective utilization of the increased funds.

“We need to tap into this humanitarian impulse,” she said. “I do think there is greater hope on the horizon.”

After the lecture, senior Joelle Miles, vice president of AFYA, credited Peterson with drawing more than 100 people to the event. "We could not have had a better representative," she said. "She brought incredible weight to the topic. She was very effective." On the basis of her own activist efforts on campus, Miles said, "One of the biggest problems is that in the United States AIDS overwhelmingly affects the lower socioeconomic brackets. Most students here are middle class or upper-middle class. Most of them, because they're educated, feel that they're not susceptible."

Miles, an international relations major who plans to pursue a career in a public health field, suggested that there remains a "social stigma" about AIDS that must be removed in order to more effectively combat the disease. She said she agreed with Peterson's assertion that stressing the humanitarian nature of the crisis will lead to more resources. "Personally I don't think there is a moral obligation," she said, "but I think we should all want to help."